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**Panel on Education**

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat  
for the meeting on 10 November 2008**

**Class restructuring of secondary schools**

**Purpose**

This paper summarizes the discussions of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the class restructuring of secondary schools under the new senior secondary (NSS) academic structure.

**Background**

2. With effect from the 2009-2010 school year, a three-year NSS academic structure would be implemented. Under the NSS curriculum framework, there would be four core subjects, 20 elective subjects and a range of Applied Learning courses. The Administration considered that in the interest of students, schools should offer a broad and balanced curriculum to cater for the diverse needs of students. Against this background, the Administration proposed in June 2006 to adopt the following guiding principles in determining the class restructuring of secondary schools under the NSS academic structure -

- (a) under normal circumstances, students should be able to complete six years of secondary education in the same school;
- (b) schools should operate at a scale that allow for a broad and balanced curriculum to be offered and students should be provided with accessibility to combinations of elective subjects of their preference; and
- (c) reasonable stability in the class structure should be in place to facilitate forward planning on the part of schools.

3. According to the Administration, the most desirable school size should be 24 or 30 classes, with 18 classes (i.e. three classes for each level) being the acceptable minimum. Under normal circumstances, the planning parameter was 40 students per class. For schools with redundant teachers, the basis of 35 students per class would be used for calculating the number of approved classes. A school with 71 Secondary 1 (S1) students would be provided with three classes throughout the three junior secondary years for that particular cohort of students. The same principle applied to senior secondary classes.

4. A school with less than three S1 classes might continue to operate if it could assure the breadth and accessibility of curriculum choice for students through other means, e.g. injecting additional resources, merging or collaborating with another school, etc. By September each year, if a school could only fill up one or two classes, the school concerned would be required to submit a proposal by the next January on how it would adequately provide for students' choice in the senior secondary curriculum. If the proposal was approved, the school would continue to participate in the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) in the following year. Schools that failed to come up with an acceptable plan would not be included in the next round of SSPA and students having been admitted would complete their junior secondary education there.

### **Deliberations of the Panel**

5. The Panel received the views of nine deputations on the proposed class restructuring of secondary schools at its meeting on 12 June 2006. The subject was also touched upon in the context of an update on the development progress of the new academic structure at the Panel meeting on 10 July 2006. The deliberations of the Panel on the subject are summarized below.

#### Reasons for class restructuring

6. Members pointed out that according to the projection made by the Administration, the number of S1 students would be decreased from 84 800 in 2006-2007 to 68 900 in 2010-2011, resulting in a surplus of 968 secondary classes. Members considered that the Administration should have reviewed the School Building Programme (SBP) in the light of the projected declining student population, rather than having continued with the school construction projects under SBP over the past years. The planning mistake on the part of the Administration had resulted in an over-supply of school places, in particular in Shatin where the problem was most serious.

7. The Administration explained that secondary school places had all along been planned and provided on a territory-wide basis. School projects under SBP

were planned on the basis of the population projection published by the Census and Statistics Department, and each project had been submitted to the Finance Committee for funding approval. In planning SBP, the Administration sought to balance the supply and demand of school places at the district level as far as possible. Owing to a limited supply of suitable sites for building schools, the supply of school places in certain districts inevitably exceeded the local demand. Apart from school councils and teachers associations, the Administration had to take into account the views of parents and students on the provision of school places, in particular the class size in popular schools. The Administration also had to consider the manpower needs of the community, the availability of resources to support the various initiatives and their competing priorities in education.

8. The Administration stressed that in considering class restructuring, the interests of students were the first priority. The NSS framework was designed to provide a broad curriculum to suit different abilities and interests of students. Small schools with limited classes could offer few elective subjects, restricting both the breadth and depth of the curriculum. At the same time, teachers in a small school would have to shoulder a bigger share of central administration and co-curricular activities, and had less capacity for collaborative lesson preparation and professional growth. Having thoroughly examined the optimal class structure and time-tabling that would maximise curriculum choice and accessibility to students under the NSS structure, the Administration concluded that 24 or 30 classes should be the desirable class structure.

#### Implementation of small class teaching

9. Members maintained the view that the problem of surplus school places was attributed to the planning mistake on the part of the Administration. Members considered it necessary for the Administration to work out feasible and reasonable measures to resolve the problem, instead of resorting to class restructuring. A suggestion was made by the Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council to reduce the class size to 32-35 students to enable the continued operation of schools on the one hand, and provide adequate curriculum choice to students on the other.

