

THE DISCOURSE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Quality of canteen fare for B40 may be compromised if RMT budget not reviewed, academics say

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SOARING food cost may compel primary school canteen operators to either offer smaller portions or use cheaper, less nutritious ingredients.

It's a warranted concern plaguing the Supplementary Food Programme (RMT), given that canteen operators need to contend with a tight budget of RM2.50 to RM3 amid rising food prices.



Prof Dr Norhasmah

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) nutrition department head Prof Dr Norhasmah Sulaiman cautioned that expensive cooking ingredients may result in shrinking portions or less nutritious food being served in schools as canteen operators struggle to cope with the challenging economy.

Pupils, she told *StarEdu*, may end up with smaller sized meals, less dishes or cheap, processed food that is high in calorie content but low in quality.

The concern is that we will be seeing more carbohydrate food groups such as rice and bihun (rice vermicelli) under the RMT because these tend to be cheaper compared to other food categories, she said, adding that complex carbohydrates, also called starches, include grain products, such as bread, crackers, pasta and rice.

These, Prof Norhasmah explained, take about four hours to digest and be absorbed by the body.

"Food high in carbohydrates keeps us full for longer periods but too much could result in adverse health effects in the long run. Excessive carbohydrates will contribute to an increase in the obesity rate among children.

"If a child is overweight, it could lead to non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular complications in adulthood," said Prof Norhasmah, who also heads the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at UPM.

Balanced meals

Canteen operators, Prof Norhasmah stressed, have a duty to provide well-balanced meals to pupils under the RMT programme.

"A healthy diet provides all the necessary nutrients a growing child needs.

"Perhaps nutritional science officers can be appointed and sent to schools to monitor and evaluate the RMT meals," she suggested.

Taylor's University food and gastronomy lecturer Tracy Wong Fang Lian said the RMT should not just be about keeping pupils full.

"The programme needs to look into 'hidden hunger' issues as these can lead to health consequences such as stunted growth, poor cognitive and physical development, as well as a weakened

immune system," she said, referring to the serving of excessive carbohydrates.

"A well-balanced diet is a must when it comes to maintaining good health and solving the problem of malnutrition.

"It is not enough that the stomach is full. We must also ensure that the body is not 'hungry' for nutrients," she said.

Moderation, balance and variety, said Wong, is key to the success of the RMT.

"These are the key to healthy growth and development in pupils.

"Balance means that all the food groups in the 'Malaysian Food Pyramid' are included in each meal of the day.

"Moderation means the portion is in accordance with the recommended serving of each food group.

"Variety means consuming different types of foods from within each of the groups to ensure that the body gets all the nutrients it needs for optimal health," she said, adding that the "Malaysian Healthy Plate" (MHP) concept is a great reference to determine whether a meal is healthy and balanced.

Initiated by the Health Ministry, the MHP is a quick visual technique to plan a balanced meal by dividing food portions.

"The plate should consist of a quarter carbohydrate (starchy food), a quarter protein and one-half fibre (fruits and vegetables)," she noted.

Nutritious aside, Wong said how the RMT meals are prepared is also equally important.

"Cooking methods are important considerations. Deep-frying food, for example, is not recommended as it requires more oil.

"Steaming, baking, grilling, poaching, stir-frying or braising is better. Additionally, food must be low in fat, sodium and sugar," she explained.

A well-balanced meal need not always be expensive, Wong pointed out.

"Besides chicken, fish and milk, soy can be introduced into the meal plan for protein.

"Meat can be alternated with legumes, which are cheaper and of comparable nutritional value.

"Soy is one of the better protein alternatives as it provides all the essential amino acids needed for good health," she said.



Prof Dr Hazreen

Agreeing with Wong, Universiti Malaya (UM) Faculty of Medicine Centre for Population Health head Prof Dr Hazreen Abdul Majid said nutritious meals do not require a big budget; all that is needed is a little creativity.

Use local ingredients, and instead of apples, serve local fruits like watermelon, he suggested.

Canteen operators, he added, should refer to the RMT guidelines to ensure pupils are served healthy meals.

A registered dietitian who has done research involving school canteens, Prof Hazreen said children are willing to try fruits and vegetables if these are available to them.

