

PRESS RELEASE

DepEd, SEARCA, UPLB to promote school-based vegetable gardens

Recognizing nutrition as a vital factor in student's learning, the Department of Education has asked the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) and the University of the Philippines (UPLB) to help the department in drafting a program that will address problems in malnutrition and undernutrition common among school-aged children in the Philippines.

Invited as keynote speaker during the 44th anniversary celebration of SEARCA inspired by the theme "Enhancing Partnerships in Education, Research and Knowledge Management towards Food Security in Southeast Asia, Education Secretary Armin Luistro talked about the importance of nutrition to the students' performance and learning in school ."

"Malnutrition is one of the most unabated health problems among public school students. Studies have shown that there are many children who come to school on an empty stomach. Learning is severely affected when students are hungry which greatly affects the physical and mental development of children. This results to absenteeism, poor school performance and eventual dropping out," stressed Luistro.

Prior to the event, SEARCA Director Dr. Gil Saguiguit, Jr. and his team had paid a courtesy call to Luistro to personally invite him to the event. Luistro took this time to initially discuss his plans and to ask for support from SEARCA in strengthening efforts to address the malnutrition concerns among students.

Saguiguit, with the UPLB community, committed to do their "homework" and to support DepEd in this undertaking. True enough, SEARCA and UPLB have come up with an initial draft proposal called "School-Based Food and Nutrition Program (SFNP) with a slogan of *"Ating anihin masustansyang pagkain, tanim sa paaralan natin."*

The proposal states that school gardens would serve as an incentive for poor parents to send their children to school, knowing that they will gain access to nutritious food and could bring home food for household consumption. Likewise, schoolchildren would have opportunities to know the value of good nutrition, and such knowledge would help mold their preference for nutritious foods.

SFNP is an effort to promote the well-being of school children by providing children with adequate nutrition through school-based gardens. It primarily aims to improve the nutritional condition and dietary habits of school-aged children through increased production of locally adapted edible plants through a school-based gardening/agriculture program.

Specifically, it has three objectives: Educationally, it aims to increase the relevance and quality of education of schoolchildren through experiential learning activities in food production and nutrition; Nutritionally, to improve food diversity and availability to meet nutrient-deficiencies and enhance the

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prospects of for community food security; and economically, to reduce food expenses, create savings, provide an alternative income source for families to address poverty in a long-term basis.

The key objectives of school-based gardens are: to ensure food security and meet the nutritional needs of school children; to strengthen school children's appreciation and skills in agriculture and the environment; to upgrade family knowledge in nutrition and agriculture; and to improve family livelihood prospects through enhanced knowledge and skills in food production.

"If we continue to put little attention to schoolchildren's nutrition, no matter how hard we try to address resource gaps, we will not be able to raise education standards in the country," stressed Luistro.

He furthered that, "if malnutrition would not be addressed soon, it will be harder for the department to achieve its Education For All goal by 2015."

SFNP is expected to help meet the challenges in the basic education sector, such as poor nutrition and poverty, by establishing school gardens to serve as food baskets and sources of food rich in vitamins and minerals. Particularly, it will contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and achieving universal primary education.

SFNP will focus on school-based food and nutrition interventions, particularly the establishment of vegetable gardens and fruit trees. These are effective ways of addressing nutritional gaps and improving educational performance. Moreover, starting the children early in sustainable agricultural practices would likely develop values and attitudes, thus creating a lasting impact on the food and nutrition security of the community.

Other government agencies such as the Departments of Agriculture, Health, and Social Welfare and Development will be tapped in this project. SEARCA and UPLB will provide science-based information and introduce locally adapted "green technologies" so that children and their community will learn about climate change, natural resource management, and other environmental concerns.

"By alleviating hunger through this joint effort, we can provide children better chances of quality learning in school," said Luistro.

This program will also support Sen. Edgardo Angara's advocacy campaign dubbed "OMG! (Oh My Gulay!)" to encourage a healthy, inexpensive diet of fruits and vegetables amid the worsening incidence of malnutrition among Filipino children.

Luistro is currently the President of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) which is the mother unit of SEARCA.

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