10. The Administration advised that under the NSS structure, all students would be provided with six years of secondary education. The number of senior secondary students would increase by about 25% in the double cohort year in 2011-2012. In the run-up to 2009, the Administration anticipated balanced teacher supply and demand. However, by 2011-2012, a shortfall of 1 200 teachers would be expected. The Administration considered it inappropriate to implement policies and measures at this stage that would exacerbate the shortfall in 2011-2012. The Administration had undertaken to review the class size after the double cohort year with a view to resolving the problem of surplus teachers.

### Adoption of a standard school size of 24 classes

11. Members noted that some popular secondary schools operated 30 classes. The Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council had made a suggestion to standardize the school class size at 24 classes. However, the suggestion was rejected by the Administration. Members sought information on the reasons for the Administration's rejection of the suggestion.

12. The Administration advised that there were divergent views among schools and parents on whether all secondary schools should move towards 24 classes as the norm, i.e. with four classes at each level. Parents did not wish to see a reduction in S1 classes in the popular schools. Principals of fully enrolled 30-class schools also found it unnecessarily disruptive to have to cut six classes, which would create problems of teacher redundancy, upset teamwork and staff morale, and reduce curriculum choice and accessibility to students. At present, about 300 secondary schools had five S1 classes or 30 classes in total. To adopt 24 classes across the board would create more instability than what the proposals purported to avoid. Even in districts where student population was declining, it had proven difficult to reach a consensus among schools to take a collective action to reduce the school size.

### Stance on the proposed class restructuring

13. Members were concerned that the implementation of the proposed class restructuring would lead to fierce competition for student enrolment among secondary schools, inevitably resulting in closure of those with insufficient enrolment. In general, schools had reservations about the proposed options to resolve insufficient student enrolment, such as collaborating or merging with other schools to provide reasonable curriculum choice and accessibility to students. In the circumstances, members objected to the proposed allocation of S1 classes on the basis of 40 students per class and the need for secondary schools to have at least 71 S1 students in order to be included in the next round of SSPA. Members requested the Administration to withdraw the proposals on class restructuring of secondary schools and to conduct more extensive consultation with a view to reaching a consensus with the key stakeholders. At its meeting on 10 July 2006, the Panel passed a motion urging the Administration to continue its consultation with educational bodies, and not to raise the subject of class restructuring with the Panel or implement the proposals before a consensus had been reached with the education sector.

### **Subsequent development**

14. In August 2006, the Education Bureau (EDB) informed schools of the principles for class restructuring under the NSS academic structure. The guiding principles were the same as those set out in paragraphs 2 to 4 above, except that the basis of 38 students instead of 40 students per class was adopted for calculating the number of approved classes.

15. In May 2008, EDB informed schools of further relaxation of the criteria for approving classes. For the September headcount of the 2008-2009 school year in schools with surplus teachers, the basis for calculating the number of approved classes would be adjusted from 35 students to 33 students per class, and further to 30 students in the following three school years. In the 2009-2010 school year, the number of students allocated to each S1 class under SSPA would be reduced from 38 to 36, and further to 34 in the following two years.

16. To address the concern of the community about closure of some band 3 schools, it has been reported in the media recently that the Administration will continue to allocate in the 2009-2010 school year S1 students to those schools which have admitted less than 67 S1 students in the 2008-2009 school year, provided that the schools concerned will inject resources to offer three classes when the S1 students progress to S4. The schools concerned will also be allowed to co-operate with tertiary institutions or vocational organizations in offering practical subjects for senior students.

### **Relevant papers**

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

## Relevant papers on class restructuring of secondary schools

| Meeting            | Date of meeting/<br>issue date | Paper   |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Panel on Education | 12.6.2006<br>(Item IV)         | <a href="#">Minutes</a><br><a href="#">Agenda</a>   |
| Panel on Education | 10.7.2006<br>(Item IV)         | <a href="#">Minutes</a><br><a href="#">Agenda</a><br><a href="#">CB(2)2680/05-06(01)</a><br><a href="#">CB(2)2680/05-06(02)</a><br><a href="#">CB(2)2680/05-06(03)</a><br><a href="#">CB(2)2792/05-06(01)</a> |
| --                 | 8.8.2006                       | <a href="#">Education Bureau circular memorandum No. 146/2006</a>   |
| --                 | 2.5.2008                       | <a href="#">Education Bureau Circular No. 5/2008</a>  |

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