

# 立法會 *Legislative Council*

LC Paper No. CB(2)1457/08-09(06)

Ref : CB2/PL/ED

## **Panel on Education**

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat  
for the meeting on 11 May 2009**

### **Prices of school textbooks**

#### **Purpose**

This paper summarizes the deliberations of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the subject of prices of school textbooks.

#### **Background**

2. According to the Administration, in the spirit of free market economy, it avoids unnecessary intervention in the textbook trade, and leaves the pricing and the selection of textbooks to publishers and schools respectively. Nevertheless, the Education Bureau (EDB) seeks to monitor the quality of textbooks and to help schools select suitable textbooks through the issuance of the Recommended Textbook List (RTL) and the Notes on Selection of Textbooks and Learning Materials for Use in Schools (the Notes).

#### Recommended Textbook List

3. If publishers wish to have their textbooks included in RTL, they may submit their textbooks to EDB for review. Textbooks submitted are examined by the appropriate Reviewing Panels of Textbook Committee of EDB in terms of content, learning and teaching approach, language and technical design, and textbooks assessed to be of an acceptable standard will be included in RTL. Schools can make reference to RTL available on the website of EDB in selecting textbooks, but it is not a compulsory requirement.

#### Notes on Selection of Textbooks and Learning Materials for Use in Schools

4. The Notes, attached to EDB's annual circular memorandum to schools, set out the fundamental principles and procedures for selection of textbooks and learning

materials for schools' reference. The Notes stipulate that subject textbook selection committees should be set up by schools to select textbooks. Whilst the basic considerations in the selection of textbooks include, among others, the educational needs and abilities of students, the attention of schools is particularly drawn to considerations over price and weight of textbooks. Schools are also urged to exercise preference for lightweight and low cost features in addition to the good quality of textbooks.

### **Deliberations by the Panel**

5. The Panel discussed the subject of prices of school textbooks twice in 1998 and 2007. Questions relating to the subject had also been raised in the Council. The issues of concern raised by Members are summarized below.

#### Price and weight of textbooks

6. Members noted that although EDB had urged publishers to make use of printing methods with low cost features, the prices and weight of textbooks had been increasing in recent years. According to the annual textbook price surveys conducted by the Consumer Council, the prices of textbooks had been increasing above the Composite Consumer Price Index (CCPI) over the past years. In 2006, textbook prices had on average increased by 4.2% and 5.2% respectively for the primary and secondary school sectors, which far exceeded the average rise of 1.5% in CCPI in the preceding 12-month period. Members also expressed concern about frequent revision of textbooks by publishers in the form of reprint editions. Members suggested that content and quality aside, the prices and weight of textbooks should also be factors in deciding whether textbooks should be included in RTL, and EDB should formulate policies and guidelines to require schools to -

- (a) specify the edition of textbooks on the school textbook lists to facilitate the consideration of students and parents in using second-hand textbooks;
- (b) indicate on the textbook lists the possible use of old editions of reprint textbooks so that parents could assess the need to purchase the reprint textbooks;
- (c) differentiate textbooks from reference books/materials such as dictionaries and atlas on the textbook lists to facilitate parents and students to assess the need to buy the latter;
- (d) provide story books in school libraries for loan to students; and
- (e) organize more textbook fairs to promote the re-use of textbooks.

7. The Administration explained that since April 2002, publishers had been

required to provide the price and weight of each textbook listed on RTL for schools' reference. Textbook prices were generally listed on school textbook lists. The Notes had specified that schools should provide sufficient description of items such as the exact title, edition, author, publisher and price of each textbook on the school textbook lists. To facilitate students to buy the right second-hand textbooks, the edition should be clearly stated. Textbooks shown with the word "*reprint*" on RTL were not new editions. Schools were specifically reminded to indicate clearly that "*second-hand textbooks can still be used*" against the title(s) if schools decided to use reprint with minor amendments textbooks and distribute addenda or corrigenda to students using second-hand textbooks. EDB would revise the Notes to request schools to specify on their textbook lists the weight of individual textbooks, the total price and weight of the textbooks by subjects at each level for the reference of parents and students.

8. According to the Administration, schools were advised, where appropriate, to mark reference materials such as dictionaries and atlases with "*for reference only*" on the school textbook lists, so that parents and students having similar materials could choose whether to buy the items selected by their schools. To minimise parents' financial burden, schools were also advised to arrange for students to share their storybooks on a rotational basis and the costs of these books.

9. The Administration pointed out the practical difficulties in incorporating the price and weight of textbooks as the criteria for considering their inclusion on RTL. In the Administration's view, the price of a textbook should be evaluated against its quality while its weight should be seen in relation to the content volume commensurate with the intended class level. There was no guarantee that a cheaper or a lighter book would signify quality, or vice versa.

10. The Administration further advised that EDB adhered strictly to the three-year rule in that it discouraged publishers from revising textbooks within three years from their first publication and would reject publishers' application to issue new editions without substantial justifications or qualitative improvement to textbook content and design. Where minor updating of information was necessary, publishers were encouraged to issue addenda or corrigenda free of charge to students using second-hand textbooks.

