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Feeding severely wasted children in school: Examining processes in DepED's School Feeding Program

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Background

Education and learning depend on good health and nutrition, especially among young children. When children lack certain nutrients in their diet or suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and diseases, their potential for learning is diminished compared when they are healthy and well nourished (Del Rosso 1999). Thus, investments have been made for these two forms of human capital development through food for education (FFE) programs (Adelman et al. 2008).

Across the world, FFE programs have taken various modalities but all of them have the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger while improving the efficiency of the education system. School feeding programs serve as platforms for human development

outcomes such as reducing hunger, aiding in the development of children, improving nutritional status and promoting good health, and reducing gender and social inequities by encouraging families to send their children to school.¹ They work on the premise that improving the health condition of children improves their learning capacity and eventually, their academic performance

¹ DepED Order No. 54, s. 2013

PIDS Policy Notes are observations/analyses written by PIDS researchers on certain policy issues. The treatise is holistic in approach and aims to provide useful inputs for decisionmaking.

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as well. Improvements in education outcomes are established by assessing school participation, school retention, and learning achievement or cognitive development. Meanwhile, improvements in health and nutrition outcomes are established by measuring the children's food energy consumption, anthropometry, and micronutrient and morbidity status.

In recent years, FFE programs have received renewed interest in developing countries as a mechanism to accelerate the achievement of some of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly those on hunger and poverty (MDG 1), education (MDG 2), and gender equality (MDG 3) (WFP 2009). Moreover, they are regarded as a social safety net that reduces the vulnerability of children by providing explicit or implicit transfer to

² Short-term hunger is a period of hunger experienced by children who have inadequate breakfasts and/or walk long distances to school.

³ Severely wasted children are children whose weight-for-height is below the minus 3 standard deviation cut-off established by the World Health Organization (WHO) for well-nourished populations.

households of the value of the food distributed particularly during social crises (Bundy et al. 2009; Andrews et al. 2011).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepED) has been conducting FFE programs since 1997. The first FFE program in the country had for its main objective addressing short-term hunger² among public school children. This objective has been modified several times to address inadequacies found in earlier programs. In particular, the focus of the feeding program has been shifted from addressing short-term hunger to dealing with the more serious case of undernutrition or malnutrition that is not uncommon among Filipino school-age children. In 2012, for instance, the Nutrition Status Report of DepED had identified 562,262 severely wasted children³ enrolled in the country's public elementary schools.

The current FFE program of DepED, the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP), has for its main objectives the rehabilitation of severely wasted children to normal nutrition status and the improvement of classroom attendance of these children, as well as that of their health and nutrition status and behavior. Its specific goals are to: (1) rehabilitate at least 70 percent of the severely wasted beneficiaries to normal nutritional status at the end of 100–120 feeding days; (2) ensure 85–100 percent classroom attendance of beneficiaries; and (3) improve the children's health and nutrition values and behavior.

The SBFP is characterized by on-site feeding of beneficiaries for a duration of 100–120 feeding days using standardized recipes with *malunggay* and a 20-day cycle menu. Each meal provides child beneficiaries with at least 300 additional calories. Meal preparation and the feeding are implemented by a school-based feeding core group, consisting of teachers and parents, with the assistance of volunteer parents. Procurement of supplies and financial reporting are the responsibility of the beneficiary schools. The DepED has also prescribed complementary activities such as deworming of the beneficiaries prior to the start of the feeding program, waste segregation, management and composting, integration of the Essential Health Care Program (EHCP) in the implementation of the SBFP, and the *Gulayan sa Paaralan* Program (GPP). The EHCP uses simple and cost-effective health interventions for promoting cleanliness and preventing sickness among school children, while the GPP provides for the growing in school sites, if possible, of vegetable gardens that have at least 50 *malunggay* trees, other vegetables as well as fruits. The SBFP in its current form was first implemented in school year (SY) 2011–2012 and was called the Breakfast Feeding Program back then.

This *Policy Note* presents the findings of the process evaluation of the SBFP. In particular, the evaluation examined the processes undertaken by the DepED in the SBFP and complementary activities during SY 2013–

2014, when DepED targeted 40,361 beneficiaries enrolled in 814 schools located in 20 provinces and eight cities. The results can provide inputs to improving current and future implementation of the SBFP, which was expanded in SY 2014–2015 to include all severely wasted children enrolled in public elementary schools.

