

## **Free Lunch at Schools**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **Brief Introduction**

(1) Q: What purpose does the programme Free Lunch at Schools serve?

A: Through the provision of free lunch at schools for primary students from low-income families, the programmes seeks to enable eligible students to have more balanced and substantial meals at schools while relieving the financial pressure on their families.

(2) Q: Have there been changes to its mode of implementation after the programme has been incorporated into the Government's regular assistance programme in the 2014/15 school year?

A: In the school years from 2011/12 to 2013/14, the Community Care Fund implemented the assistance programme on a pilot basis to provide free lunch at schools for eligible students. The implementation mode was largely the same in each of these years. The Education Bureau (EDB) would invite whole-day government and aided primary schools and primary schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) via circular memoranda to call for parents' participation. Advanced provision would then be disbursed to participating schools so that they may cover the lunch expenses of eligible students on an accountable basis. EDB would verify the expenditure at the end of the school year. Review indicated that the programme, especially its implementation mode (i.e. provision of lunch for eligible students through schools), was well received by stakeholders. As reflected by feedback from stakeholders, the assistance in the form of subsidy and the implementation arrangements ensured that funding was fully used to benefit target students by covering their lunch expenses, while providing them with balanced and substantial meals at schools. Starting from the 2014/15 school year, the programme has been incorporated into the Government's regular assistance programme and the implementation details remain essentially the same as in the previous years.

(3) Q: What are the eligibility criteria that students participating in Free Lunch at Schools should meet?

A: Primary 1 to Primary 6 students fully meeting the following requirements are eligible to participate in Free Lunch at Schools:

- (i) receiving full grant under the Student Financial Assistance (SFA) Schemes;
- (ii) studying in a whole-day government/ aided primary school (including any of the special schools) or a primary school under the DSS; and
- (iii) having lunch arranged by the schools they attend.

(4) Q: Are schools participating in Free Lunch at Schools required to arrange lunch for eligible students? What does it mean by "arrange"? And what should schools be aware of when making lunch arrangements?

A: Yes. "Arrangement" may include selecting lunch suppliers for students in accordance

with the guidelines on tendering and procurement, hiring staff to provide lunch for students, etc. Should students bring their self-packed lunch to school, participating schools will not be provided with the funding for these students. Schools should make appropriate lunch arrangements for students. Apart from requiring lunch suppliers to provide healthy, balanced and substantial meals, school should offer diversified food options to cater for students' individual needs (such as those out of the health, religious or cultural reasons, etc.).

### **Administrative Arrangements**

(5) Q: How can schools inform parents of Free Lunch at Schools, and how can parents submit applications?

A: Schools should issue circulars to inform parents of the details and invite them to participate in the programme. Parents should complete the reply slip attached to the circular and make applications to schools. A circular template is available on EDB website for schools' reference.

(6) Q: What documentary proof should parents submit to schools?

A: Parents have to submit to schools the Notification of Result for Assessment of Eligibility or Eligibility Certificate issued by the Student Finance Office (SFO) of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency (WFSFAA) to prove that their children meet the eligibility criteria for receiving full grant under the SFA Schemes. Parents should also give their consent to having their children's lunch arranged by the school.

(7) Q: How should schools calculate the lunch subsidy for students participating in Free Lunch at Schools?

A: In principle, the provision of subsidy under Free Lunch at Schools should start from the date on which the application is submitted by parents. Schools may refer to the following three examples:

(i) For parents who make an application for Free Lunch at Schools at the beginning of a school year, provided that they have submitted all the documentary proof required, their children's lunch subsidy will start from September;

(ii) For parents who make an application for Free Lunch at Schools, while the result of eligibility assessment for SFA Schemes is still pending and have already settled the payment for their children's lunch expenses, provided that they can produce the documentary proof required afterwards, their children's lunch subsidy will start from the date on which they submit an application for Free Lunch at Schools;

(iii) For parents who have no intention of making an application for Free Lunch at Schools at the beginning of a school year, they may submit an application to the school later, but their children's lunch subsidy will only start from the date on which the application is submitted to the school. Parents should not make a retrospective claim for any lunch subsidy before the date of application.

