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A Matter of Choice

On the issue of Direct Subsidy Scheme for Schools

A submission to the Education Panel, Legislative Council

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1. This is a representation in view of the forthcoming debate in connection with the Direct Subsidy Scheme. I am making this representation as a student of education and education policies in particular.
2. The news about the abovementioned debate has taken me by surprise. It occurs at a time when the emergence of Direct Subsidy schools, despite the small number, has created a new dimension in the school system warranted by the flexibility provided by the DSS. Such a dimension has gained demonstrated endorsement from the parents.
3. Everywhere in the world, there is a general trend of moving schools away from a purely public system. This is sometimes known as "privatization" which is somewhat a misnomer, because few systems could move away from public funding. The essence is in creating room for schools to enjoy flexibility in providing education with special characteristics. This meanwhile also provides the opportunity to remove the heavy bureaucracy from the government machinery.
4. In the US, there is the notion of "school choice", which allows parents to have better opportunities in selecting their preferred schools. This has given rise to a whole range of new school modes, the better known is the "chartered school" category where those who are interested (often teachers and parents) are given public funding to operate their own schools. In UK there has been the scheme for parent to "opt out" the public system, yet still receiving public funding. In Shanghai, there is a well known movement in the last decade in transforming some of the public schools into "converted schools" which again are schools supported by public funding, yet given management autonomy.
5. There is no argument that Hong Kong should follow whatever happens in the other system, but the existing DSS schools have demonstrated their attraction to parents. There are several reasons for the apparent success of the DSS schools, but the most significant is perhaps the flexibility that has provided the room for the schools to develop according to preferred characteristics. This echoes the

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commonly observed benefits of similar programmes in other system. However, compared with other system, the degree of flexibility and the scale of the scheme are indeed very modest.

6. There is profound demonstrated interest in the sponsorship of DSS schools, and such an interest is never paralleled before. Many new schools are proposed and established with specific characteristics in mind. It is again the flexibility that has aroused the interest. There is a much more colourful diversity among schools in Hong Kong because of the emergence of DSS schools.

7. It is true that DSS schools are allowed to charge fees and hence provide education at a higher cost. However,

- a. It is misleading to paint a picture that *all* DSS school charge additional fees and hence are for the richer parents. There are indeed DSS schools that do not charge additional fees and target deprived children. It is flexibility, rather than money, that counts.
- b. The fee charging mechanism is indeed a way of mobilizing community resources from non-government sources. Such a mechanism should be spread to more schools. There is not excuse that the funding of education should be limited by government funding, whilst leaving private money idle out there.
- c. There is a tacit assumption that fee-charging would create inequality. Contemporary education finance ideology supports equality of *public* funding, but do not forbid private resources to improve children's education. In other words, the polar cases of totally government schools and totally private schools are now but part of a whole spectrum of ways of integrating public and private funding. Again the DSS is perhaps the only small trial case in Hong Kong towards a real diversity in educational finance.

8. The DSS scheme has given us an alternative way of improving the quality of school education. It has proved a hope for many parents. My personal view is that the concepts that have proved effective a favourable should be gradually shared by all schools. I understand this is not yet a Government policy, but I am sure such measure that are so constructive to your children's learning should be maintained and developed.

9. In this context, I was rather taken aback by the proposal to terminate or suspend the DSS scheme. If we take our children's learning as our first and foremost priority, and indeed regard that as the core business of schools, other considerations should give me. Otherwise, we are not responsible to our children.