Methodology for assessment

The process evaluation focused on the implementation of the program in SY 2013–2014, the most recent school year during which the SBFP has been completed. The study examined the processes undertaken by the different administrative levels of DepED in implementing the SBFP and assessed the gaps between planned and realized outcomes.

The DepED gave the PIDS research team the clearance to conduct the project during the last week of July. Instruments for the field work were pilot tested during the first week of August in a school in Metro Manila, and in another school in Cavite. Learnings from the pilot field work were used to finalize the data gathering instruments during the second week of August. Field work for the remaining six schools across Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao were conducted during the last two weeks of August.

Structured interviews of school implementers (school heads and SBFP core group leaders or members), teachers, and DepED officials or staff that are tasked to monitor the program at the division, district,

and regional levels were conducted in all eight schools. The interview guides for the school implementers focused on program implementation and procedures, issues and challenges faced, and lessons learned, and included performance ratings of the other implementers (e.g., the performance rating of the SBFP core group if the one being interviewed is the school head). The interview with the teacher focused on the performance of the child in class and on perceptions of the implementation and management of the SBFP. The interview with the DepED division staff focused on monitoring issues and concerns.

Documents on the implementation of the SBFP that were requested of the eight sample schools were encoded, examined, and analyzed⁴ and transcripts of the interviews were prepared and analyzed.

Findings from the process evaluation

A well-managed program

The 2013–2014 SBFP was generally well managed by beneficiary schools as school

⁴ These are the list of documents requested to be prepared by the selected schools: (1) SBFP Form 1 including SBFP Form 1 reports; (2) SBFP Form 2; (3) Request for Quotation (RFQ)/Market Form; (4) Work and Financial Plan; (5) Project Procurement Management Plan; (6) names of the SBFP core group and classification as to whether they are teachers or parents; (7) names of the Bids and Awards Committee (BAC) members; (8) Purchase Order (PO) for the food commodities; (9) name of the school nurse, if any; (10) Termination report; (11) Attendance sheet; (12) Form 137 of at least 10 beneficiaries who were randomly selected; (13) Other reports submitted to the division office; and (15) Procurement forms that include PHILGEPS certificate, abstract of quotation, official receipt, and reimbursement and expense receipt.

heads and other school personnel were oriented on the program before it started. DepED division staff or staff from higher levels of the DepED bureaucracy (e.g., regional level, Health and Nutrition Center) conducted orientation programs prior to implementation. The orientation covered financial and auditing procedures and/or included beneficiary and volunteer parents as participants in the case of some schools. In addition, program implementation was facilitated by a good feedback mechanism with DepED division staff tasked to monitor it. Some division accountants assisted school heads in complying with procurement requirements and preparing liquidation reports or consulted with staff of the Commission on Audit for problems encountered by the SBFP implementers.

Good practices were also observed. Some schools, owing to advocacy of the local government units (LGUs), monitored heights and weights of children monthly. Other schools issued “meal cards” to monitor the feeding and ensure that only beneficiaries would be fed, while some schools instituted a system of prioritization to ensure that unconsumed meals due to absences among beneficiaries were given to wasted children.

The SBFP also appeared to work best when complemented with the other DepED programs of deworming, GPP, and EHCP. School heads mentioned the importance of proper hygiene and GPP and also considered deworming as vital.

Benefits to the children and the community

The SBFP is well appreciated by beneficiary and volunteer parents as well as by implementers (school heads, teachers, and DepED monitoring staff). All voiced hopes that the program will be continued and expanded, if possible, to cover not only severely wasted pupils but also wasted pupils, if not all the children. School heads and teachers involved in the program expressed commitment to the program despite the extra workload as they were inspired by the reduced number of severely wasted students in SY 2014–2015 and behavioral changes in parents who adopted some of the menus in the feeding program. The stakeholders, particularly beneficiary and volunteer parents and teachers of the beneficiary pupils, noted the benefits of the feeding program to the children, such as improved nutritional status, better hygiene, lower morbidity during the program, improved school attendance during and even after the feeding program, increased attentiveness in class, and better social behavior in many of the children even after completing the program. Moreover, they regard the program as addressing malnutrition among children and promoting a culture of care and active participation among all stakeholders and fostering camaraderie among parents.

