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Panel on Education

Background Brief prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 13 June 2005

Implementation of small class teaching

Purpose

This paper summarizes the discussions of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the studies on small class teaching in public sector schools proposed by the Administration and related issues since the first term of the Legislative Council (LegCo). This paper also provides information on the relevant questions/motions raised/moved at Council meetings.

Background

2. In 1992, the Education Commission Report No.5 (ECR5) recommended, among others, a reduction in the standard class size of five places at each level from Primary 1 (P1) to Secondary 5 (S5) by phases and improvement of teacher-to-class ratio. The Government, however, decided in 1997 to adjust the reduction of places from five to three in order to speed up the implementation of whole-day primary schooling.

3. When the Panel discussed “Improving the student-teacher ratio in primary and secondary schools” on 18 January 1999, members expressed concern about the heavy workload of teachers, particularly those teaching in schools with a large number of band five students. Members in general expressed support for reducing the class sizes in public sector schools in order to improve the quality of school education. They urged the Administration to set out the policies and timetable on reduction of class sizes in primary and secondary schools.

4. In response to an oral question raised by Hon SZETO Wah at the Council meeting on 13 November 2002, the Secretary for Education and Manpower

confirmed that the Administration was contemplating the conduct of a pilot study on small class teaching in 30 to 40 public sector primary schools from the 2003-04 school year. The participating schools would try out the class size of about 20 students at junior primary levels. Relevant professional training and support would be provided to the teachers as appropriate. Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong also moved a motion at the Council meeting on 27 November 2002 urging the Government to implement small class teaching in primary and secondary schools in a gradual and orderly manner so as to achieve the ultimate target of 25 students per class. The motion was negated.

The proposal of a longitudinal study on small class teaching

5. The Administration informed the Panel in November 2002 that although there had been calls for a reduction in class size in primary education, overseas experience shown that reducing class size per se might have very little effect on the quality of education. It was necessary to find out the necessary pre-conditions and teaching strategies which would maximise the benefit of small class size. The Administration therefore proposed to conduct a longitudinal study on the impact of small class size from the 2003-04 school year.

6. Some members queried the need to conduct the longitudinal study. They considered that the benefits of small class teaching were apparent and all teachers would support its implementation as it certainly would facilitate class management and improve student-teacher interactions in a class room setting. Some other members, however, expressed concern about the huge costs incurred for the implementation of small class teaching. They considered that other initiatives, such as reducing the student-teacher ratio, could also improve the quality of education.

7. The Administration explained to the Panel that in view of the substantial resources required for implementing small class teaching in public sector primary schools, it needed to conduct a longitudinal study in selected primary schools to find out the relationship between small class teaching and its effectiveness on teaching and learning. The longitudinal study would be designed to help determine the optimal class size for primary education and identify the role and functions of teachers in teaching and learning in both small and regular classes for the formulation of long-term policies and strategies in primary education. The Administration also pointed out that the student-teacher ratio of 20.8:1 at that time was comparable to those of the western countries. The establishment of a long term policy on reduction of class size would require corresponding changes to the pedagogy. It should also be based on solid evidence of positive learning outcome and subject to the availability of resources.

8. Some members suggested that the Administration should consider maintaining the education allocation to primary schools at the current level and allow them to operate smaller classes in case their student enrolment decreased as a result of a

declining student population. They considered that the Administration should consult frontline teachers on the merits of small class teaching rather than relying on the results of a longitudinal study.

The study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools

9. At the Panel meetings on 19 May and 16 June 2003, members discussed with the Administration its proposal to conduct a study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools (the Study). According to the Administration, the Study, which replaced the longitudinal study, aimed to identify the good practices in small class and variable group teaching in selected public sector primary schools for dissemination to and adaptation by other schools for enhancing learning effectiveness.

10. Some members considered that the Study was in essence different from the longitudinal study originally proposed. They pointed out that variable class size and group teaching strategies did not mean a reduction in class size but only flexible adjustment of class sizes to suit different learning and teaching activities in selected primary schools. These members considered that small class teaching would certainly enhance the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools. They urged the Administration to take the opportunity to implement small class teaching in schools located at districts where the student population had significantly decreased.

11. The Administration pointed out that while all public sector primary schools were provided with similar level of resources, some schools had managed to practise variable class size and group teaching strategies to enhance learning effectiveness. The Administration would conduct a six-month survey (the first stage of the Study) to identify the existing good practices of effective small and variable group teaching strategies adopted in schools.

