

Got Milk?



Students of Tanglin Primary School drinking milk, 1986. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001175 - 0089).

The School Milk Scheme in Singapore

In the 1970s and 1980s, primary school children were encouraged to drink milk in school. By the late 1980s, this initiative had curdled.

By Rebecca Tan

In schools across Singapore during the 1970s and 1980s, scenes of school children chugging milk in class daily were a common sight. Singapore students did not suddenly develop a taste for the drink though. Instead, this came about thanks to the School Milk Scheme, a government initiative that began in 1974.

Why Drink Milk?

In a letter to the *Straits Times* in 1982, the Ministry of Education explained that the main objective of the scheme was “to improve and upgrade the nutritional intake of primary school children by the consumption, regularly in school, of a

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substantial food item”. Milk, the ministry noted, was rich in proteins, carbohydrates and calcium which were “essential for healthy physical growth in our school children”.¹

Former educator and historian Eugene Wijesingha noted that Singapore was a poor country at the time. “Don’t forget. This was the seventies. That was the time I think when people in the country hadn’t become sufficiently affluent enough. There were still poverty gaps in different parts of the island,” he said in an oral history interview in 1995.²

The milk scheme idea came from Minister for Education Lee Chiaw Meng (1972–75) who “felt that nutrition was a crucial element in the learning process of a child”, said Wijesingha. He surmised that Lee was most likely inspired by his visit to the United Kingdom where “every child must drink half a litre or so many pints of milk every day”, which was “part of the whole national health scheme”.³

In June 1973, the Education Ministry started selling powdered milk “at 10 cents a glass in 10 primary schools” located in housing estates, in preparation for rolling out the School Milk Scheme nationwide. “The scheme, open to all school children from Primary one to six, is a move to get the children accustomed to milk drinking as well as to provide a nourishing supplement to their diet,” said the ministry.⁴

The milk was supplied at 10 cents a glass from Monday to Friday, but it was free for underprivileged children. According to the ministry, “[r]esponse from parents and children have [sic] been very encouraging”, with many children looking forward to drinking the milk each day. “Parents too are very happy that their children are receiving this nourishing supplement at a minimum cost,” the ministry noted.⁵

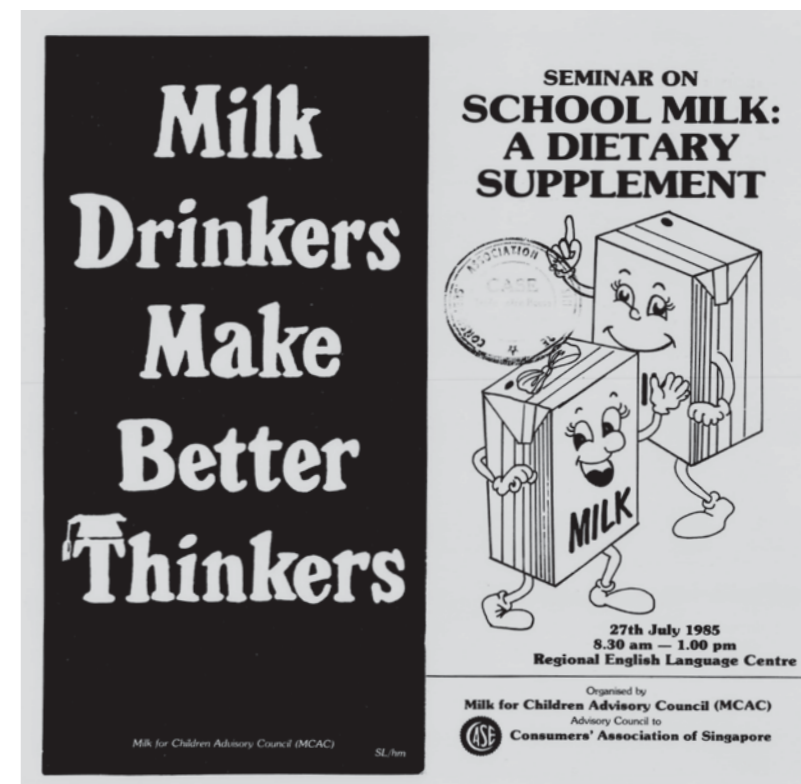
As Fresh as Milk

The scheme proper was launched in February 1974 at 33 primary schools and later expanded to more schools. By the end of 1975, “children in 150 schools were drinking the milk”, with plans lined up to extend the scheme to another 140 primary schools by the end of 1976. Under the scheme, reconstituted pasteurised milk was sold at 10 cents a packet to students (this was increased to 12 cents from 1975), but children of parents receiving social welfare need not pay. The milk came in 150ml plastic packets

and provided schoolchildren with a “wholesome, nutritious and low-cost snack” each day and aimed to “inculcate in them nutrition consciousness and good food habits”, said the ministry.⁶

