

**Extract from the minutes of meeting of the
Panel on Education held on 30 May 2005**

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I. Review of the School Building Programme

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1656/04-05(01) to (02) and CB(2)1753/04-05(01)]

At the invitation of the Chairman, Secretary for Education and Manpower (SEM) briefed members on the main points of the Administration's paper on the review of the School Building Programme (SBP) [LC Paper No. CB(2)1656/04-05(01)].

2. Members noted the background brief on "School Building Programme and School Improvement Programme" prepared by the Legislative Council (LegCo) Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)1656/04-05(02)] and the submission from Yuen Long Lutheran College which was tabled at the meeting [LC Paper No. CB(2)1753/04-05(01)].

Review of SBP and reduction of surplus school places

3. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that Annex C of the Administration's paper had indicated that in the 2009-10 school year, the projected supply of public sector primary and secondary school places (after the proposed adjustments to SBP) would exceed the demand by 11% (1292 classes) and 6% (705 classes) respectively. Given the declining school-age student population, the number of surplus school places might continue to increase beyond the 2009-10 school year. Mr CHEUNG considered that the increasing number of surplus school places in the next five years was mainly a result of inaccurate projections on primary and secondary student population. He cautioned that both the Administration and LegCo might take the blame for the wastage of public resources arising from over-supply of public sector school places.

4. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong suggested that in the circumstances, the best strategy was to progressively implement small class teaching in districts where there was a surplus of school places, preferably starting from the primary one level in the 2005-06 school year. Mr Albert CHAN and Dr Fernando CHEUNG expressed a similar view. Mr CHAN said that the Administration should take the opportunity to improve quality of education by way of implementing small class teaching.

5. SEM responded that the Administration was supportive of small class teaching and had proactively launched a three-year longitudinal study which covered 37 participating schools from the 2004-05 school year to assess the teaching strategies and support necessary for maximising the benefits of small

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class teaching in the local context. The final report of the Study would be completed at the end of 2008, the findings of which would provide useful reference for the Administration to consider the way forward. SEM considered that small class teaching should not be implemented for the sake of reducing surplus school places. He added that primary school student population might start to increase after the 2009-2010 school year.

6. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that if small class teaching could not be implemented at this stage, the next appropriate strategy was to proceed with the school projects under SBP which were planned for the implementation of whole-day primary schooling or on the basis of the projected school-age population in the districts concerned. Mr CHEUNG considered the proposed adjustments to SBP in the Administration's paper the least effective strategy for resolving the problem of surplus school places in the next five years. He pointed out that the proposed adjustments would certainly invite objections from sponsoring bodies which had been provisionally allocated a new school premises. Mr CHEUNG said that he had consulted the school sector on the above strategies. The sponsoring bodies of the three school projects which were suspended due to the South East Kowloon Development Review (SEKDR) had indicated acceptance of the provision of replacement sites which would be allocated to them as a matter of priority.

7. SEM said that the sponsors of the three school projects which were suspended due to SEKDR had asked for priority in the provision of replacement sites on a territory-wide basis, and not within the same district as the schools. He pointed out that most parents would prefer to send their children to popular schools, and surplus places would inevitably exist in less popular schools in each district. SEM considered that the long-term solution to the problem of surplus school places was to work out strategies to minimise the disparity in quality of education among schools in each district.

8. Ms Emily LAU considered that while the Public Accounts Committee had recommended that surplus school places should be utilized in a cost-effective manner, it did not mean that existing schools housed under sub-standard premises should not be re-developed or re-provisioned. She considered that the Administration should try to provide all students with a school of the Year 2000 design. She asked how many existing schools were housed in sub-standard premises.

9. SEM responded that he agreed that sub-standard school premises should be re-developed or re-provisioned. He, however, pointed out that some 130 existing schools were built more than 30 years ago or located in sites which could not accommodate a school of the Year 2000 design. Nevertheless, the Administration would continue to locate and identify suitable sites for re-provisioning of these schools, having regard to the supply and demand of school places in the districts concerned. Ms Emily LAU remarked that the

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Administration should examine the demand and supply of school places in each district in the light of the latest population projections and other developments in the education sector before proposing the final adjustments to SBP to the Finance Committee for funding approval.