He said a study done by UM found that students were open to eating other types of fresh produce, and not just those familiar to them.

He added that canteen operators were also open to serving other fruits and vegetables when subsidised.

The Outcome Evaluation on Impact of the Nutrition Intervention among Adolescents Study done by UM tested the effects of providing subsidised food with healthy cooking on their health.

What canteen operators need is support in growing the demand for healthy food among pupils, he said.

Raise the budget

Prof Norhasmah said the small budget makes it difficult for canteen operators to prepare food that is nutritious and diverse.

The RM2.50 to RM3 allocated under the RMT may have been enough a few years back but with the current food inflation, it is simply not possible, she added.

The allocation needs to be revised if we want canteen operators to provide our children with a variety of nutritious and balanced meals, she opined.

Echoing Prof Norhasmah's views, Wong said with the current allocation, it is only possible to serve food like plain fried rice or bread with egg to fill the belly.

"The amount is not enough to serve a balanced meal with fresh, quality ingredients, milk and fruit.

"We must understand that when determining food cost, not only is the price of raw ingredients considered, but the cost of labour, energy, equipment, non-food supplies, and storage is also factored in.

"Canteen operators cannot be expected to serve like a charity. They need to survive too. They will be less inclined to cut corners if they can earn a decent profit," she said, before calling on the government to consider roping in the private sector to enhance the implementation and outcome of the RMT.

Welcoming Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin's recent proposal for the RMT budget to be increased, both Prof Norhasmah and Wong viewed it as a necessity if we want our children to have balanced and nutritious meals that are in line with national dietary recommendations.

"Increasing the allocation will also make the RMT a win-win initiative as it would result in better quality meals for pupils and ensure the sustainability of the canteen operators," said Wong.

What's cooking: About free school meals

● Early this year, a screenshot of a packet of white rice and gravy, allegedly given under the Supplementary Food Programme (RMT), went viral.

● Denying the allegation, Education Minister Datuk Dr Radzi Jidin, on Jan 20, said a detailed investigation showed that the shared picture was not the food provided for RMT recipients at the school.

● The RMT was first implemented in 1979 to provide daily meals for poor pupils in primary schools. It was improved in 2020 and has meals from over 20 menus prepared by school canteens, based on recommendations from the Health Ministry.

● Each meal should consist of rice or noodles, vegetable, protein (chicken, fish, etc), fruit and a drink.

● The Education Ministry currently allocates RM2.50 per pupil in the peninsula and RM3 in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan for the RMT.

● But on July 22, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin proposed that the Education Ministry raise the current spending to at least RM4 for Peninsular Malaysia and RM5.50 for Sabah and Sarawak, after revealing that only 61% of schools checked by the ministry since January have complied with the specifications prescribed under the RMT.

● Khairy said the increased allocation is necessary to ensure that children get nutritious food as the current amount is insufficient in light of the rising prices of raw ingredients needed to prepare the menus drawn up by the Health Ministry.

● In August 2019, former education minister Dr Maszlee Malik introduced a free school breakfast programme for children in government and government-aided primary schools. Five months on, the programme was scrapped after the Cabinet decided that the present food plans for primary school pupils such as the RMT, and the school milk programme for deserving B40 pupils were sufficient and would be retained with improvements.

THE VIEWS

'Better RMT management, please'



"Canteen operators must be creative and work with the given budget to prepare nutritious food. It is not just about the portion. Growing kids need nutrition for their mental and physical well-being. Regardless of the amount allocated, the critical issue that needs to be addressed is that the

RMT is open to abuse. Middlemen and rent seekers take a cut from the profit, leaving crumbs for pupils.

We need to investigate, stop and prevent this from happening. To prevent the programme from being abused, pupils should instead be given 'pocket money' in the form of vouchers that can be redeemed at the canteen." - Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim

"It is high time that the RMT allocation be increased to RM4, or higher, per pupil. Canteen operators get additional business from the programme so they should reduce their profit margins by serving bigger portions and offering more nutritious food to poor pupils as part of their corporate social responsibility projects. The Education Ministry should also give incentives, in the form of rent discounts or waivers, to operators so that they are motivated to use the cost savings in a way that benefits our children." - Melaka Action Group for Parents in Education (Magpie) chairman Mak Chee Kin



Healthy food pyramid

