

**Voting Begins In Seoul's Crucial Free Lunch Referendum**  
**Bernama**  
**August 24, 2011**

SEOUL, Aug 24 (Bernama) -- Seoul residents went to the polls on Wednesday over a crucial referendum on the city's free school lunch program, the first such poll to determine the direction of the nation's populist welfare policy, as well as the fate of Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon, ahead of next year's key elections.

Voting began at 6 a.m. at 2,206 polling stations across the capital and will continue until 8 p.m., reports South Korea's news agency Yonhap.

The referendum is about whether to enforce an opposition-led free school lunch program for all students or favour the conservative mayor's proposal for free lunch for students whose family income falls into the bottom 50 per cent.

Turnout is crucial as the ballots will only be counted if more than one-third of the city's nearly 8.4 million eligible voters participate in the vote under the current law.

In a controversial move, Oh gave a tearful news conference on Sunday in which he said he would resign as mayor if voter turnout fell short of the one-third cutoff.

With Oh's resignation in mind, opposition parties and liberal activists have fiercely called for a boycott of the vote.

In the event that Oh's proposal fails, all students at Seoul's elementary and middle schools will receive free lunch, regardless of income level.

Oh and his supporters say the program should be introduced in stages, as it could open the doors wide for more populist policies that could weigh on the state budget.

His opponents argue that poor students who receive free lunch could be stigmatised at school.

After the opposition-controlled Seoul Metropolitan Council passed the free-lunch-for-all bill last December, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education in March began providing first through fourth graders with free lunch and it plans to expand the program to include fifth and sixth graders so that all elementary school students are covered.

If voter turnout exceeds 33.3 per cent despite the opposition-led boycott campaign, it would be a boon for the mayor and his ruling Grand National Party, which accused the program of being a "welfare populist" policy.

If the referendum ends in failure, either due to low turnout or a majority in favour of the opposition, it would deal a serious blow to Oh.

Since South Korea adopted residents' referendums in 2004, local governments have only polled the public three times on administrative affairs, with this being the first such vote for Seoul.

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