

**Community Care Fund Assistance Programme -
Provision of School Lunch Subsidy for Needy Primary Students
Evaluation Report by Education Bureau**

Background

1. On 20 April 2011, the former Steering Committee of Community Care Fund (CCF) endorsed the assistance programme of the School Lunch Subsidy for Needy Primary Students (the Programme) to be implemented in the 2011/12 school year. The Programme is implemented by the Education Bureau (EDB). Its objective is to assist the non-Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) primary school students coming from low-income families so that they could have a more balanced and ample diet at school. Their families could then utilise the lunch expenses for other purposes so as to alleviate their financial burden. This evaluation report consolidates the findings on the Programme reported earlier to the ex-CCF Steering Committee and CCF Task Force under Commission on Poverty (CoP).

2. The target beneficiaries of the Programme are Primary 1 to Primary 6 students studying in whole-day government, aided or direct subsidy scheme (DSS) primary schools, receiving full grant from the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA), and having lunch as arranged by their attending schools. Due to its limited resources, the Programme targets the neediest students, with target beneficiaries being primary school students receiving SFAA full grants, and excluding those receiving SFAA half grants and secondary school students. The assistance is given to the needy students through their schools, but not in the form of cash, so as to ensure the whole subsidy is spent on students' lunch expenses. Before implementation, EDB has held briefing sessions for the schools to consult them on the implementation details. Circular memorandum was then issued to invite schools to join the Programme.

3. EDB has collected stakeholders' views on the operation and effectiveness of the Programme through conducting questionnaire survey to participating schools. The key results are summarised as follows:

- (a) The beneficiaries, stakeholders and the public generally agree to the objective of the Programme.

- (b) It is perceived that there will be strong concern on the sustainability of the Programme in the future.
- (c) If the Programme becomes a regular government subsidised scheme, stakeholders in particular the schools are concerned whether there will be measures to address the special needs of students and to alleviate the school workload.

Implementation in the 2011/12 School Year

4. In the 2011/12 school year, there are 500 whole-day government, aided and DSS primary schools joining the Programme. The total number of student beneficiaries is around 57 000. There are 23 primary schools not joining the Programme (with around 300 eligible student beneficiaries). The main reasons for schools not joining the Programme include: the boarding service provided by schools has already covered meals (6 schools), there are other organisations providing lunch/ related subsidy (4 schools), and there is no need to arrange lunch for students (3 schools). There are another 10 schools with parents not requesting to join the Programme. Both EDB and members of the former Education Sub-committee on the CCF have contacted the above schools to understand their reasons for not joining and invite schools to have closer communication with the parents in explaining the situation.

5. To streamline the administrative procedures and to alleviate schools' workload, the funding was disbursed by EDB to participating schools in two phases (late August and late December 2011 respectively), with the calculation of funding based on the information of SFAA full grant recipients of each school. Any surplus/ deficiency of funding in schools will be calculated by the end of school year, with the net surplus returned to CCF.

6. In the 2011/12 school year, the budget for the Programme is \$183.6 million, and the final allocation is \$131.91 million (this is because the number of target beneficiaries and the number of school days are fewer than expected). The administrative fee incurred is \$0.4 million, which is used to hire an administrative assistant and a clerical staff to provide administrative support for implementation of the Programme.

7. The summary of the questionnaire survey conducted by EDB for

schools during the 2011/12 school year is at the Annex.

Implementation in the 2012/13 School Year

8. The former CCF Steering Committee endorsed, at its meeting on 23 May 2012, the extension of the Programme to continue providing assistance to eligible primary students in the 2012/13 school year. The implementation mode and target beneficiaries are the same as in the 2011/12 school year. This is to allow time for the government to consider the implementation details of the regularisation of the Programme.

9. For the 2012/13 school year, there are 505 schools joining the Programme (5 more when compared with 2011/12). The total number of student beneficiaries is around 62 000 (5 000 more when compared with 2011/12). In the 2012/13 school year, there are 18 primary schools not joining the Programme. The reasons are: the boarding service provided by schools has already covered meals (5 schools), there are other organisations providing lunch/ related subsidy (5 schools), parents of eligible students do not make any request (7 schools), and there is no eligible student in the school (1 school).

10. The budget reserved by CCF is \$210.4 million (including \$0.4 million administrative fee). It is estimated that \$180 million will be disbursed to participating schools in the 2012/13 school year.

Regularisation of the Programme

11. The Programme is well-received by the stakeholders. There is strong demand from both parents and students to have the Programme continued, and the public generally agrees to the continuous need of provision of lunch subsidy to the needy primary students. EDB has been proactively considering the feasibility of regularising the Programme but more time and deliberation is needed on the evaluation and implementation details of the Programme upon regularisation.

12. In considering the regularisation of the Programme, EDB has taken into account the following major factors:

Implementation Mode

13. The current practice is for CCF to provide funding direct to schools, which in turn would use the subsidy to pay the lunch providers on behalf of the eligible students. Such practice can ensure the funding is totally utilised for the lunch expenses of the student beneficiaries and has been operating well. If the subsidy is provided to the students' parents in the form of cash allowance as in the existing School Textbook Assistance and Student Travel Subsidy Scheme, it may not be guaranteed that the needy students can have a proper lunch. In fact, some former members of CCF and schools have reflected that individual needy students cannot receive such family support. Furthermore, the price of lunch varies among different schools. Subsidy through cash may lead to some students receiving fewer subsidies.