10. Mr Patrick LAU expressed support for re-provisioning existing schools with sub-standard facilities, and suggested that the Administration should make use of the vacant sites to construct smaller schools with fewer classes so that the students could enjoy a more spacious environment and more facilities in school education. Dr Fernando CHEUNG echoed Mr LAU's view, pointing out that in the face of a declining student population, many schools would prefer to reduce their number of operating classes from 30 to 24.

11. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung said that to facilitate members' understanding of the actual demand and supply of school places in individual districts, the Administration should specify the locations of the 22 school projects under SBP which would be suspended or dropped. He considered that the Administration should consult the 18 District Councils on the proposed adjustments to SBP to avoid any mismatch between the supply and demand of school places in individual districts.

12. SEM responded that the 19 school projects under SBP proposed to proceed were specified in paragraph 10 of the Administration's paper and 22 school projects under SBP were proposed to be suspended or dropped. The supply and demand of school places before and after the proposed adjustments to SBP in the 18 districts were detailed in Annex C of the Administration's paper.

13. Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower (PSEM) supplemented that as explained in paragraph 4 of the Administration's paper, there were many imponderables and practical constraints which made the planning of public sector school places difficult. She pointed out that while the construction of a new school premises would take four to five years, the demand and supply of school places in the district concerned could change during the period. Moreover, the figures provided in Annex C were the projected demand and supply of public sector school places, which had not taken into account other factors such as the effects of parental choice in selection of schools for their children and the availability of places in popular private schools in other districts.

14. Mr Albert CHAN and Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that bi-sessional primary schools which had been notified of the provision of a new school premises for conversion of its morning and afternoon sections to operate on a whole-day basis should have already worked out their development plans and relocation arrangements with teachers and parents. Mr CHAN considered it unfair to suspend or drop these school projects and urged the Administration to keep its undertakings given to the school sponsors concerned. Dr Fernando

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CHEUNG also considered it necessary to fulfill the policy commitment to achieve 100% whole-day primary schooling in the 2007-08 school year and the undertakings given to school sponsors in allocation of schools under SBP.

15. SEM explained that to facilitate effective use of public resources, the Administration had been inviting successful bidders in School Allocation Exercise to participate in the design of the facilities in new school projects. The Administration had made it clear that school projects under SBP were subject to the support of the Panel and the funding approval of the Finance Committee.

16. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong remarked that the Administration should discuss with the school sponsors affected by the proposed adjustments to SBP and give priority consideration to their requests in the light of the supply and demand of school places in the districts concerned. Ms Emily LAU, Mr LEE Wing-tat, Dr Fernando CHEUNG and Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung considered that the affected sponsors/schools should be given an opportunity to express their views at a future meeting. They also suggested the Administration to consult the affected sponsors/schools extensively before concluding the proposed adjustments to SBP.

17. The Chairman asked whether the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) would discuss with the affected school sponsors of the 22 school projects which were proposed to be suspended or dropped.

18. SEM responded that subject to the views of the Panel on the proposed principles and the consequential adjustments to SBP, the Administration would proceed to discuss with the affected school sponsors for mutually accepted arrangements.

19. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that the Liberal Party considered that the Administration should provide a clear picture on the impact of the proposed adjustments to SBP on the affected schools and the full implementation of whole-day primary schooling in the 2007-08 school year. The Liberal Party also considered it necessary for the Panel and the Administration to listen to the views of the 22 schools which were affected by the proposed adjustments to SBP.

20. SEM responded that disclosing the names of the 22 affected schools might create unnecessary labeling effects which would affect their student enrolment in the next school year. He pointed out that some of the school projects which were proposed to be suspended or dropped were allocated to bi-sessional schools which experienced under-enrolment and had started to admit new cohorts of students in a whole-day mode in-situ. He reiterated that the Administration would discuss with the affected school sponsors and listened to their views.

