

# 立法會 *Legislative Council*

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## **Panel on Education**

### **Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 29 February 2008**

#### **Small Class Teaching**

#### **Purpose**

This paper summarizes the discussions of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on issues relating to small class teaching (SCT) in primary and secondary schools.

#### **Background**

2. In 1992, the Education Commission Report No. 5 (ECR5) recommended, among others, a reduction of five places in the standard class size at each level from Primary 1 (P1) to Secondary 5 (S5) by phases and improvement of teacher-to-class ratio. The Administration, at that time, agreed to the class size as recommended in ECR5, i.e. 35 students for each conventional class and 30 for each activity approach class in primary schools, and 35 students for each class in secondary schools. In 1997, the Administration decided to adjust the class size slightly by adding two students to each class in primary schools and temporarily suspend the reduction of class size in secondary schools in order to speed up the full implementation of whole-day primary schooling by 2007-2008.

3. In the 2003-2004 school year, the Administration launched a pilot study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools (the Study) 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. The intention then was to conduct the Study in two stages. At stage one, a survey would be conducted on existing good practices of effective small and variable group teaching strategies adopted in schools. At stage two, the attributes of success as identified from the exemplars in stage one would be applied to 10 selected schools which adopted conventional class teaching.

## **Deliberations of the Panel**

4. The Panel discussed issues relating to the Study at a number of meetings. The deliberations of the Panel are summarized below.

### Findings of the first stage of the Study

5. The Administration briefed the Panel on 16 February 2004 on the preliminary findings of the first stage of the Study and the design framework for the second stage of the Study. Members were informed that not many suitable good practices of SCT could be identified in the first stage of the Study for dissemination to schools. Based on the findings of the first stage of the Study, the Administration concluded that to optimize the educational benefits of SCT, teachers should be given professional support and the initiatives should be focused on students who were in greatest need for early intervention.

### Second stage of the Study

6. In the light of the findings in the first stage of the Study, the Administration decided to re-focus the second stage to try out SCT in some selected schools. In the second stage, participating schools would be given additional time-limited resources to operate small classes of about 25 students, starting at Primary 1 (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 SCT at P1 and P2 could be sustained as they moved 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 second stage of the Study would last for four years.

7. Members queried the need to conduct the second stage of the Study when different parties, including the Administration, agreed that teaching in small classes would be better than in large classes if all other factors were equal. Members also criticized the limited scope of the Study as it covered only primary schools. There was a concern that the outcome of the Study might be used by the Administration to justify a decision not to implement SCT. The Administration was requested to work out a timetable for progressive implementation of SCT in all public sector schools, instead of conducting the second stage of the Study in four years.

8. According to the Administration, there were views in the education community that SCT was not necessarily the best way to improve the quality of education, and that the professionalism of teachers was more important. Many academics even considered that SCT was not cost-effective and suggested using the resources in other educational areas. Given the divergent views and the significant resources implications, the Administration considered it necessary to conduct the Study to ascertain the benefits of SCT in local school environment before deciding on the way

forward. 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 SCT. Should the results of the Study be positive, the Administration would draw up a timetable for progressive implementation of SCT in other schools.

#### Criteria for selecting participating schools

9. Members sought information on the criteria proposed by the Administration for selecting participating schools. The Administration's intention was to identify around 40 schools with a sizeable portion of students of disadvantaged background, such as new arrivals from the Mainland and students receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance. Members considered that to enhance its reliability and comprehensiveness, the Study should include a wide variety of primary and secondary schools with different teaching and learning characteristics, and cover different levels of classes and subjects. The Administration explained that it had made reference to overseas experience, and aimed at identifying schools which could optimize the benefits of SCT. The findings of the Study would be less convincing if it covered a wide variety of schools with a few sample schools in each category. According to overseas studies, SCT would benefit students from socially disadvantaged families more.

10. Based on the Administration's criteria, 37 government and aided primary schools were selected to participate in the Study and implement SCT in P1 from the 2004-2005 school year.

#### Interim findings of the Study

11. The Administration and Professor Galton briefed the Panel on the interim findings of the Study at its meeting on 12 February 2007. Based on the first two years' data and observations, Professor Galton provided the following preliminary analysis:

- (a) there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate that pupils in small classes fared better than their counterparts in regular classes in terms of academic performance, subject attitudes and motivation;
- (b) attempts were made to break down each attainment test into a number of 'generic skills' such as critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. Results regarding the impact of SCT on promoting these generic skills were not conclusive;
- (c) analyses of five schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils against the remainder showed that disadvantaged pupils did better under SCT in Chinese and Mathematics for Cohort 2, but this advantage was not replicated for Cohort 1. Cohort 1 were pupils studying in small class from P1 to P3 and would return to regular class in P4 in the

2007-2008 school year, and Cohort 2 were pupils studying in small class from P1 to P2 and would return to regular class in P3 in the 2007-2008 school year;

- (d) systematic classroom observations revealed signs, particularly among teachers of Chinese and Mathematics, that participant teachers were changing their practice in ways that resulted in higher levels of problem-solving questioning and a greater range of feedback responses, although, overall, there was little evidence of a dramatic change in teaching modes;
- (e) although it was widely believed that more individual attention could be given to pupils in a small class context, systematic lesson observation data showed low levels of individual attention provided by teachers for pupils in the small classes; and
- (f) the case studies observed that schools and teachers had not yet reached the stage where they were willing to take ownership for revising the curriculum in ways which maximized the advantages of having fewer pupils in the class.

