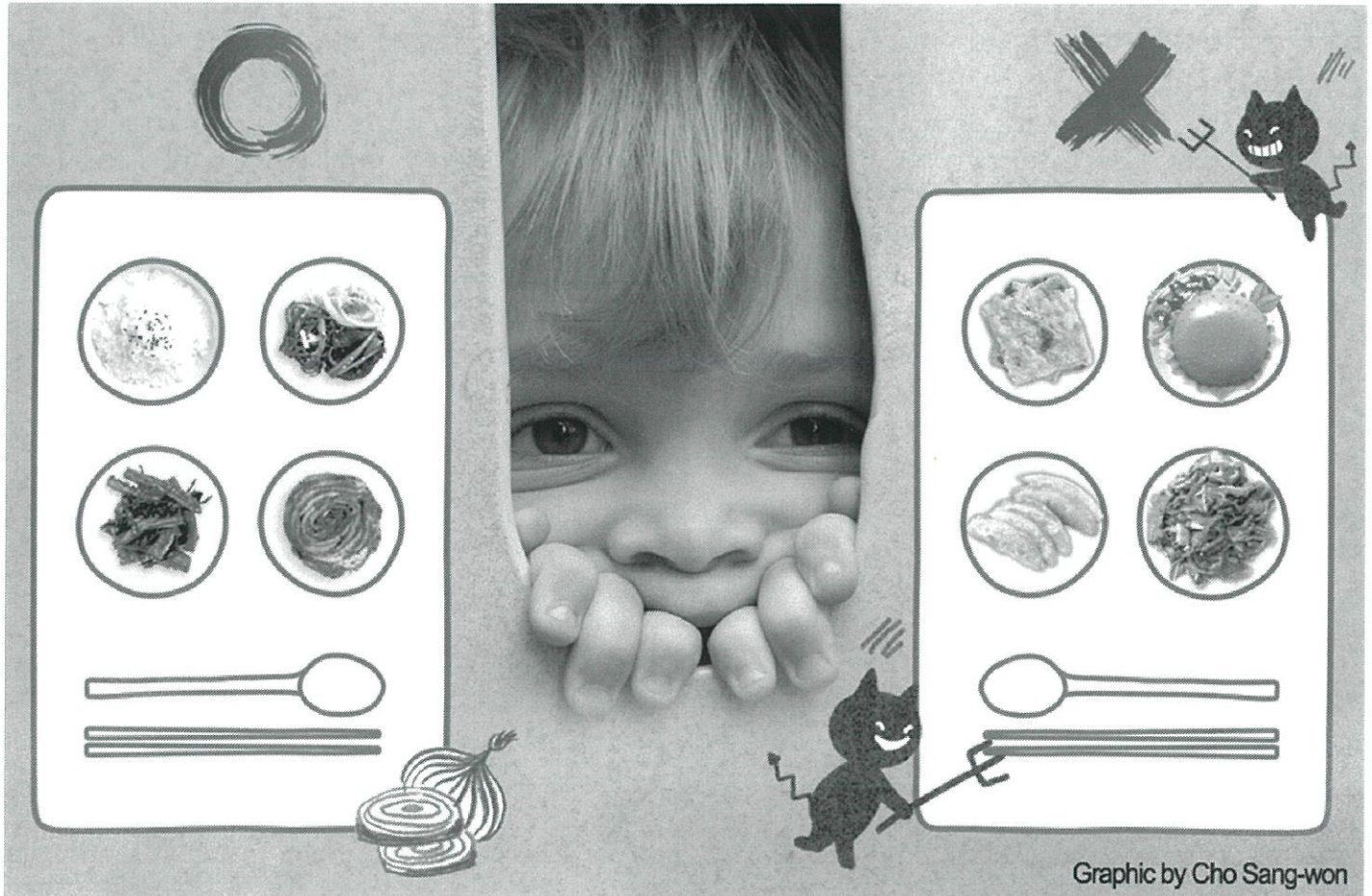


Controversy rises over vegetarian school meal options

2020-10-06 : 15:36



Graphic by Cho Sang-won

By Bahk Eun-ji

Seoul's education office is set to introduce more plant-based food in elementary, middle and high schools under its jurisdiction as it takes steps to become more eco-friendly to help tackle climate change.

Tentatively titled the "Vegetarian meal choice system," meals at participating schools will include meat-free options as a part of ecological education, according to the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education (SMOE).

In some regions including Busan and Gwangju, meat has been already taken off the menu for one day a week, resulting in mixed reactions from many parents and educators.