12. The Administration subsequently briefed the Panel on the preliminary findings of the first stage of the Study and implementation of the second stage of the Study on 16 February 2004. The findings of the first stage of the Study and implementation of the second stage of the Study are detailed in the Administration's paper [LC Paper No. CB(2)1282/03-04(01)].

13. According to the Administration, participating schools would be given additional time-limited resources during the second stage of the Study to operate small classes of about 25 students at P1 and then proceeding to P2 for two consecutive cohorts. The students would return to regular classes at P3. The Administration would follow up the two cohorts of students longitudinally beyond P2 to see whether the benefits of small class teaching at P1 and P2 could be sustained as they move up to higher levels, and whether they would compare favourably in terms of their affective and academic domains with students of similar background in other schools not participating in the Study. The Study would last for four years and the Administration would consider the interim findings to determine the way forward for

small class teaching.

Members' concerns about the Study and the Administration's responses

The need to conduct the Study

14. Some members queried the need to conduct a four-year Study when all, including the Administration, agreed that teaching in small classes would be better than in large classes if all other factors were equal. They suggested that the Administration should have worked out a timetable for progressive implementation of small class teaching in all public sector schools after the completion of the Study. The Administration explained that there were views in the education community that small class teaching was not necessarily the best way to improve the quality of education, and that the professionalism of teachers was more important in improving quality of education. Given the fiscal deficits, many academics also considered small class teaching not cost-effective. They suggested that resources should be used in other education areas.

Number of participating schools

15. Some members considered that to enhance its reliability and comprehensiveness, the Study should include a wider variety of primary and secondary schools with different teaching and learning characteristics, and cover different levels of classes and subjects.

16. The Administration pointed out that there were successful and unsuccessful experiences in the implementation of small class teaching in overseas countries. Given the divergent views and the significant resources implications and hence the displacement effect of small class teaching, the Administration would have to ascertain its benefits in local school environment before deciding on the way forward. As curriculum adaptation and change in teaching pedagogies were essential to the success of small class teaching, the Administration would provide support and training to serving teachers in the development of the skills and pedagogies for effective teaching in small classes. If the results of the Study were positive, the Administration would draw up a timetable for progressive implementation of small class teaching in other schools.

Evaluation

17. Some members expressed concern that implementation of small class teaching would hinge on the evaluation of the Study to be made by a Steering Committee only. They considered it inappropriate that the result of the Study might be assessed on the basis of the performance of the participating schools with mainly band 3 students or new arrival children with those schools with a large enrolment of band 1 students. These members also queried how the learning process and outcomes of students in the participating schools could be objectively assessed and compared with those of their

counterparts in other schools.

18. The Administration explained that the Steering Committee would comprise two local academics and three primary school heads. The Administration would provide school-based support and organise briefings and workshops for teachers before the start of the Study and at intervals throughout the Study. For evaluation purpose, the performance improvements of the participating schools and their students would be assessed by comparison with other schools having a similar student enrolment in the assessment process.

The review on the implementation of the recommendations of ECR5 on improving teacher-student ratios and class sizes in primary and secondary schools

19. When the Panel met with deputations and the Administration on “the Review on the implementation of the recommendations of ECR5 on improving teacher-student ratios and class sizes in primary and secondary schools” on 19 July 2004, the issue of small class teaching was also discussed. Deputations in general considered that the class sizes in primary and secondary schools should be reduced to 30 students, and requested early implementation of small class teaching in the light of a declining student population.

20. Some members considered that the Administration should provide a timetable for the implementation of the relevant recommendations in ECR5 and suggested that the Administration should redeploy savings achieved through reduction of classes and the phasing-out of under-utilized schools to finance the implementation of the recommendations.

21. The Administration explained that to improve the teacher-to-class ratio in whole-day primary schools from the present 1.4:1 to 1.5:1 would entail significant recurrent staff costs. Taking the projected position in the 2007-08 school year as an example, the additional annual staff cost would be around \$385 million. As regards class size in primary schools, the Administration would implement the Study from the 2004-05 school year, which would throw light on the impact of small class on student learning, and the supportive conditions necessary to enhance the impact.

22. The Administration agreed with the deputations’ view that the forecast decline in student population over the next 10 years provided an opportunity for improving teacher-to-class ratio or reducing class sizes in schools. The Administration, however, pointed out that given the prevailing budgetary constraints and uncertainty over the amount of education funding available, it was not possible to contemplate any improvement in staffing or class size at this stage. Nevertheless, the Administration would continue to do its best, within the professional and financial resources available, to enhance support to schools and teachers.

Recent Panel discussion on the Study

23. At the meeting on 8 November 2004, the Panel received views from 27 deputations on the implementation of small class teaching. Deputations unanimously expressed support for the implementation of small class teaching so as to enhance teacher-student interactions, students' learning outcomes and development, and quality of school education.