(8) Q: Since eligibility assessment under the SFA Schemes takes time, if parents have paid/pre-paid their children's lunch expenses at the beginning of a school year

and are still pending the eligibility assessment result, can they claim the subsidy under Free Lunch at Schools with retrospective effect from 1 September of the school year (or the date admitted within the school year)?

A: In principle, the lunch subsidy will start from the date on which an application for Free Lunch at Schools is submitted by parents. Parents should not make a retrospective claim for any lunch subsidy before the date of application. Since eligibility assessment for the SFA Schemes takes time and lunch expenses usually have to be prepaid, for parents who have made an application for Free Lunch at Schools while the result of eligibility assessment for the SFA Schemes is still pending and have already settled payment for their children's lunch expenses, provided that they can produce the documentary proof required afterwards, the school should make arrangements for the lunch supplier to refund (with effect from the date of application). For parents who have no intention of making an application for Free Lunch at Schools at the beginning of a school year, they may submit an application to the school later, but their children's lunch subsidy will only start from the date on which the application is submitted to the school. Parents should not make a retrospective claim for any lunch subsidy before the date of application. Schools may refer to the following two examples:

- (i) If parents have made an application in response to the school circular on Free Lunch at Schools in September, i.e. at the beginning of the school year, and submitted the documentary proof of eligibility for full grant under the SFA Schemes at the end of October, their children's lunch subsidy will start from early September and the school should arrange for the lunch supplier to refund the lunch expenses paid/pre-paid by parents from September and October. For the rest of the school year, the school will pay the lunch expenses on behalf of the students.
- (ii) If parents with no intention of making an application in response to the school circular at the beginning of the school year, and subsequently submitted an application for Free Lunch at Schools to the school on 1 December, and produced documentary proof of eligibility at the end of February the following year, their children's lunch subsidy will start from 1 December. Parents should not make a retrospective claim for any lunch subsidy before 1 December.

(9) Q: Can schools disburse lunch subsidy to parents in the form of cash?

A: The funding of the Free Lunch at Schools will be disbursed to participating schools by EDB direct. The schools then should pay lunch expenses on behalf of eligible students. Schools are not supposed to give any cash to parents/students.

(10) Q: If schools have paid the lunch expenses for an eligible student and circumstances that arise subsequently rendering the payment unnecessary (e.g. the student has taken sick leave or withdrawn from school, or is found ineligible upon re-assessment by WFSFAA). What should they do?

A: In principle, if a student has taken sick leave or withdrawn from the school and the lunch supplier is given timely notification to suspend meal supply for the student concerned, school should request a refund of the difference from the lunch supplier.

If the WFSFAA's re-assessment confirms that a student is ineligible for full grant under the SFA Schemes, the school should ask parents to pay their children's lunch expenses to the lunch supplier on their own and to refund the sum that the school has paid for these students. In this connection, schools are advised to check against the School Textbook Assistance/Students Travel Subsidy Result Report or Updated Report issued by the SFO monthly, so that necessary arrangements can be made with parents and lunch suppliers in a timely manner.

(11) Q: If in the course of WFSFAA's re-assessment or processing of an appeal, a student initially considered ineligible is found to be eligible for full grant under the SFA Schemes, what should schools do?

A: If the student's eligibility for full grant under the SFA Schemes is confirmed by WFSFAA's re-assessment or final vetting, schools should handle the case in accordance with the principles set out in (7) & (8) above.

(12) Q: If a receipt for payment of lunch expenses shows only the amount settled (e.g. payment at a convenience store, or by PPS, bank deposit, ATM transfer, crossed cheque, etc.) or schools have hired staff to provide lunch for students, in the absence of the required information, what should schools do?

