

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. 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.).

Application Procedures

(5) 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.

Administrative Arrangements

(6) 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.

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

A: Parents have to submit the following two documents to schools, including

- (i) the duly completed reply slip attached to schools' circular with parents' consent on students' participation in Free Lunch at Schools;
- (ii) 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.

(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. Examples are set out in Appendix.

- (9) Q: Can schools disburse lunch subsidy to parents in the form of cash?
- A: The funding of 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 (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: 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.
- (19) Q: If amid the epidemic that participating schools of Free Lunch at Schools in the 2021/22 school year provide students with quality low-risk lunch boxes that can be kept for a longer time to take home for consumption during half-day schooling, how should schools handle their contract with the existing lunch supplier?

A: Upon consulting relevant stakeholders, the school heads or his/her delegated person may liaise with the existing lunch supplier to seek amendments to the contract terms and indicate such changes, including price adjustment, in the form of addendum. All amendments to be effected for this arrangement should be approved by the School Management Committees (SMCs) / Incorporated Management Committees (IMCs), and properly recorded. If such an amendment of terms is considered not feasible upon reviewing the existing contract, schools may consider conducting a procurement for this special arrangement in accordance with EDB's "Guidelines on Procurement Procedures in Aided Schools". For schools whose contract with the existing lunch supplier is about to expire, when selecting lunch supplier and preparing a new contract / extending the validity period of the existing contract, they should take into account the prevailing circumstances and review the contract terms as appropriate to ensure that the lunch supplier can provide proper lunch service for eligible students on days with half-day schooling.

Others

(20) Q: How do schools select nutritious and low-risk lunch boxes that can be kept for a longer time for students to take home for consumption during half-day schooling under the impact of the epidemic?

A: When selecting nutritious and low-risk lunch boxes that can be kept for a longer time, schools may refer to the "Guidelines on How to Ensure School Lunches Ordered Are Safe" issued by the Centre for Food Safety, including ensuring hot meal boxes to be kept at above 60°C and chilled meal boxes at 4°C or below before distribution. Considering some students may take longer journey from school to home, schools are advised not to provide cold food, e.g. salad, cold side dishes and sandwiches etc. For hot food, no matter they are hot or chilled meal boxes, students are advised to reheat the food thoroughly until it is steaming hot and consume as soon as possible after coming home. Schools should remind the lunch supplier to avoid providing food that spoils easily such as undercooked egg, tofu, leafy green vegetables, or dishes with too much sauce (such as curry). Schools should also provide health and environmental education to students by educating them food safety and reminding them not to waste food. Besides, students and parents should be told to handle lunch boxes properly to ensure food safety and hygiene, and encouraged to bring their own insulation bags/ reusable food storage bags to take the lunch boxes home and well reminded to clean food storage bag properly after every use.

For selecting healthy lunch for students, schools may refer to relevant guidelines and reference materials issued by the Department of Health. Details are at EatSmart@school.hk (webpage: <https://school.eatsmart.gov.hk/en/index.aspx>).

(21) 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).

Examples of calculating the effective date of receiving subsidy of Free Lunch at Schools

Case	Submission date of reply slip attached to school circular for application of Free Lunch at Schools	Submission date of required documentary proof, such as the Notification of Result for Assessment of Eligibility or Eligibility Certificate issued by the SFO of the WFSFAA by the parent	Date of receiving full grant status under the SFA Schemes	Effective date of receiving subsidy of Free Lunch at Schools	Remarks
1	1 September of the school year	1 October of the school year	1 September of the school year	1 September of the school year	School should arrange their lunch supplier to refund the lunch expenses paid/ prepaid by the parent for September and October. For the rest of the school year, the school will pay the lunch expenses on behalf of the student.
2	1 September of the school year	1 December of the school year	1 November of the school year	1 November of the school year	School should arrange their lunch supplier to refund the lunch expenses paid/ prepaid by the parent for November and December of the school year. For the rest of the school year, the school will pay the lunch expenses on behalf of the student. The parent shall settle the lunch expenses for their children for September and October of the school year.
3	1 December of the school year	1 February of the following year	1 September of the school year	1 December of the school year	Since the parent submitted the application for Free Lunch at Schools to school on 1 December of the school year, the student's lunch subsidy shall only start from 1 December of the school year. Parents should not make a retrospective claim for any lunch subsidy before 1 December.