

We have a food crisis silently brewing in our schools

With canteen operators struggling, vending machines and food deliveries are replacing fresh meals. This raises serious concerns about the long-term health of students.

Teo Yik Ying

As businesses and services in Singapore adapt to post-pandemic norms, one overlooked sector continues to struggle – school canteens.

What was once a haven for students to find affordable, tasty and healthy meals to fuel their learning, school canteens these days grapple with the uncertainty of finding reliable and long-term operators to manage food stalls.

This unsettling trend has already prompted a shift towards vending machines or food delivery services as quick fixes to feed hungry student populations. It raises a pressing question: Will there be unintended and far-reaching consequences for the health and well-being of our students in terms of dietary behaviours and habits?

After all, school meals have always been about more than simply satisfying hunger.

Around the world, school meal programmes are vital for both educational and public health outcomes. In countries like Brazil, the US and Japan, national school meal programmes have long been used as tools to improve child nutrition, tackle malnutrition, and even address issues like stunting and obesity.

These meals are not just crucial for poor or underprivileged children, but instead benefit all students by providing a reliable source of healthy, balanced nutrition. Studies have repeatedly shown that students who eat nutritious school meals have better concentration, higher attendance, and even improved academic performance.

This is why I view the situation

in Singapore's schools as deeply troubling. But why has this problem suddenly become so prevalent in recent times?

ROOT CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

To be fair, the problem of finding sufficient numbers of canteen stall operators has always existed even before Covid-19.

The root of the issue lies in the unsustainable financial model faced by canteen stallholders.

Vendors are expected to keep prices affordable for students, while adhering to strict guidelines on healthy eating and producing food that is both tasty and nutritious.

Even though rentals for school canteen stalls are heavily subsidised, falling revenues and increasing uncertainty over demand are driving operators away, especially given the accelerated increase in the cost of living in Singapore over the past three years.

With schools now transitioning between in-person and home-based learning, and the long periods without income during school holidays, many vendors are opting to cease their operations rather than endure what is increasingly unviable economically.

Clearly the situation will only worsen, with more current stallholders bowing out of the system.

This development should be deeply concerning for parents, educators and policymakers.

What is happening in our schools signals more than just a minor inconvenience, but speaks to larger questions about public health, equity, and the responsibility of schools to nurture both the minds and



Even though rentals for school canteen stalls are heavily subsidised, falling revenues and increasing uncertainty over demand are driving operators away, especially given the accelerated increase in the cost of living in Singapore over the past three years, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

bodies of our children.

EVOLUTION OF SINGAPORE'S SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMMES

As a country where human capital is viewed as the only natural resource, Singapore has never left the development of our people to chance, which is why we have always recognised the importance of nutrition in schools.

When Singapore was developing in the 1970s and 1980s, we introduced initiatives such as the School Milk Scheme to provide undernourished students with regular servings of milk, to tackle malnutrition and to provide children with basic sources of protein and calcium.

Conversely, when rising

affluence led to growing concerns about childhood obesity and unhealthy eating habits, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) in 2011 launched the Healthy Meals in Schools Programme to encourage schools to serve balanced meals that include whole grain, fruits, vegetables and lower-sugar beverages.

Moreover, the Ministry of Education's Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) ensures that even children from lower-income families can access subsidised, nutritious school meals, allowing them to focus on their studies rather than worrying about hunger.

These initiatives created a school food environment that was both inclusive and health-promoting.

The crisis that is happening in school canteens now is threatening to erode all the advances that Singapore has made in our school meal programmes, especially if the stopgap solution is to rely on vending machines.

At first glance, vending machines seem like a convenient solution that is keeping with the times. They offer quick, on-the-go options, and with advances in food technology, there are now ready meals that can be prepared fresh and with minimal use of preservatives.

However, the reality is more problematic.

Currently, vending machines selling better quality food tend to be pricier and beyond the daily budget of the average student,

and there is insufficient demand to provide the economies of scale necessary to drive down prices.

The majority of vending machines still dispense pre-packaged, ultra-processed foods – high in preservatives, sugar, and salt – that run counter to the goals of the Healthy Meals in Schools Programme.

Even the ubiquitous vending machine that provides seemingly "healthy" orange juice that is freshly squeezed in front of your eyes disregard the recommendation that we should be taking our fruits whole, rather than simply drinking the juice.

Moreover, vending machines encourage a "grab-and-go" mentality, signalling to students

CONTINUED ON PAGE B2

A healthy body is just as important as a sharp mind

FROM B1

that quick, processed food is an acceptable substitute for a freshly prepared, balanced meal. Schools, along with homes, are among the most influential environments for shaping lifelong behaviours. This is particularly true when it comes to eating habits.

Research has shown that it is not simply about providing healthy options, but also to ensure the food environment as a whole encourages the behaviour of making healthier choices. When pricier but healthier offerings compete with cheaper ultra-processed options such as

instant noodles, crisps and chocolate bars, it is not difficult to imagine what most price-conscious students will choose from vending machines.

When fresh meals are replaced by processed alternatives, it is not just their lunchtime choices that are affected, it is their entire approach to food and nutrition. As a society, we need to consider whether we want to shape a generation of children who grow up with the habit of heading to vending machines whenever they need sustenance.

This is why I believe it is time for a major rethink of how school meals are provided.

MOVING TOWARDS CENTRAL CATERING

Currently, the responsibility for managing canteen operations lies with individual schools. This decentralised model may have worked in the past, but in the face of today's challenges when many schools are struggling, it seems outdated and no longer effective.

This means it is perhaps time for the Ministry of Education (MOE) to reconsider its approach to school canteens, and to take on a more active role in ensuring schools can offer healthy, affordable meals.

A more sustainable model could involve centralised purchasing and preparation of meals.

Instead of relying on individual stallholders, schools could pay food vendors a fixed monthly rate to cook meals or engage catering companies to provide meals across multiple schools. In fact,

schools could band together by MOE zones or clusters to collectively negotiate with catering companies, which given the bulk orders could secure better deals and ensure consistent, healthy and quality meals. To reduce administrative burden, students could be offered a limited set of meal options, much like the standardised menus seen in airlines, military camps or hospitals.

A handful of Singapore schools have already resorted to catering with central kitchens, but these are still mostly left to schools to individually negotiate with caterers such as Sats and SFI.

Singapore wouldn't be the first country to rely on centralised kitchens, as Japan has long operated a centralised school meal system, where nutritious meals are prepared in large kitchens and delivered to schools daily.

While the lack of variety in a centralised model may seem like a drawback, research has actually shown that peer influence plays a significant role in children's food choices. When students see their classmates eating a variety of foods, they are more likely to try new dishes. Centralised kitchens could, in fact, encourage healthier eating habits and openness to a wide range of foods.

REIMAGINING SCHOOL MEALS FOR THE FUTURE

Singapore's school meal programmes have come a long way, from an initial focus on meeting basic nutrient needs to tackling the growing problem of obesity and poor diets. But we are now at a crossroads. Schools are struggling to even provide fresh meals, and vending machines are becoming a worrying default solution.

It is time for Singapore to reimagine what school meals should look like in this new era. This will require us – parents, schools and policymakers – to take bold steps for a major reform. What we cannot afford to do is to ignore the problem, and allow vending machines to become the new normal.

Singapore's commitment to education has always been about preparing students for the future. But part of that preparation must include nurturing their health and well-being, starting with what we feed them at school.

After all, a healthy body is just as important as a sharp mind in ensuring our children are ready to face the challenges of tomorrow.

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