#### Electronic textbooks

11. To reduce the costs of textbooks, a suggestion had been made to explore the feasibility of using electronic textbooks.

12. The Administration pointed out that the majority of students were still holding on to habits of making notes and completing exercises on printed textbooks. Some publishers were also worried about the vulnerability of copyright infringement through the electronic media. Nevertheless, EDB was aware of the great possibilities for e-learning in the information and communication technology era. EDB had invested substantially in building up the electronic infrastructure at both the systemic

and school levels. It would continue to strengthen electronic platforms such as the Hong Kong Education City portal for knowledge dissemination and provide professional development programmes to better prepare teachers for the use of e-learning resources, including textbooks. EDB would also study the success of e-learning resources and textbooks worldwide to pave the way for their wider use in Hong Kong.

#### Parental awareness and involvement

13. Some members considered that EDB should promote parental awareness of the issuance by publishers of addenda or corrigenda for updating of information in textbooks, and schools should consult their parent-teacher associations in deciding the textbook lists for different levels of studies.

14. The Administration pointed out that the Notes had stipulated the need for schools to provide adequate information to parents in the textbook selection process so that they could be well-informed consumers. The Notes also highlighted the need for schools to seek parents' views on the school textbook lists through meetings of their parent-teacher associations.

#### Gifts and donations

15. Noting that publishers provided free gifts, luxurious hospitality or donations to schools, and included them in the costs of textbooks, members called on the Administration to formulate policies and measures to prohibit the provision and acceptance of advantages and gifts between schools and publishers, except for the provision of a limited number of free textbooks for teachers.

16. According to the Administration, EDB worked closely and held regular/ad hoc meetings with publishers, school councils, the Consumer Council and the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) on matters relating to the acceptance of advantages by schools such as free textbook copies and gifts from publishers. Publishers were advised against providing free gifts, luxurious hospitality or donations, in whatever form during promotion. In addition to EDB's annual circular memorandum which provided a strong reminder to schools that section 9 of the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance had to be strictly observed, seminars co-organized by ICAC and the Consumer Council were regularly conducted to ensure that textbooks were selected in a fair and open manner, with due consideration to quality, price and weight. The Notes had clearly specified that schools could only accept complimentary textbooks and teachers' manuals confined to teachers' desks, and teaching resources which were produced to support the use of textbooks e.g. wall charts, overhead transparencies, cassette tapes and computer software. Schools were specifically reminded not to allow their choices of textbooks to be in any way influenced by a donation or any other form of advantages, thereby placing themselves in an obligatory position to the publishers, and teachers should not accept any advantages or luxurious entertainments offered by textbook publishers during the marketing activities of textbooks.

### Provision of textbooks by the Government

17. There was a view that the Administration should consider providing textbooks to schools for use by students, make reference to the overseas experiences, and conduct a survey among parents and students to ascertain their needs and preference.

18. According to the Administration, if textbooks were provided directly by the Government, they would essentially be owned by schools, temporarily on loan to students, and had to be returned at the end of a school year. Such a practice would further strain the administrative burden on schools and teachers, as additional workload would be generated to teachers in the procurement, storage and stock-taking of textbooks. In addition, students in Hong Kong were accustomed to doing homework assignments and making notes on the textbooks. EDB had conducted a pilot study on the provision of textbooks in four schools in 2001. However, after discussion with teachers and parents, the four schools considered the arrangement not feasible as students could not make notes on the textbooks provided by schools and they would prefer to use new or second-hand textbooks to facilitate learning. EDB would further study overseas experiences in the provision of textbooks by government and explore with schools, parents, students and publishers on the different ways textbooks might be supplied in Hong Kong.

### Financial assistance

19. Members noted that according to the results of a survey conducted by the Society for Community Organization, about 90% of the low-income families eligible for the School Textbook Assistance Scheme had difficulties in paying for the cost of textbooks in advance, and the majority of them considered the grants under the Scheme insufficient to meet the total textbook costs. Members urged the Administration to expedite the release of grants under the Scheme.

20. According to the Administration, the Student Financial Assistance Agency had since the 2006-2007 school year requested schools to nominate students of needy families in advance before the commencement of a new school year. Of the 320 000 students eligible for applying for the Scheme in the 2006-2007 school year, some 5 000 students had been nominated by schools for early processing of their applications. Around 2 600 of these students had applied for and were provided with the grants before the start of the school year.

### **Latest development**

21. In September 2008, EDB set up a Working Group on Development of Textbooks and E-learning Resources to examine the development and prices of textbooks, as well as study the success factors contributing to the use of e-learning resources. Members of the working group include information technology experts, secondary and primary school principals and teachers, publishers, community

members and parents.

**Relevant papers**

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

Council Business Division 2  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
4 May 2009

**Relevant papers on prices of school textbooks**

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Paper</b>
Panel on Education	28.7.1998 (Item III)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings (Question 15)</a>
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings (Question 17)</a>
Legislative Council	17.10.2001	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 7 - 12 (Question)</a>
Panel on Education	11.6.2007 (Item VI)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>

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