12. Members questioned the validity of the observation that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate that students in small classes fared better than their counterparts in regular classes in terms of academic performance, subject attitudes and motivation. Members pointed out that this observation was at variance with the experience shared by the schools participating in the Study. Members urged the Administration to release the interim report of the Study to facilitate their understanding of its design and methodologies.

13. The Administration stressed that the findings and observations of the Study were preliminary, and it had no intention to undermine the benefits of SCT through the preliminary findings. In order to maintain the independence of the Study and avoid unnecessary disturbances to the participating schools, the Education Bureau (EDB) had all along adopted the practice of not disclosing the interim findings of research studies in progress. EDB would release the findings of the final report of the Study by the end of 2008.

#### Government's stance

14. Noting that the Chief Executive (CE) had pledged during the election campaign to implement SCT if he was re-elected, members considered it unnecessary to await the completion of the Study before deciding the way forward for SCT. On behalf of the Panel, the Chairman wrote to CE twice in February and March 2007 asking for a timetable for implementing SCT. In her reply to the Panel dated 27 April 2007, the Private Secretary to CE indicated that "CE is fully committed to fulfilling his pledge in his next term of office, and is confident that a strategy will be formulated in good time. In this regard, CE will see to it that the Administration will, with the benefits of the Study due for completion in 2008, promptly map out the way forward."

## Updated development

15. On 9 September 2007, the Secretary for Education announced that with effect from the 2008-2009 school year, the standard size of conventional class in primary schools would be reduced from 37 to 35 and of activity approach class from 32 to 30. During the headcount for different levels in primary schools for the 2007-2008 school year, EDB would use the criteria of 35 or 30 students per class for schools with surplus teachers arising from packing of classes.

16. In his 2007-2008 Policy Address, CE announced that starting from the 2009-2010 school year, SCT would be implemented in P1 in public sector primary schools and extended to higher levels progressively up to P6 in the 2014-2015 school year along the following direction -

- (a) for school nets with sufficient number of school places to meet demand, each school in the net could decide whether or not to implement SCT, i.e. using 25 students per class as the basis for school places allocation. Schools not opting for SCT would continue to be allocated students on the basis of 30 students per class; and
- (b) for school nets which might feature a shortfall of school places, the Administration would first invite each school in the net to indicate whether it wished to implement SCT. If there remained a projected shortfall of school places after taking into consideration the intentions of all schools in the net, the Administration would explore ways to resolve the problem, such as by borrowing places from neighbouring school nets and examining the feasibility of building new schools. If schools in the net could not implement SCT from the 2009-2010 school year due to practical constraints, the Administration would separately consider ways to assist these schools in taking forward school-based measures.

17. At the briefing on the 2007-2008 Policy Address, members expressed support for the implementation of SCT in primary schools. However, they noted the absence of a timetable for the implementation of SCT in secondary schools. There was a suggestion to reduce the class size of secondary schools by two students per year starting from the 2008-2009 school year so that the cohorts of students receiving SCT could proceed to secondary schools with small class size after completing primary education in the 2014-2015 school year.

18. In the Administration's view, as the student population was expected to decline in the coming years, the actual class size in secondary schools would inevitably be smaller. The Administration would review and adjust, if necessary, the standard class size for secondary schools in the light of the student population projections and the implementation of the new senior secondary academic structure from the 2009-2010 school year. As SCT in primary schools would be implemented

progressively from the same school year onwards, the Administration would take into account the operational experience of SCT in primary schools before deciding the way forward for SCT in secondary schools, including the possibility of reducing secondary class size by two students per year, in the 2009-2010 school year. The Administration would consult the stakeholders before the end of 2007, with a view to confirming before September 2008 the detailed arrangements for progressive implementation of SCT in primary schools.

### **Relevant papers**

19. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
25 February 2008

## Relevant papers on small class teaching

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	15.7.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings, Question 6 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	30.9.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings, Question 20 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	14.10.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings, Question 20 (Question)</a>
Panel on Education	18.1.1999 (Item III)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Legislative Council	19.12.2001	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 63 - 67 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	3.7.2002	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 69 - 77 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	13.11.2002	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 15 - 22 (Question)</a>
Panel on Education	18.11.2002 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Legislative Council	27.11.2002	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 83 - 143 (Motion)</a>
Panel on Education	19.5.2003 (Item V)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Panel on Education	16.6.2003 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Minutes</a>
Legislative Council	3.12.2003	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 79 - 147 (Motion)</a>
Panel on Education	16.2.2004 (Item III)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Panel on Education	19.7.2004 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Legislative Council	27.10.2004	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Page 69 (Question)</a>

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Paper</b>
Panel on Education	8.11.2004 (Item V)	<a href="#">Minutes</a>
Legislative Council	2.12.2004	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 5 - 103 (Motion)</a>
Panel on Education	13.6.2005 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Legislative Council	8.6.2005	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 76 - 80 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	8.3.2006	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Page 78 - 80 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	17.5.2006	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 70 - 74 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	21.6.2006	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 83 - 92 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	6.12.2006	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 37 - 45 (Question)</a>
Legislative Council	24.1.2007	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 191 - 282 (Motion)</a>
Panel on Education	12.2.2007 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Finance Committee	20.3.2007	<a href="#">Administration's replies to Members initial written questions</a>
Panel on Education	16.4.2007 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">CB(2)1653/06-07(01)</a> <a href="#">CB(2)1735/06-07(01)</a>
Panel on Education	18.10.2007 (Item I)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>