Aspects of program implementation requiring improvement

Nutritional status assessment

Some aspects of SBFP implementation require improvement. Lack of standard weighing

protocols and/or weighing equipment among implementing schools may have resulted in inaccurate weight and height measurements, and therefore in misclassified nutrition status of the children both in the prefeeding and postfeeding stages. Further, data on number of severely wasted children for the past school year rather than current data were used for budget allocation purposes. This may lead to serious underestimation of required resources for feeding the beneficiaries. Inconsistencies in the birthdates and the estimated ages of the children in both the prefeeding and postfeeding stages were also seen in the SBFP forms accomplished by the schools. There may also be errors in the computation of the body mass index as the descriptive category for nutrition status of some children does not match the status indicated by their recorded weights and heights. It is also not clear whether some schools did use the child's age computed at the end of the feeding program when checking the child's postfeeding nutrition status against World Health Organization Child Growth Standards (WHO-CGS) tables, as their submitted SBFP forms do not have a column for the child's postfeeding

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age. Clearly, any encoding and measurement errors on the nutrition status data have implications on the targeting accuracy of the program as well as on correct assessment as to whether stated goals are attained.

Fortunately, despite the presence of such measurement errors, three schools, which provided sufficiently detailed documents as to allow computation of the percentage of children that attained normal nutrition status at the end of the program, were determined to have exceeded the 70-percent cutoff.

Orientation on procurement and liquidation procedures

Accountants in the DepED division offices reported that the procurement and liquidation procedures are difficult for SBFP implementers to follow and the forms are complicated. Delays in submission of liquidation reports and in acceptance of the same by the division office caused disruptions in feeding programs in some schools and even in the discontinuation of the program in one case. However, the difficulties encountered by school implementers can be addressed through more thorough orientation of the school heads and other school personnel on procurement and liquidation procedures and forms. Heads of schools that are repeat SBFP beneficiaries attributed their smooth implementation of the program the second time around to their familiarity with the routines and forms of the program and their prior experience on procurement.

Timely program fund releases

Delays in the transmittal of sub-Allotment Release Orders (sub-AROs) and Notice of Cash Allotments (NCAs) triggered delays in starting the feeding program. Some schools thus resorted to double-feeding to ensure that the feeding program is completed within the remaining school year. While double-feeding should not adversely affect attainment of the nutrition goal, it limits the period during which the feeding serves as incentive for the beneficiary children to attend school. Timely release of program funds should be ensured to encourage accurate implementation of the feeding program and discourage double-feeding.

Program budget

The daily feeding budget of PHP 16 per beneficiary needs to be reviewed. There is a clear consensus among those interviewed that the funding levels should be augmented. The DepED staff who monitor program implementation emphasized the need to increase the budget component both for the children's food and for administration and monitoring expenses. Inflationary adjustments have to be considered.

The DepED should also look into the possibility of increasing funds for deworming as there are schools that conduct deworming only once a year due to lack of funds.

Parents' participation

Parents' participation as SBFP volunteers and their adoption of nutritious menus and

hygienic practices in the home are essential to the smooth implementation of the program and to sustaining its gains. Repeat beneficiaries result from poor nourishment at home, especially when the break between feeding programs is long.

The parents' role in inculcating proper nutrition practices is essential. The SBFP beneficiaries are not always from impoverished households. Poor eating habits result in wasted and severely wasted status even among children from nonpoor families.

Recommendations for policy and program implementation

While the program has been managed well, there are implementation issues that need to be addressed, and policies that may require adjustments. In particular, it is recommended that DepED:

1. Provide implementing schools, perhaps through the assistance of LGUs and education stakeholders, with weighing equipment and measurement protocols for more accurate recording of the children's weights and heights;
2. Train SBFP school implementers, class advisers included, in the proper filling out of SBFP Forms 1 and 2;
3. Set up and maintain a more up-to-date information system on the nutritional status of children, which can be a rider to current information platforms at the DepED, such as the Enhanced Basic Education Information System;

4. Provide school heads and SBFP core group members with thorough training on procurement and liquidation procedures and forms;
5. Advocate with the Department of Budget and Management for the timely release of NCAs by its regional offices;
6. Encourage and assist implementing schools in conducting seminars for parents on proper nutrition and hygienic practices, perhaps in cooperation with the Department of Social Welfare and Development through its *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino* Program's family development sessions;
7. Increase the budget allocation per child for the food component and that for administration and monitoring; and
8. Advocate for a government policy to provide sustained resources for feeding not only severely wasted children but also wasted children. 📄

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