A: The officers-in-charge should indicate on the receipt the number of students benefitted, the amount of lunch expenses and number of days with school lunch arrangements as sub-items of the grand total, and confirm such details by signature. The receipt must bear school chop as proof of verification.

(13) Q: Are schools allowed to provide lunch suppliers with information on students eligible for full grant under the SFA Schemes?

A: Schools should obtain the consent from parents concerned and comply with the provisions of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance to handle the matter.

(14) Q: The implementation of Free Lunch at Schools aggravates the workload of teachers and the administrative burden of schools. What support does EDB render to schools?

A: EDB has provided an additional recurrent cash grant equivalent to the salary of a Clerical Assistant for public sector primary schools since the 2014/15 school year. This helps schools cope with the additional administrative and clerical work arising from the implementation of various initiatives, in particular work relating to poverty alleviation (including the programme of Free Lunch at Schools). For details, please refer to EDB Circular No. 10/2014.

### **Accounting Arrangements**

(15) Q: When will participating schools receive the funding for Free Lunch at Schools?

A: As in the past, the funding will be disbursed by EDB to whole-day aided primary schools (including special schools) and primary schools under the DSS in late August and late December each year respectively. For whole-day government primary schools, the funding will be disbursed in two instalments, one in August and the other in April the following year.

(16) Q: What is the basis for calculating the funding for Free Lunch at Schools?

A: The funding for individual schools under Free Lunch at Schools is calculated on the basis of the estimated number of full grant recipients under the SFA Schemes in each participating school, daily lunch expenses and number of days with school lunch arrangement as reported by the school in the Application Form. The funding will be disbursed to schools in two instalments, i.e. in late August and late December (in April the following year for government primary schools to tie in with the prevailing accounting arrangements). Adjustment to the funding level will be made through the second instalment.

(17) Q: If the funding disbursed under Free Lunch at Schools is inadequate for meeting the actual expenditure or more than the amount of actual expenditure, what action should schools take?

A: The funding for Free Lunch at Schools is disbursed to schools in advance and calculated on the basis of the estimated number of full grant recipients under the SFA Schemes in each school. In case the advance funding is inadequate, schools should contact the Extended Support Programmes Section of EDB for further funding adjustment. If the provision exceeds the actual expenditure, schools should verify the balance of the funding at the end of the school year and surrender any surplus to EDB. No balance should be carried forward to the next school year, while deficit in the accounts will be made up by EDB's supplementary provision. Detailed arrangements will be announced to schools under a separate cover in June each year.

(18) Q: What accounting requirements should schools observe in respect of Free Lunch at Schools?

A: The funding for Free Lunch at Schools serves a specific purpose and participating schools should prepare a separate ledger for it. Schools should keep all relevant receipts, as in the case of other grants. In addition to the amount of expenditure, number of students benefitted, the lunch expenses and number of days with school lunch arrangements should be indicated on the receipts for audit purposes. In compliance with the requirement on submission of audited annual accounts as stipulated in EDB's relevant circular memoranda (including annexes), school should prepare a separate ledger and submit their annual accounts to EDB for scrutiny. For government primary schools, the funding will be disbursed in the form of budget allocation. The expenditure should be charged to a designated account and should not exceed the allocation in the respective financial year.

### **Application Procedures**

(19) Q: What schools can participate in Free Lunch at Schools? What are the application procedures?

A: All whole-day government and aided primary schools (including any of the special schools) and primary schools under the DSS can participate in the programme to provide free lunch at schools for eligible students. Schools should complete the Application Form attached to the relevant EDB Circular

Memorandum and return it to the Extended Support Programmes Section of EDB before the specified deadline for processing.

(20) Q: How can schools reach the responsible staff of EDB?

A: For enquiries, please contact the Extended Support Programmes Section of EDB at 2892 6659 (Address: Room 1141, 11/F, Wu Chung House, 213 Queen's Road East, Wan Chai, Hong Kong.)

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