At the start of the scheme, the milk was prepared by Ben Sunshine Dairies. Later on, the milk was supplied by Malaysian Dairy Industries, Singapore Cold Storage or Premier Milk. It was “delivered daily to the schools twice a day in time for recess”. Children could choose from five different flavours: vanilla, strawberry, pineapple, chocolate or for the not too choosy, plain milk.⁷

Although the scheme had initial teething problems such as “late and short deliveries”, these were eventually resolved and it became popular with both teachers and students. “Response is overwhelming. The pupils enjoy the delicious milk and some of them even buy extra packets for their brothers and sisters at home,” a teacher at River Valley English School told the *Straits Times*. Seah Peng Peng, a Primary 6 pupil, said: “I like the milk very much. I think if I drink a pack every day, I will have enough vitamins, proteins and brains to help me pass my examinations.” The ministry also



The “Milk Drinkers Make Better Thinkers” brochure by the Milk for Children Advisory Council. Consumers’ Association of Singapore, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Microfilm no. NA 1911).



Students of River Valley English School drinking milk, 1974. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

approved two secondary schools to participate in the scheme.⁸

School tuckshop vendors were also said to be supportive of the scheme even though business at the drinks stall dropped. They “appreciated the importance of the scheme and have given the schools their full co-operation,” the *Straits Times* reported.⁹

A teacher distributing milk to students of River Valley English School, 1974. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



Milk Scheme Goes Off

Over time however, interest in the scheme began to wane. In 1974, when the scheme was started, 63 percent of all primary school children drank milk daily but by 1980, this had fallen to 21 percent. The Education Ministry gave various reasons for the drop, such as children getting “fed up with drinking milk every day” and the “aggressive sales promotion” of soft drink companies having changed children’s preferences.¹⁰

When interviewed by the *Straits Times* in 1981, some children, like Primary Three pupil Li Yi Liang of River Valley Government Primary School, simply said “I don’t like milk” to explain why they did not participate in the scheme. He was on the scheme in Primary One but stopped after a year. “I don’t like to drink it. I thought you must take it, so I did,” he added. Later on, he switched to bringing his own flask of water from home. Betty Wong, 12, of the same school was more forthright. “Every time I drank it I felt like vomiting, so I stopped,” she said.¹¹

The Education Ministry adopted various measures to reverse the drop in milk consumption. In August 1981, it “urged principals to encourage pupils to sign up for the scheme by telling them and their parents the nutritional value of milk”. It also changed the type of milk given to schools. Previously, schools were supplied with pasteurised milk twice a day at 20 cents a pack. However, the ministry announced in January 1982 that it would

发育中的孩童
孩童求学期间，正亦是他们发育成长最迅速的时期，这期间他们需要足够的精力和营养，以供他们在体能和精神上的一切活动。

牛奶
牛奶是精力和营养的宝贵来源，除了提供使骨骼和牙齿健壮钙质之外，牛奶也提供高品质的蛋白质——含有对身体发育健康所需的各类氨基酸。它富含维生素，对强健的体魄和良好的生活都有着重大功效。

校内牛奶提高儿童的表现
校内牛奶含有一切的营养，使孩童发育健全，尤其对那些缺乏足够早餐或体重欠佳的孩童更有帮助。
每一包250cc的牛奶就是够提供一名小学孩童每日所需的四分之一蛋白质，一半的钙质及五分之一的B2维生素。

