

Should all school kids get free meals?

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As Seoul prepares to vote ...



Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon campaigns ahead of the school meals referendum slated for August 24. (Yonhap News)

A rocky road to a controversial vote

After months of political dispute, Seoul citizens will decide on free school meals in a vote on Wednesday. The referendum will ask voters to choose between providing free meals to all school students regardless of income straight away, as favored by Seoul City Council, or gradually covering students from the poorest 50 percent of households, as backed by Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon. At least one third of the electorate must vote for the result to be valid.

The road to this point has been fraught with controversy and division. In protest of Seoul City Council's decision to implement a universal meals program, Oh earlier this year boycotted council meetings for six months, prompting the council to accuse Oh of a "dereliction of duty." On Tuesday, Oh put his political career on the line, promising to step down as mayor should his proposal fail. For Oh and many conservatives, the vote is a last bid to safeguard the city's finances from welfare populism. To many liberals, the referendum demonstrates more about Oh's political ambitions than his principles. Where their conservative peers see waste in a universal program, they see inclusiveness that avoids stigmatizing poorer children. But in the end, the voters' voice will be the one that matters.

Yes: We must not divide the rich and poor

By Ahn Jin-geol

Korean civil society is actively denouncing Grand National Party member and Mayor of Seoul Oh Se-hoon's "eco-friendly free school meal" city plebiscite. So what is the problem with following this

plan, and voting on allowing school children to eat healthy meals in peace? Precisely that Oh has decided to take the low road, pushing through with a vote for himself and by himself, solely intended to feed his political ambition.

It is clear that Oh is the controlling force behind this plebiscite, evidenced by all the press conferences and interviews he has held on the subject.

This is all without mentioning the reports of false signatures and other types of illegal activity that have been made regarding the organization of the vote.

But there is yet another problem, regarding the points on which the plebiscite touches. The core issue surrounding the “eco-friendly free school meals” was the question of whether to provide these services to all schoolchildren regardless of family income (and so establish a universal free school meal policy), or as the mayor advocates, to only fund and provide the meals to the lowest 50 percent of households in terms of income.



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As such, one would expect the plebiscite to ask a question highlighting the difference between the “universal free school meal” and the “discriminatory free school meal” propositions.

However, the mayor has instead put to the forefront of the vote the very much secondary question of the timing for the policy’s implementation, asking whether it should be gradual or all at once.

Mayor Oh Se-hoon’s discriminatory policies would divide the children of the rich and the poor, and make less fortunate children feel hurt and dispirited; this is against the very principles of education. The “eco-friendly free school meals,” like compulsory elementary and middle school, should be applied to all, regardless of income level.

We cannot stand by and watch classmates be divided between the well-off and the less well-off, nor can we stand idly by as some children feel ever more left out, branded “poor” by their own peers, and all because of school meals. The constitution of Korea is very clear in its declaration that compulsory education ought to be free as well.

As such, many citizens are taking action to reject this power play of a plebiscite, calling it the “worst plebiscite on record.” Since the plebiscite itself is so twisted in its premises, the idea is to not go out to vote at all. All around Seoul, various civil society organizations are hard at work in vote boycott campaigns. Today in Seoul students in the first four years of elementary school are benefitting from the “eco-friendly free school meals” without any problems.

To expand this coverage to the last two years of elementary school would require 65.9 billion won (\$60.8 million), only 0.35 percent of the city budget. That is not even one tenth of the 673.5 billion won being spent on the “Han River Art Island” project, which itself is accused of destroying the environment.

Oh Se-hoon spends some 50 billion won a year on promotion for the city government, and this coming plebiscite will cost taxpayers 18.2 billion won. How can civil society simply accept this? Do we really need to show our children, the future of our society, the image of their parents voting and fighting over who gets to eat?

The citizens will be the final judges of Mayor Oh Se-hoon’s absurd plebiscite brouhaha.

Ahn Jin-geol is chief coordinator of the social economic rights team of People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, a progressive civic group. — Ed.

No: Subsidizing everyone wastes tax money

By Casey Lartigue, Jr.

The more Seoul superintendent Kwak No-hyun and his allies talk, the more they strengthen my opposition to their grandiose plans. In an interview earlier this year with Michael Alison Chandler of the Washington Post, Kwak justified suspicions that advocates are using the free lunch program as a proxy for a larger agenda.

Kwak begins: "If we harbor the idea of universal welfare ..."

This justifies suspicions that the goal is to establish a universal welfare program, not just to help poor kids. "Welfare populism" has defined the current election cycle, with Korean politicians pushing and shoving each other out of the way to announce the latest "free" or "half-free" proposal: "Free" school lunches, "free" medical services, "half-tuition," "free" childcare.



Casey Lartigue, Jr.

Leading the opposition is Seoul Metropolitan City Mayor Oh Se-hoon. He has dubbed himself the "antipopulism warrior," arguing that the referendum "will be a watershed to decide whether to expand or put an end to welfare populism." I doubt the referendum will end such appeals from those who harbor the idea of universal welfare. Such advocates will be back with more "free" initiatives, regardless of the outcome of the vote.

A common political strategy is to highlight beneficiaries while ignoring or underestimating costs. Korea's national pension fund is now 1.3 trillion won in debt — did advocates mention this when the program was created and later expanded?

Highlighting benefits while ignoring costs works in tandem with the "stalking horse" approach. That is, hide your agenda behind sympathetic figures, the way bad guys hid behind horses in the old Hollywood Western movies. Kwak and his allies have the "perfect" strategy to implement universal welfare — free meals for kids to soften opposition.

He concludes his justification for a universal program with "... in contrast to selective welfare which tends to be accompanied by stigma and discrimination." That appeal to kids tugs at the heartstrings, but decision-makers must make sound decisions that don't burden those same kids in the future.

David Boaz, of the Cato Institute, recently said that ending the stigma of welfare is a mistake.

"We need to re-establish that stigma," Boaz said, not only for food stamp recipients, but also for corporate CEOs and farmers receiving subsidies from the government. "People should be embarrassed about being on the public dole."

Boaz was responding to a New York Times article reporting that the stigma of welfare in

America has disappeared, mainly due to the government allowing the use of debit cards rather than food stamps.

Aristides Hatzis, a professor at the University of Athens who recently spoke at a Center for Free Enterprise forum and to National Assembly members, warned against South Korea following Greece's path to welfare populism and government overspending. To an overflow crowd at the Plaza Hotel on Aug. 9, Hatzis asked why Seoul taxpayers should be forced to feed wealthy and middle-class children.

That's a good question. Currently, about 11 percent of children in Seoul get free lunches. If the goal is to help the poor, why not focus on them rather than expanding to a universal program? Many government programs do more harm than good, but it makes more sense to focus on people in need. If stigma is a reason to expand the program, then would Kwak cut back to a targeted program if poor kids could receive assistance that isn't transparent to others — or is the real goal a universal program, with stigma being an excuse?

Democratic Party spokesperson Lee Yong-seop has even asserted that the free school meal program "is the state's duty and the people's rights. So not only would taxpayers be forced to pay for yet another large program, but opposing the program allegedly violates the right to have free food at taxpayer's expense. The demand for other rights at taxpayer expense is sure to increase if the "freesomething" policies are implemented.

The larger agenda, the lack of concern about costs, and the effort to turn charity into a right — the more Kwak and his allies talk, the easier it is for me to oppose their grandiose plans.

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