

24 lakh pre-primary students to get meals

Centre rebrands scheme as PM POSHAN; no progress on plan for breakfast

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The Centre has rebranded the 26-year-old national mid-day meal scheme to give a hot cooked meal to 11.8 crore government school students from classes 1 to 8, with the Cabinet approving a proposal to rename it as the PM POSHAN (Poshan Shakti Nirman) scheme on Wednesday.

From the next financial year, it will also cover the 24 lakh children studying in balvatikas, the pre-primary section of government schools, Education Ministry officials said.

Although this year's budget for mid-day meals remains unchanged, an additional ₹266 crore is expected to be added as the Central government's share to cater to balvatika students from 2022-23, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan told journalists after the Cabinet decision.

The extension of mid-day meals to pre-primary students, who are to be incorporated into the formal education system, was a key recommendation of the National Education Policy

(NEP), 2020 and the population of balvatikas – which offer one year of pre-school classes – is expected to rise from the existing 24 lakh as the policy is implemented.

However, there has been no progress on the NEP's other recommendation to start offering breakfasts to school students as well.

Mr. Pradhan declined to comment on the issue, but Ministry officials have previously told *The Hindu* that the Finance Ministry vetoed the proposal for this year, which would involve an additional budgetary allocation of ₹4,000 crore, due to a severe funding crunch.

In fact, the School Education Department's budget for this year has been cut by almost ₹5,000 crore.

The PM POSHAN scheme has been approved for the next five-year period until 2025-26, with a collective outlay of ₹1.31 lakh crore, including ₹31,733 crore as the share to be borne by the State governments.

It will "improve nutritional status, encourage education and learning and increase enrolments in government schools", Mr. Pradhan said.

The rebranded scheme aims to focus on "holistic nutrition" goals, Ministry officials said.

Social audits have been made mandatory in all districts.