化解牛奶
不宜饮用普通牛奶的学童，可改喝化解牛奶，因为它比普通牛奶更容易消化，化解牛奶适合所有学童饮用。

牛奶——天然营养最均衡的食品
让我们享受它美好滋味

普通体重 (公斤)	男 (公分)	女 (公分)	普通体重 (公斤)
46.3 - 56.5	158	142	42.8 - 52.4
44.4 - 54.2	154	141	39.6 - 48.4
42.8 - 52.3	152	139	37.8 - 46.2
40.6 - 49.6	150	137	36.1 - 44.1
38.7 - 47.3	148	134	34.4 - 42.0
36.5 - 44.8	146	132	32.8 - 40.0
34.3 - 41.9	144	130	31.1 - 38.1
32.8 - 40.0	142	128	29.7 - 36.3
31.1 - 38.0	140	126	28.4 - 34.8
29.8 - 36.4	138	124	27.3 - 33.3
28.4 - 34.7	136	122	26.4 - 31.7
26.7 - 32.7	134	120	24.8 - 30.4
25.4 - 31.0	132	118	23.8 - 29.0
24.2 - 29.6	130	116	22.8 - 27.8
23.3 - 28.5	128	114	21.9 - 26.6
22.3 - 27.3	126	112	20.9 - 25.5
21.2 - 26.0	124	110	20.1 - 24.5
20.3 - 24.8	122	108	19.2 - 23.4
19.4 - 23.7	120	106	18.5 - 22.6
18.6 - 22.7	118	104	17.8 - 21.6
17.8 - 21.9	116	102	16.9 - 20.7
17.1 - 20.9	114	100	16.3 - 19.9
16.4 - 20.0	112	98	15.7 - 19.1
15.8 - 19.3	110	96	14.9 - 18.3
15.1 - 18.5	108	94	14.2 - 17.5
14.5 - 17.9	106	92	13.7 - 16.7
13.9 - 17.3	104	90	13.2 - 16.2
13.3 - 16.8	102	88	12.7 - 15.5
12.9 - 16.3	100	86	

(资料来源: 1983年新加坡卫生局学校卫生服务署)

MILK FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN
FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN
HYDROLYSED MILK

MILK FOR CHILDREN ADVISORY COUNCIL

This is your Milk (CHOCOLATE MILK) Drink. We Need A NAME AND A DESIGN. Please Help.

(Above) The “Milk for School Children” brochure by the Milk for Children Advisory Council. It describes the benefits of milk and has a form for parents to fill in and sign their children up for the scheme. *Consumers’ Association of Singapore*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Microfilm no. NA 1911).

(Above right) To promote the nationwide “Name and Milk Package Design Contests” in January 1983, existing milk packets were replaced with new packaging bearing the message, “This is your milk” in a child’s handwriting, with the added text “We need a name and design. Please help”. Source: *The Straits Times*, 28 December 1982, 10 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

supply “packet milk which has been ultra heat treated to last longer”. Also known as UHT milk, it would contain 66 percent more milk and be supplied to schools in bigger packs at 20 cents each.¹²

Even with these measures, the milk distribution experience in some schools did not sit well with parents who complained that “pupils are forced to buy milk they don’t want”. Tan Tze Eng, an accountant, told the *Straits Times* in 1984 that at her daughter’s school, pupils would receive a month’s supply all at once. “The poor children have to lug 20 packets of milk home on the day the milk comes,” she said. “And those who forget their plastic bags are scolded by their teacher and have to get their friends to help them carry the milk home.”¹³

Teachers were also unhappy since distributing the milk and collecting the money ate into teaching time. Wijesingha acknowledged that it was more work for teachers. “They had to collect money, they had to distribute the milk, they had to keep records. I am sure there was not an entirely happy reception from teachers,” he said in his oral history interview.¹⁴

One teacher noted that the milk scheme was not popular because students were “not allowed to choose the flavours they liked”, and the choice of flavours delivered “was left entirely to the supplier”. The same teacher found it “too troublesome” to

allow the children to pick and choose the flavours they liked because time would be spent checking that the correct orders were delivered.¹⁵

Another teacher who could not get 20 pupils in her class to buy the milk resorted to buying the milk herself. “I know that some of my pupils hate the milk and I feel bad to force them to buy it, so I take the remainder home for my husband and sons,” she said.¹⁶

Milk for Children Advisory Council Set Up

Possibly to further combat falling milk consumption in schools, the Consumers’ Association of Singapore set up the Milk for Children Advisory Council (MCAC) in 1982.¹⁷ The council complemented the Education Ministry’s efforts to encourage milk drinking in primary schools, said Ivan Baptist, the executive secretary of the Consumers’ Association.

Chaired by Nalla Tan, the council aimed to promote milk as a dietary supplement for children aged nine months and upwards, secure sponsors to supply free or subsidised milk to children too poor to afford it as part of a diet, and promote milk as a fun and nutritious drink. The council also aimed to publish literature on the promotion of milk for children, as well as give advice to parents, teachers and consumers.¹⁸

“The council wants to create a general acceptance of milk as a nutritional drink,” said Baptist. “More importantly, we want children to enjoy the drink and not force it down their throats.” To make milk more attractive to children, the council planned to ask milk manufacturers to “package their product more attractively”.¹⁹ It also got children involved in the design of milk packages.