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Assumptions and principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP

21. Mr LEE Wing-tat considered that the Administration should collaborate with the affected school sponsors to work out mutually agreeable arrangements for the proposed adjustments to SBP on the basis of the demand and supply of school places in individual districts. He added that many principals and teachers were reluctant to discuss the matter with the Administration for fear that their future bids for allocation of new school premises might be affected.

22. PSEM responded that the Administration had proposed the adjustments to SBP based on the three assumptions in paragraph 6 and the six principles in paragraph 7 of the Administration's paper. She pointed out that any change in the assumptions and principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP would result in different categorisation for the proposed adjustments and the number of affected schools under each category. She suggested the Panel to focus its discussion on the assumptions and principles for proposing adjustments to SBP first. The Administration would proceed to discuss with the affected schools based on the agreed assumptions and principles, and revert to the Panel if the affected schools held different views.

23. PSEM also explained that SBP was not worked out solely on the basis of the projected supply and demand of public sector school places in Annex C. There was the need to provide diversity in school education and parents might prefer to send their children to Direct Subsidy Scheme schools, Private Independent Schools and international schools offering non-mainstream curriculum.

24. Mr Albert HO considered that the projected surplus or shortage of public sector school places in Annex C did not support the proposed adjustments to SBP in paragraph 7 of the Administration's paper. He pointed out that while there were projected surplus of school places in Sha Tin and Tuen Mun, and shortage of school places in Yuen Long, the proposed adjustments to SBP would allow a private independent school and two primary schools to be constructed in Sha Tin and Tuen Mun respectively, and suspend or drop four school projects in Yuen Long.

25. Mr Albert HO, Dr Fernando CHEUNG and Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung suggested that the Administration should provide the up-to-date supply and demand of school places in each district to support the proposed adjustments to SBP, and justifications to convince the affected sponsors/schools to accept the proposed adjustments. Mr HO also suggested that the Administration should elaborate on the policies and principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP, having regard to the circumstances of the affected schools and the views of their teachers and the parents.

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26. PSEM explained that Annex C was compiled with reference to the latest population projections (2003-based projections) released by the Census and Statistics Department in June 2004 and further organised by districts in October 2004. She pointed out that the Administration had exercised prudence in planning for the provision of new school infrastructure taking into account the population projections, the availability of resources and other policy considerations. Nevertheless, there were uncertainties and practical constraints which had impacted on the supply and demand of public sector school places in each district at different time. She added that there were at present surplus places in some public sector schools in Yuen Long, and the Yuen Long District Council had requested the Administration to suspend the construction of additional schools for cross-district allocation in the District.

27. Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (2) (DS(EM)2) supplemented that from planning to completion, a school project under SBP would normally take four to five years. She explained that Yuen Long would have a projected surplus of 66 classes under the existing SBP and a projected shortage of 40 classes under the proposed adjustments to SBP in the 2009-10 school year. Given that some of the bi-sessional primary schools in the District had experienced the problem of under-enrolment, the Administration proposed to suspend some of the school projects required for the whole-day conversion of these schools as the schools might be able to achieve whole-day conversion in-situ. For such cases, the Administration would review the supply and demand situation for the 2005-06 school year to decide whether the school projects should proceed, be suspended or dropped.

28. Mr Jasper TSANG considered that the Administration should revise the projected surplus or shortage of school places in the 18 districts in Annex C in the context of the planning limitations and the principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP as detailed in paragraphs 4 and 7 of the Administration's paper. He queried why the two school projects in Tuen Mun should proceed, given that the projected surplus of primary school places in Tuen Mun was far greater than that of Yuen Long in the 2009-10 school year.

29. PSEM explained that excluding special school projects and those pending allocations, SBP currently carried 41 allocated projects under planning and 33 allocated projects for which funding had been approved and construction works had commenced. She pointed out that the number of affected schools would change with different assumptions for the proposed adjustments to SBP. She also explained the different arrangements for conversion of bi-sessional schools into whole-day operation.

30. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong considered that the Administration should consult all school sponsors and affected schools on the assumptions and principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP on the basis of the school-age children in the districts. Most importantly, the Administration should work out

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with the affected sponsors/schools mutually acceptable alternatives/arrangements for any suspended or dropped school projects. He anticipated that these alternatives/arrangements could serve as models for settling disputes arising from any adjustments to SBP in the future.

31. The Chairman suggested the Administration to withdraw its proposal and consider the views of the 22 affected schools at a future meeting of the Panel. SEM, however, pointed out that the Panel should discuss and indicate whether it supported the assumptions and principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP first because it would have implications on the number of schools being affected.

32. Mr Albert CHAN held a strong view that the Administration should honour its undertakings in allocation of schools and submit the funding proposals to the Public Works Subcommittee (PWSC) for consideration. He considered that the school sponsors and parents concerned had a reasonable expectation that the Administration should honour its undertakings.

33. The Chairman asked whether the Administration had undertaken to allocate the new school premises to respective school sponsors under the School Allocation Exercise. PSEM responded that the allocation of school projects under SBP was made to successful bidders on a provisional basis. The Administration had made it clear that the final allocations were subject to the funding approval of the Finance Committee for the construction of the school premises. SEM added that in the light of Mr Albert CHAN's view, the Administration would have to submit all the 41 school projects to PWSC for consideration. The Chairman remarked that the Administration should obtain the support of the Panel before submitting the proposals to PWSC.

34. Ms Audrey EU considered it unfair for the Administration to expect members to indicate support for the principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP without knowing the priority and the impact of these principles on the part of the sponsors/schools concerned. She considered it reasonable for members to collect views from the affected sponsors/schools before deciding whether the principles should be supported or not.

35. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong agreed that members should listen to the views and concerns of the school sector in a comprehensive manner before deciding whether to support or oppose the proposed adjustments to SBP. He cautioned that the principles for proposing adjustments to SBP had far-reaching implications which should be carefully examined in the light of the views and concerns of the school sponsors/schools.

36. PSEM agreed with Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong that the school sector as a whole should be consulted extensively on the principles for proposing adjustments to SBP. She explained that the principles for the proposed adjustments to SBP were put forward on the basis of the three assumptions in

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paragraph 6 of the Administration's paper. She considered that members should discuss and indicate whether they supported the three assumptions first, as different assumptions would result in different proposed adjustments to SBP.

37. Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that it would be difficult for him to support the Administration to revoke the allocation of school projects under planning to individual school sponsors in the presence of their strong objections, and to defer the target date for converting all bi-sessional schools into whole-day operation. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung expressed a similar view and considered that the Administration should make reference to the distribution of school-age children in each district in considering any adjustments to SBP.

38. PSEM responded that the Administration would have to reach a consensus with LegCo and the stakeholders on the assumptions and principles, before proposing any adjustments to SBP. She pointed out that regardless of how SBP would be adjusted and the number of school projects suspended or dropped, there would be an overall surplus supply of school places by the 2009-10 school year as the student population would continue to decline in the next five years. PSEM suggested members to consider the assumptions and principles for proposing adjustments to SBP first, and leave the request of individual school sponsors for provision of replacement sites to a later stage.

Way forward

39. In summing up the discussion, the Chairman said that members had reached the following consensus –

- (a) the Administration should take the opportunity to implement small class teaching in districts where the problem of under-enrolment had emerged;
- (b) the Panel supported full implementation of whole-day primary schooling by the 2007-08 school year and requested that existing bi-sessional schools for which school buildings had been allocated for whole-day conversion purpose be given priority in the review of SBP; and
- (c) the Administration should give due regard to the projected school-age children population by district in determining the number of schools to be built in each district.

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He requested that the Administration should further review SBP, having regard to members' consensus and school sponsors' concerns, and revert to the Panel as soon as possible.

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40. SEM responded that in view of members' consensus in paragraph 39(b) and some members' view that EMB should fulfill its undertakings in allocation of schools to sponsors, the Administration would consider proceeding with the 41 school projects under the current SBP regardless of the number of surplus school places in the next few years. PSEM supplemented that the Administration would continue its support for the re-development and re-provisioning of quality schools with sub-standard facilities.

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