24. Some members expressed reservations about the reliability of the Study, the findings of which would be considered by the Administration in determining the way forward for small class teaching. They pointed out that the Study covered only 37 participating schools over a period of three years, and the findings would be assessed by a Steering Committee comprising academics and frontline educators appointed by the Administration. These members expressed concern that the outcome of the Study would be used by the Administration to justify a decision not to implement small class teaching.

25. The Administration explained that the Study was conducted to ensure successful implementation of small class teaching instead of deferring its implementation. The Study would assess students' achievements on standard tests, improvements in learning behaviour and abilities to develop generic skills and higher order thinking skills. The Study would also link students' learning outcome to the teaching pedagogies and strategies for small class teaching. The Steering Committee was formed to monitor the progress of the Study and conduct interim reviews annually. The Administration pointed out that apart from academic indicators, evaluation of the Study would also be made by way of questionnaires to be completed by schools, teachers, parents and students.

26. Members agreed to follow up the implementation progress of the Study at a future meeting.

Motion on implementing small class teaching and the Administration's response

27. At the Council meeting on 1 December 2004, Hon Audrey EU moved a motion urging the Government to progressively implement small class teaching. The motion, as amended by Hon Mrs Selina CHOW and Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong, was carried.

28. In response to the motion, the Administration provided a progress report on implementing small class teaching in February 2005 (**Appendix I**). According to the report, the Study has been conducted according to schedule. Thirty-seven government and aided primary schools have started small class teaching in P1 as from September 2004. The final report of the Study will be completed at the end of 2008. Interim reports will be submitted by the appointed consultant, Professor Maurice Galton of the University of Cambridge, annually between 2005 and 2007.

Questions and motions on small class teaching and related issues

29. Members had raised/moved a number of questions/motions on implementation of small class teaching, improvement of teacher-student ratios and reduction of class sizes in primary and secondary schools at different Council meetings since the first term of LegCo, a list of which in chronological order is in **Appendix II**. The Official Records of Proceedings of the relevant Council meetings are available on the LegCo website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

Relevant papers

30. The minutes of the relevant Panel meetings and the Administration's papers for discussion of small class teaching and related issues are listed in **Appendix III**. Soft copies of these documents are available on the LegCo website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
8 June 2005

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL BRIEF

**PROGRESS REPORT ON
“IMPLEMENTING SMALL CLASS TEACHING”**

PURPOSE

This paper reports the actions taken by the Administration with regard to the motion on “Implementing Small Class Teaching” carried on 1 December 2004.

BACKGROUND

2. The Administration is of the view that implementation of small class should be strategically planned to ensure that the expected outcomes are achieved. We are supportive of small class teaching. But in consideration of the long-term financial implications and competing demands for funds, the conflicting findings of overseas studies on the effect on student learning, and scarcity of local experience, we proactively launched a three-year longitudinal study on small class teaching from the 2004/05 school year. The purposes are to assess the benefits of small class teaching in the local context in terms of both academic and affective outcomes; and to identify the teaching strategies and support necessary for maximizing the benefits of small class teaching. The findings will provide useful reference for the Administration to consider the way forward for small class teaching.

PROGRESS

3. The Study has been conducted according to schedule. Thirty-seven government and aided primary schools have started small class teaching in Primary 1 as from September 2004. A Steering Committee comprising experienced academics and front-line educators has been set up to direct and monitor the progress of the Study. To ensure that the Study is objective and rigorous, we have engaged Professor Maurice Galton of the University of Cambridge, a renowned expert in classroom interaction, as the consultant. He provides us with the expertise, professional assistance and support in conducting the Study. He is also responsible, among other things, for developing data collection strategy and the relevant instruments/evaluation tools, performing analyses on the data gathered, and writing reports for the Study.

Evaluation

4. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected to assess the learning process and outcomes. We measure the students' academic attainments with standardized tests in Chinese, English and Mathematics. Students' motivation and self-esteem will be assessed by means of questionnaire surveys. Teacher and parent questionnaires will also be developed to collect other relevant data. In addition, there will be systematic classroom observations to record the frequency and nature of classroom interactions. Last but not least, we will conduct case studies to ascertain the variables including pedagogical practices and other support strategies that are likely to mediate between class size and the identified learning effectiveness.

5. The final report of the Study will be completed at the end of 2008. Interim reports will be submitted by the Consultant annually between 2005 and 2007.