In January 1983, the “Name and Milk Package Design Contests” were held. To promote the contests, existing milk packs were replaced with new packaging bearing the message, “This is your milk” in a child’s handwriting, with the added text “We need a name and design. Please help”. A \$10,000 cash prize was promised to the school that provided the winning entry. The “name and age of the winner and his or her school’s name” would also be printed on the new packs.²⁰

Children were rewarded for drinking milk. Between June and November 1983, children who accumulated 30 milk pack flaps received a “magic” ruler and an eraser-pencil cap. The council ordered 200,000 rulers and eraser-pencil caps costing a total of \$20,000 to run the promotion, which ended on 4 November that year.²¹

To make the milk more palatable, the council looked into introducing new flavours beyond the five initially offered. A *Straits Times* article on 10 November 1984 noted that the council “planned to introduce local fruit flavours but found [that] the flavours were not available in sufficient quantities”. Furthermore, some flavours like blackcurrant and peach were not well received when tested on children.²²

In November 1984, the council even came up with an event, appropriately named Milk Day. The inaugural event was held at the Mandai Zoological Gardens and attended by thousands of primary and pre-primary students. “The idea is to get children to participate in the activities and to make milk-drinking fun for them,” said Nalla Tan, the council chairman. Each child received two packets of a new apricot-flavoured milk, which they drank with other food like sandwiches and cakes. The children were also entertained by an animal show, ventriloquist performances and a colouring competition.²³

Milk Day in 1985 was held at the zoo over two days. The 5,500 children who visited the zoo on 19 November did not let the rain dampen their excitement. On Milk Day 1987 at Jurong Bird Park, each child received two packets of the newly launched sweet corn flavour.²⁴

Children Sour on Milk Scheme

The council’s initial efforts were successful. By February 1983, “about 27,000 of the 300,000 schoolchildren in Singapore were drinking milk compared to 24,300 a year ago”. In 1983, “primary and pre-primary schools and the People’s Association kindergartens bought about 10 million packs under the milk scheme”. In 1984, “pre-schoolers and primary schoolchildren drank the same amount within 10 months”, which meant that on average, a million packets of milk were drunk per month.²⁵

While further numbers regarding milk consumption are not available, developments suggest that the programme was running into headwinds caused by Singapore’s growing prosperity. Although the initial impetus of the milk scheme was to improve children’s nutrition, by the late 1980s, the concern became less of nutrition and more about childhood obesity. In fact, in 1988, the School Milk Scheme was temporarily stopped because health experts feared it could be a cause of obesity, according to Baptist.²⁶

In August that year, the seminar “Milk for Better Living” was held and some 350 principals, teachers, nutritionists, doctors and Health Ministry officers convened at the Pan Pacific Hotel to discuss who should be included in the School Milk Scheme. The seminar also reviewed the MCAC’s role in light of “the prevailing food habits, the nutritional status, and the health of schoolchildren”.²⁷

At the seminar, council chairman Chua Sin Bin noted that “there is no direct link between obesity and the drinking of milk in schools”, contrary to the earlier concerns of health experts. He said that since January 1988, full-cream milk had been replaced with low-fat milk even though full-cream milk did not lead to obesity in children. The reason, he said, was “psychological”, and the replacement was to “stress the need to reduce the consumption of fats”.²⁸

Uma Rajan, the medical director of the School Health Services, noted that there were “changes in the dietary profiles of Primary One pupils” due to “increased spending power and the greater freedom children had in the choice and quantity of food.” Hence, “the child of the ’80s is taller and heavier than the child of the ’60s”.²⁹ The observation by Rajan suggested that childhood malnutrition was much less of a problem in the 1980s than it had been in previous decades. Indeed, it seemed that by the late 1980s, obesity among children, rather than malnutrition, was a bigger concern. The milk scheme, it would appear, had outlived its usefulness. In Wijesingha’s analysis, “gradually, as people became more affluent, there was no need to sustain this scheme” and it “died a natural death”.³⁰ ♦



Milk packs for students of Tanglin Primary School, 1986. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001175 - 0090).

Nalla Tan, chairman of the Milk for Children Advisory Council, drinking milk with the top three winners of the “Name and Milk Package Design Contests”, 1983. (From left) The winners are Leong Jenn Gan of Rosyth School, Winnie Kuek Suyin of River Valley Kindergarten and Tom A. Rozario of Anglo-Chinese Primary School. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001422 - 0089).



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