

Best Children's Day Gift for Children in Remote Areas Centralized Kitchens for Better School Lunches

(Photo/Text: Chiu Chiu-Chan, Division of Student Affairs and School Security)



The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Council of Agriculture (COA) presented the Centralized Kitchens for Remote Schools Program in the Executive Yuan sitting on April 1, 2021. The Executive Yuan will allocate NT\$3.5 billion to this program to help schools in remote areas offset the cost of food ingredients, build centralized kitchens to service remote schools, make bulk purchases of food ingredients, coordinate manpower allocation, and make transport arrangements. The program will allow school children in remote areas to enjoy the same quality and care when it comes to dietary provisions as their counterparts in urban areas. It is truly the best Children's Day gift from MOE to these children, presented right before Children's Day.

When it comes to providing school lunches, schools in remote areas commonly face problems such as small cohort size, remote locations, food procurement orders being too small for economies of scale to set in, high transportation cost, and the lack of cold chains. The high costs brought about by these factors result in the schools having a low budget for food

ingredients themselves, which makes it immensely challenging for them to procure high-quality and fresh ingredients recognized by the Three Badges and One QR Code Program (3B1Q) and to hire professional kitchen staff. As such, MOE and COA have come up with four solutions to alleviate the problems faced by remote schools:

1. Significant increase in food subsidies for students in remote schools

From 2021, the government will invest NT\$2 billion per year to schools to encourage them to include locally-produced high-quality and traceable agricultural products in school lunches. The subsidy for mainstream schools has increased from NT3.5 per student per meal to NT6 per student per meal, and that for remote schools has increased even more, from NT6 per student per meal to NT10 per student per meal.

2. New and expanded centralized kitchens to service remote schools

To ensure the consistency of the quality of school lunches, MOE has disbursed grants to schools in remote areas to build new and expanded centralized kitchens that will serve as a hub to service all schools in the vicinity. These centralized kitchens will enable MOE to manage both hardware and software more efficiently and enjoy economies of scale in the purchase of food ingredients. In addition, MOE will also gather a group of professional consultants to design kitchens that are ergonomic, aesthetic, and open to allow students to observe the meal preparation process. The tableware, which will sport a minimalist design, will help students practice dining etiquette and table manners during mealtime in school. Under this program, kitchens will be in the spotlight on these campuses, thanks to their appealing visual design, education function in matters of food and nutrition, and their potential in helping students explore career options. These kitchens will be exemplary models of contemporary design with an international appeal.

3. Bulk purchase of ingredients to safeguard quality:

(1) Fund the establishment of food procurement cooperatives: By encouraging existing school clusters to jointly procure ingredients, MOE aims to keep ingredient prices low and their quality stable, and at the same time reduce the schools' administrative workload.

(2) Grants to farmer associations for the acquisition of equipment required to support cold chains: COA will provide grants to farmer associations for the acquisition of cold chain equipment such as refrigerators, freezers, refrigerated vans, and cold boxes needed in short-distance deliveries so as to ensure the high quality of food delivered via the supply chain and also to entice more farmers to become suppliers for remote schools.

(3) Establish a food supply platform: COA provides guidance to wholesale markets or associations of farmers, fishers, and livestock rearers in the setting up of a 3B1Q platform based on needs surfaced by local governments and school clusters. The platform will allow COA to work with farmers to plan for the production of 3B1Q food ingredients in order to further enhance the stability of food supply to schools. The establishment of a supply system also acts as a link between the demand for and supply of fresh food, allows for a pre-ordering transaction model, enhances traceability management, and clearly traces food sources.

4. Boost manpower involved in school lunches and establish a transparent and smart logistics management system

(1) Consolidation and effective management of manpower for school lunches: MOE will provide grants to enhance the salary of staff involved in supplying school lunches in remote schools and increase transparency in the management of school lunch operations. The ministry will also facilitate manpower planning when it comes to kitchen staff, nutritionists, and other professionals involved in school kitchens, as well as set employment guidelines, establish pay structures, organize training courses, and reward outstanding individuals. With these measures, MOE hopes to set a precedence for creating friendly workplace cultures and safeguarding community employment opportunities that county and city governments can emulate.

(2) Smart technology in logistics management: To reduce the cost of transporting food ingredients to remote schools, MOE has disbursed grants which will be channeled to building a logistics management system that uses AI to manage transportation routes, time, and temperatures with the aid of a cloud GPS system. With smart technology used to monitor the entire food supply chain, MOE seeks to ensure that students receive hot and hearty lunches and that there is more transparency in terms of food safety matters.

During the Yuan sitting, President of the Executive Yuan Su Tseng-chang expressed, "We have to protect our most vulnerable children. We hope that children in remote areas will gain positive experiences during their growing-up years and subsequently move on to accomplish great things. Therefore, it is not only the government's responsibility but also the nation's expectation to let every child receive all the nutrition they need to grow up well. Every child deserves to eat well, in terms of both quantity and quality, and go to school without worries."

Various departments in MOE will work together with COA to set up modern centralized kitchens and cluster-based procurement alliances to improve the quality of school lunches in remote schools. It is the mission of MOE to take care of the 120,000 children in small schools in mountainous and coastal areas and on the outlying islands.