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## Heat over meal scheme

Renuka wants hot food for kids to go, Planning Commission refuses to budge

Rajesh Sinha.

Women and child development (WCD) minister Renuka Choudhary is on a collision course with the prime minister's office (PMO) and the Planning Commission on the issue of providing hot cooked meals to children under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).

According to sources, Choudhary is trying hard to dump the practice of providing locally prepared hot cooked meals and replacing it with a scheme of centrally procured packaged food for distribution to children.

She has commissioned a survey to study how the existing scheme of providing local hot cooked meals was functioning.

The survey, being conducted by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development



(NIPCCD), comes at a time when the WCD is holding a conference of ministers and secretaries of states on January 28-29 and the ICDS programme is set for restructuring.

Barring the WCD ministry, everyone—the Planning Commission, the Supreme Court and the Prime Minister's National Advisory Council—has consistently and strongly held that locally-prepared hot cooked meals are best for

meeting the nutritional requirements of children since they would be in accordance with local tastes and food habits.

"We are in favour of hot cooked meals for children," said Planning Commission deputy chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the prime minister's handpicked man for the job.

"All children like burgers," Choudhary has been quoted as having said some time ago, dismissing arguments about

local tastes and food habits. She favours a scheme for providing supplementary nutrition by giving children packaged food, procured through centralised purchases.

The survey by NIPCCD, said sources, was aimed at bolstering her contention by establishing that hot cooked meals were a bad idea. While neither the WCD minister nor the NIPCCD director AK Gopal responded to *DNA's* attempts to contact them, sources said the survey was

conducted cretively, without the knowledge of the state governments implementing the scheme.

But, a WCD official explained, "We can certainly get our own surveys done and there is no need to inform state governments."

Others are not so sanguine about the whole thing.