

Opening Statement (Chapter 3)

The ESF appreciates the work of the Audit Commission and the EMB, in particular Prof. Arthur Li, in highlighting the need for reform of governance of the ESF. This has served to strengthen our resolve and increased the momentum for the needed changes to take place.

With regard to the subvention, there are both historic factors, and benefits for the future of Hong Kong that should be recognized.

The ESF was established by Ordinance in 1967. This was based on the recommendations of the 1965 Education Policy White Paper. The reasons stated in the White Paper (page 6 of the Audit Report) are as applicable today as they were in 1965. The only changes being paragraph (e). The majority of students in the ESF schools are now permanent residents rather than British expatriates. The fact remains that despite the change in sovereignty the need for good quality English medium education continues to exist and indeed grow. This is evidenced by the increasing number of schools opened by the ESF at the behest of the Government, and the growth in the number of students in our schools from about 10,000 in 1997 to about 12,500 in 2005. The long waiting lists in many of our schools also attest to the robust demand for an ESF education.

The parity of subsidy principle was clearly stated in the White Paper and it was on this basis that the ESF was established by Ordinance. In 1979 six government schools entered the ESF on the understanding that parity of subsidy would be maintained. As late as 1995 when the basis for ESF funding was amended, it was done so in order to “better reflect” the principle of parity of subsidy. Discussions between ESF officers and EMB in 1999-2000, on the future of the subvention, were never concluded. No proposal on changing the basis of ESF funding was ever put before the Foundation, the supreme governing body. The ESF’s position on the principle of parity of subsidy remains unchanged. ESF regards itself as an integral part of the local education system, as entitled to government funding as other schools in the aided sector.

In 1995 the government reviewed subsidies to international schools. ESF was not consulted during this exercise. The EMB Working Group defined international schools as schools which follow a non-local curriculum and whose students do not sit for local examinations. But the type of education provided by the ESF schools as defined in the Ordinance is “... a modern liberal education through the medium of the English language to boys and girls who are able to benefit from such an education.” There is no mention of any international curriculum. This aside, there is the question as to whether the definition used by the Working Group still applies in the face of changes in the curriculum of some aided schools who now offer a non- Hong Kong curriculum. Furthermore ESF schools have been modifying their curriculum; in the context of the change to the IB the phrase “the British curriculum” no longer applies. Even if ESF students do not sit for the local examination the local tertiary institutions are increasingly willing to take in students from the ESF through the non-JUPAS route.

Article 144 of the Basic Law guarantees that policies on subvention prior to 1997 shall be “maintained”. ESF sees no contradiction between this Article and Article 136 as the latter makes clear that policies on education should be “on the basis of the previous educational system”. ESF is a part of the previous educational system and should not unilaterally be excluded from the government aided sector. Given the historic links between the EMB and the ESF, those in the community who elect to send their children to ESF do have a reasonable expectation that ESF will continue to be part of that sector.

ESF will continue to serve a distinct need as part of Hong Kong’s educational service. No longer do most ESF families return to other countries. 81% of present students are Hong Kong people: permanent residents. ESF schools not only assist Hong Kong in attracting talent and investment by provision of affordable, high quality education, to incoming expatriates, but now serve a significant sector of local Hong Kong people. Among these are returning Chinese who hold foreign passports and for whom English may be the first language, people from other Asian countries who are long term residents, Eurasians, as well as local families whose requirements are best met through ESF schools. It is a myth to assume that these groups are necessarily those who could afford a fully private education. ESF does not claim a special advantage over international schools but believes that it provides EMB with a group of schools that serve a particular need for an inclusive, open access education (including for those with special educational needs) with an international dimension as befits an international city.

ESF serves the Hong Kong economy and society. In the absence of an affordable ESF, the EMB and Hong Kong generally would incur costs. ESF assists Hong Kong in its positioning as an international city by attracting and retaining investment and talent to Hong Kong, and providing an international dimension to the EMB’s educational service. Former ESF students now work in all aspects of professional life in Hong Kong, contributing to the local economy the language and other skills acquired at ESF schools, while remaining part of a wider network of international connections. ESF would welcome then an evaluation by EMB of the contribution of ESF and international Schools to Hong Kong society and economy, and the needs of the mother tongue English community.

ESF believes that there should be no alteration of the parity of subsidy principle until the value of ESF to Hong Kong, and the needs of those who require mother tongue English education, have been formally evaluated.