14. On the other hand, a small portion of students choose not to order lunch from the lunch provider in school because they prefer to have self-prepared lunch, some have food allergy or for other reasons. Thus, they cannot benefit from the Programme. EDB noted that there are not many such students. The schools have already explained to them and their parents about the Programme and they could consider whether to join or not.

School Administration Work

15. During the implementation period of the Programme in the 2011/12 school year, schools have reflected to EDB that lunch arrangement is not part of learning and teaching activities, and hence should not be included in schools' regular service. EDB also noted that the Programme has caused heavy workload to teachers, including arrangement of the operational details, record keeping and accounting, verification of students' eligibility, and payment and return of fees. Schools also have to handle parents' enquiries, such as children's sick leave on the day, uncertainty in the eligibility for the Programme due to the failure of the students in submitting timely applications for student financial assistance, CSSA students' requests to join the Programme instead of getting the CSSA "meal allowance", etc. All these have increased schools' administration work. There are suggestions that the subsidy under the Programme should be disbursed in the form of cash through SFAA to student beneficiaries.

16. As the 2011/12 school year is the first year of implementation of the Programme, both the schools and lunch providers have to adapt to the new

arrangement. EDB noted that in the second year of implementation, the administration work is getting smooth and is on the right track. Schools generally consider that the current operation can ensure that the needy students really benefit from the Programme.

Interface between SFAA and Schools

17. SFAA has been actively working with the schools in the Programme, including the provision of the list of eligible students to the schools. However, the list of eligible students has to be frequently updated due to various reasons, such as students' late submission of information or provision of incomplete information, and families having significant change in financial situation during the school year. It is understood that this would unavoidably cause additional workload to schools, particularly in verifying students' eligibility. SFAA has updated its computer system and improved the workflow in communicating with schools. Enhancement has been made in the 2012/13 school year for schools to have a closer grasp on the students who have a recent change in eligibility status.

Extension of the Subsidy Scope

18. There are views on extending the scope of the Programme to secondary school students, and to cover students receiving SFAA half grant and CSSA. Due to limited resources, the Programme is targeted at the neediest students, that is, primary school students receiving SFAA full grant. Furthermore, the existing mode of providing lunch in schools may not suit secondary schools.

Under CSSA, beneficiaries' basic meal expenditure has already been covered under the CSSA "standard rates". There is an additional "meal allowance"¹ for students receiving full-day education who need to have lunch outside their home. They are therefore not eligible to join the Programme.

2013/14 School Year

19. According to the experience in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 school years, there are two major concerns of the stakeholders, that is, it is effective and

¹ The rate of CSSA meal allowance was \$225 per month for the 2011/12 school year and has increased to \$245 per month for the 2012/13 school year.

worthy to continue to implement the Programme through schools but the additional workload brought to schools has to be addressed.

20. Taking into account stakeholders' views, EDB has proposed to the CCF Task Force to continue with the Programme in the 2013/14 school year, with eligibility and implementation mode remaining intact. In addition, administration fee will be provided to schools so as to alleviate their additional workload. The proposal was endorsed by the CoP in February 2013.

21. The estimated funding for the 2013/14 school year is \$216.9 million, inclusive of the additional administrative fee for schools. Participating schools will be provided with administration fees, with a cap at 3% of the funding allocation. The mode of disbursement will be in 3 tiers, at a fixed rate of \$6,000, \$12,000 or \$18,000 for each year. Schools with relatively more number of student beneficiaries will receive \$18,000 per year and schools with fewer number of student beneficiaries will receive \$6,000 per year. Schools with an average number of student beneficiaries will receive \$12,000 per year. This mode can ensure that schools can at least obtain an administration fee of \$6,000. Schools are given the flexibility to utilise the administration fee². The ceiling for this additional administration fee for the 2013/14 school year is \$6.5 million. The administration fee can be flexibly utilised together with other school grants.

Education Bureau

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² When a school deploys a staff to assist in handling the related administration work for the Programme and other administration work, the school may apportion the staff cost based on the workload or work hours and charge it to the administration fee and other school grants provided by EDB accordingly.

**Provision of School Lunch Subsidy for Needy Primary Students
Views Collected from Schools in the 2011/12 School Year**

1. EDB conducted an evaluation of the Programme in March 2012. There is a return of 252 questionnaires among 262 issued. The return rate is over 96%. The key results are summarised as follows:
 - i) Around half of the schools think the Programme should be regularised. 27% of schools hope for further streamlining of the administration work, and around 30% of schools have adjusted their usual lunch arrangement due to the Programme.
 - ii) 89% of the responding schools have designated a teacher-in-charge for the Programme. The responsible staff in handling parents' enquiries are class teachers (36% of the schools), clerical staff (32% of the schools), deputy school head (11% of the schools) and social worker (14% of the schools).
 - iii) For the additional workload caused by the Programme, the major areas are record keeping and accounting (97%), verification of students' SFAA full grant eligibility (96%), payment of fee (90%) and handling of fee return (79%). Views reflected above are mainly from schools with relatively large number of student beneficiaries. Around 60% of the participating schools have over 100 eligible students.
 - iv) Parents are concerned about the eligibility of students for the Programme (including how to support those students who prepare their own lunch). Some parents suggest that the Programme should cover other students, such as those receiving SFAA half grant and secondary students. Some CSSA families request to join the Programme.