The controversy over adding a vegetarian option to school meals is mainly focused on whether it is a guarantee of choice or nutrition guidance that does not meet the dietary needs of growing students.

In early June during a press conference at the SMOE building in Seoul, Superintendent Cho Hee-yeon said, "Despite the growing number of young students choosing vegetarian meals by recognizing health problems and the climate crisis, school meals are mainly meat-based without

vegetarian options. We think this can result in elements of inequality and human rights violations.”

He added, “The introduction of the selective vegetarian meal system is included in the medium- and long-term development plan for our ecological transformation education. The SMOE plans to form a research team in the near future centered on nutrition experts to collate domestic and international cases to come up with guidelines for vegetarian meals.”

The education office will conduct a survey to select schools with a high percentage of parents, students and faculty members who agree with the plan and test-run the meal substitution before expanding the system.

Pros: Animal welfare and environmental protection

The vegetarian option for meals at public institutions was an issue that emerged in the April 15 general election campaigns, with support from progressive parties such as the Green Party Korea and Justice Party. The former even filed a petition with the Constitutional Court for the “right to choose a vegetarian diet,” April 6.

They argued that students' basic rights were being violated because under the current School Meals Act no consideration was given to those who were vegetarians when school nutritionists planned menus.

People in favor of vegetarian meals say vegetarianism is necessary to protect the environment. They note that as greenhouse gases from the livestock industry account for about 14 percent of total emissions, it is necessary to reduce meat consumption to prevent global warming and develop more eco-friendly eating habits.

“I don't think the education authorities will provide enough workers to prepare vegetarian meals in each school. In the end, the quality of all meals for students may be degraded,” said Lee Chae-young, the mother of an elementary school student in Mok-dong, southwestern Seoul, who is in favor of vegetarian school meals.

Lee, who has been a pescetarian (a vegetarian who eats seafood) for 14 years, said she has been teaching the advantages of vegetarianism to her daughter since she became an elementary school student.

“My daughter isn't a vegetarian yet, but I hope she will be provided with options to choose from if she decides to become one someday,” she said.

Some who advocate vegetarianism, state that slaughtering animals or cooking them alive seriously infringes on “animal welfare.” Others argue that students who want a vegetarian diet should be given the choice, whether for the sake of protecting the environment, protecting their beliefs or for their health.

Cons: Nutrition imbalance and lower food quality

There are also many people who strongly oppose vegetarian meals in schools, also from a nutritional standpoint. Some say growing children should not be encouraged to eat meat-free meals.

An official at a children's meal management center in Seoul under the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety said, “Adults can choose their own diets according to their beliefs, but this center's principle

is not to apply a vegetarian diet to children's meals." He added, "There are various nutrients that can only be obtained from meat."

It is also a challenge for school meal managers. Even if introducing selective vegetarian meals is widely adopted, various management problems can arise in the process of getting ingredients and preparing them separately for a small number of students.

"It can be difficult because schools will have to manage ingredients for vegetarian meals separately," said Lim Kyung-sook, a professor of college of health science at Suwon University.

"To make their own decision to have vegetarian meals, students need to be able to clearly know and judge the advantages and disadvantages of vegetarianism, but it is not easy for young students to do so."

Parents have different opinions. Some who prefer vegetarianism say they are pleased with the SMOE decision.

Korea Vegetarian Union — a platform to share tips on leading a vegan lifestyle here — released a statement welcoming the education office's decision, but called for meat to be completely eliminated from all school meals at least once a week.

Although opinions are divided within and outside the education sector, the SMOE has not come up with a detailed plan yet. Prior to the policy announcement, the education office also did not collect opinions from parents or consult nutrition experts.

"The decision was made in consideration of the fact that civic groups' demands have been made and that some regional education offices have already begun to provide vegetarian meals once a week," an official at the SMOE said. "As it is a long-term plan, it will not be implemented immediately."

be set to, tackle, tentative(ly), violation, violate, infringe(ment), for the sake of, tip, implement

Do you think providing children with one vegetarian meal a week is controversial?

When was the last time you had a vegetarian meal? Why did you eat it?

Are you vegetarian? Have you thought about becoming vegetarian? Do you know anyone who is?

Now that you know the livestock industry accounts for about 14% of greenhouse gas emissions, will you think about reducing meat consumption?

Do you worry about your health or the climate crisis when you eat meat?

Do you think it is a human rights violation not to offer vegetarian meals to children?

How was the food when you were in school?

Are you concerned about animal welfare?

Should the government ask the students what they want to eat?

What is one problem in your life you must tackle?

Do you have a health tip?