

### **Special grant for schools soon to help develop 'nutrition gardens'**

NEW DELHI: Schools across the country will soon get a special grant from the Centre to develop "nutrition gardens" on their campuses where students would not only grow fruits and vegetables but also savour them in their midday meal, said a senior government official familiar with the matter.

The plan, chalked out by the human resource development ministry, is aimed at addressing the problem of malnutrition while also giving children a firsthand experience of connecting with nature and gardening, something which may keep them away from junk food, the official said.

There are around 11 lakh schools which provide mid-day meal, a programme designed by the government to better the nutritional standing of schoolchildren across the country.

"The HRD ministry has drawn up guidelines for the scheme. It is envisaged that government schools may get up to ₹5,000 each annually for the expenses to develop their gardens. The funding will be done by Centre and states on a sharing basis. Thousands of schools already have some form of a garden. However, a bigger number which will be encouraged by this scheme," the official said, adding, "The aim is to turn this into a people's movement." Asked about the huge financial requirements that such a plan may entail, the official said the HRD ministry plans to utilise the flexible component in the mid-day meal scheme to meet the expenses of the scheme. The flexi-component has been initiated this year, under which up to 5% of the budget allotted to a state for midday meal expenses may be utilised for innovations.

"The required approval was taken from the cabinet a couple of months back," the official added.

According to the guidelines, the ministry plans that a committee headed by the district magistrate would allot funds according to the requirements while the monitoring will be done electronically. Schools will be asked to upload pictures of the gardens as well as the work done on the midday meal portal.

The fund provided by the Centre could be used by the schools for the purchase of seeds, equipment, compost among others.

Ashok Aggrawal, lawyer and education-activist, said, "In one way it is good if such a scheme can increase the engagement of students in schools. However, often things may look good on paper but not reflect the reality. It has to be ensured that children are actually learning from this exercise. Strict monitoring is another aspect so that funds are not misused."