Professional Support

6. In the course of the Study, EMB will provide the participating schools with professional support to help the teachers develop appropriate school-based and context-apt teaching pedagogies/strategies to optimise the benefits of small class teaching.

7. In July 2004, we invited frontline education workers from Shanghai and from local schools to share with the participating schools their experience in curriculum adaptation and effective pedagogies for small class teaching. More workshops have been organized for the participating schools from November 2004 to January 2005. They covered topics like “How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Smaller Classes”, “Grouping and Group Work”, “School-based and System Evaluation”, “Cooperative Learning” and “Looking at Students’ Work to Feedback on Teaching”. The seminars and workshops have facilitated sharing of local and overseas experiences in implementing small class teaching, and provided opportunities for exchanges on effective teaching strategies that may reap greater benefits in a small class setting. Participants found the workshops to be enlightening and practical. Teachers in the participating schools are making an effort to try out the different teaching strategies introduced, such as cooperative learning and enquiry-based discussion, in the

classroom. Class observations showed that teachers still had to improve their techniques in managing the related activities.

8. With a view to providing on-site support that suits the needs of the schools, we conducted the first round of visits to all the participating schools in September and October 2004 to align goals and expectations of the Study and solicit views on schools' training needs. We have made our second round of school visits starting in December 2004 to discuss with schools the problems encountered and any school-based support required.

9. It is planned that on-site support be rendered to individual schools for the core subjects (Chinese, English, Mathematics) and other pedagogical skills appropriate for small classes, such as facilitating collaborative learning and handling learner diversity, as and when required. At the same time, appropriate training will continue to be lined up to meet the professional development needs of schools. The Consultant will also provide feedback on his interim findings for the participating schools.

10. To facilitate schools in retrieving relevant information on small class teaching, a resource bank has been set up on EMB's homepage. Useful reference materials including relevant circulars, administrative guidelines, training materials and handouts and other useful references on the issue have been uploaded.

WAY FORWARD

11. EMB has always encouraged flexible deployment of schools' resources to arrange students into appropriate learning groups according to the subject requirement, the nature of the learning activities and needs of the students. In recent years, additional resources have been provided to schools in the form of cash grant which increases flexibility in the use of resources. With additional resources for primary schools to increase the class-to-teacher ratio to 1:1.5 progressively beginning in 2005/06, schools will have even more room to manoeuvre.

12. As stated in the 2005 Policy Address, we believe small class teaching is a positive development and will promote it on the basis of results from the Study. In the meantime, the Administration is open to suggestions on strategies/measures that can enhance the quality of education and improve student learning outcomes.

Education and Manpower Bureau
February 2005

Appendix II

Questions/Motions moved at Council meetings on/related to implementation of small class teaching

<u>Date of Council Meeting</u>	<u>Motion/Question</u>
15-7-98	Oral question on “Class sizes in primary and secondary schools” raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
30-9-98	Written question on “Class sizes of primary and secondary schools” raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
14-10-98	Written question on “School places of primary six and junior forms of secondary schools” raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
19-12-01	Written question on “Teacher-student ratios” raised by Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung
3-7-02	Oral question on “Plan to reduce the number of primary one classes in the coming school year” raised by Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
13-11-02	Oral question on “Trial scheme for teaching in small classes” raised by Hon SZETO Wah
27-11-02	Motion on “Teaching in small classes” moved by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
3-12-03	Motion on “Education Policy” moved by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
1-12-04	Motion on “Implementing Small Class Teaching” moved by Hon Audrey EU

Council Business Division 2
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Appendix III

Relevant documents for discussion of small class teaching and related issues at Panel meetings

Date of meeting	Paper	LC Paper No.
18-1-99	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)1973/98-99</u>
	Admin paper entitled "Improving the student-teacher ratio in primary and secondary schools"	<u>CB(2)1063/98-99(02)</u>
18-11-02	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)627/02-03</u>
	Admin paper entitled "Priorities in Education for 2002-03"	<u>CB(2)155/02-03(01)</u>
19-5-03	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)2404/02-03</u>
	Admin paper entitled "Study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools"	<u>CB(2)1826/02-03(06)</u>
16-6-03	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)2974/02-03</u>
16-2-04	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)2015/03-04</u>
	Admin paper entitled "Study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools"	<u>CB(2)1282/03-04(01)</u>
	Admin paper entitled "Study on small class teaching"	<u>CB(2)2844/03-04(01)</u>
19-7-04	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)3330/03-04</u>
	Admin paper entitled "Teacher-to-class ratios and class sizes in primary and secondary schools"	<u>CB(2)3088/03-04(01)</u>
8-11-04	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)351/04-05</u>