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Panel on Education

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 8 February 2010**

Prices of school textbooks and e-learning

Purpose

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

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.

The Notes

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.

Working Group on Textbooks and E-learning Resources Development

5. In October 2008, EDB set up a Working Group on Textbooks and E-learning Resources Development (the Working Group) to study the use and development of textbooks and electronic learning resources. The Working Group was chaired by the Under Secretary for Education, and its members included school principals, teachers, parents, textbook publishers, representatives of information technology sector, the Consumer Council and former and incumbent Legislative Council Members. The Working Group submitted its report to the Secretary for Education on 22 October 2009.

6. The major recommendations and action plans put forward by the Working Group are as follows –

- (a) a three-year pilot scheme on "Promoting e-Learning" will be launched in 20 to 30 local schools in the 2010-2011 school year;
- (b) additional resources will be provided to strengthen and expedite the development of the existing "Depository of Curriculum-based Learning and Teaching Resources" (the Depository) from the 2009-2010 school year onwards;
- (c) a one-off grant will be provided in the 2009-2010 school year to all local schools for purchasing e-learning resources for students;
- (d) an e-commerce platform for e-learning resources and an online community for teachers at the Hong Kong Education City (HKEdCity) website will be set up;
- (e) textbooks and teaching and learning resources will be debundled for pricing so as to allow the market to operate on a user-pays basis from the 2010-2011 school year onwards; and
- (f) the "three-year rule of no revision" will be changed to "five-year rule of no revision" from the 2010-2011 school year onwards.

Deliberations of the Panel

7. The Panel had discussed the subject of prices of school textbooks and e-learning including the recommendations of the Working Group. It had received views from 14 deputations including textbook publisher associations, school councils, parent-teacher associations and concern groups. The issues of concern raised by members are summarized below.

Prices of textbooks

8. Members noted that although EDB had urged publishers to make use of printing methods with low cost features, the prices of textbooks had been increasing. 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. The respective increases rose to 5.4% and 3% in 2007, and 5.9% and 6% in 2008, compared with only 2% rise in CCPI in 2007 and 4.3% in 2008.

9. Members also expressed concern about the frequent revision of textbooks by publishers in the form of reprint editions. Members suggested that content and quality aside, the prices 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; and
- (d) provide story books in school libraries for loan to students.

10. The Administration explained that since April 2002, publishers had been required to provide the price and weight of each textbook on RTL for schools' reference. Textbook prices were generally listed on school textbook lists. The Notes 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.

11. The Administration also advised that it had accepted the recommendation of the Working Group to implement the "five-year rule of no revision" with effect from the 2010-2011 school year. It would revisit the criteria for judging applications for textbook revision. Whenever there were minor changes or updates in the curriculum in future, EDB would provide supplementary teaching/learning materials of the modified parts for schools' reference and use. The Administration hoped that these measures would reduce the frequency of textbook revision and help stabilize textbook prices in the long run.

Debundling textbooks from complimentary resources

12. Members noted that one of the reasons for the increasing textbook prices was excessive packaging and bundling of textbooks with various teaching and learning resources. Members were given to understand that only a very small part of these teaching and learning resources were used by teachers and students. For the purpose of reducing textbook prices, members considered it necessary to require publishers to debundle textbooks from teaching and learning materials such as audio-visual aids and provide the prices for individual items.

13. While welcoming the Administration's decision to implement the "debundling" policy, members were concerned about the provision of adequate funds for schools to purchase the required teaching materials. Members pointed out that teaching materials had all along been provided by textbook publishers to schools free of charge. After the implementation of the "debundling" policy, schools would need to purchase the teaching materials. As textbook prices were expected to decrease following the implementation of the "debundling" policy, the annual expenditure on textbook subsidies for needy students under the School Textbook Assistance Scheme would be reduced. Members were of the view that the money thus saved should be deployed to schools for purchasing teaching materials.

14. The Administration advised that the existing Operating Expenses Block Grants (OEBG) and Expanded Operating Expenses Block Grants (EOEBG) could be deployed by schools for the purchase of teaching materials. The Working Group had cautioned against the conveyance of a wrong message to the public that the Administration would compensate textbook publishers by public funds for their reduced profits as a result of the implementation of the "debundling" policy. The Administration would closely monitor the situation, and if schools had genuine financial difficulties in purchasing teaching materials, the Administration would provide appropriate funding. The Administration was of the view that in the long run, schools should use more e-learning resources instead of printed teaching materials.

15. Members pointed out that OEBG and EOEBG were not purported for the

purchase of teaching materials. While accepting that schools should not be provided with unlimited grants for the purchase of teaching materials, members stressed the need for the provision of additional resources to schools for the purpose.

One-off grant to schools for purchasing e-learning resources

16. Members noted that the Administration would set aside \$50 million for providing a one-off grant to government, aided, caput, and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools (including special schools) in 2010-2011 for purchasing e-learning resources and the grant could be spent over three years. Members sought information on the basis for arriving at the amount, and were concerned whether the provision was adequate.

17. The Administration explained that the original plan was to provide the \$50 million grant to schools to purchase e-learning resources in one year. As only limited suitable e-learning resources were available on the market, schools requested an extension of the one-year period to three years. The Administration would monitor the trend of using e-learning resources. Should schools have financial difficulties in purchasing the necessary teaching materials, the Administration would provide more funding for schools.

Textbook recycling

18. According to some deputations, many private independent schools and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools had adopted the arrangement to provide textbooks to their students on one-year loan. Students were required to return the books to the schools by the end of the school year and to pay for any damage to the books. The costs of the textbooks on loan had been included in their school fees. There was a view from the school sector that it was more suitable to implement textbook recycling in secondary schools as primary school students were less capable of keeping their textbooks in good condition. For the purposes of environmental protection and lowering textbook prices, members expressed support for textbook recycling. Members called on the Administration to collaborate with the Committee on Home-School Cooperation to promote the benefits of textbook recycling to parents and students.

19. The Administration acknowledged the benefits of textbook recycling. It pointed out that it had discussed with some schools some years ago regarding the implementation of a pilot scheme on the provision of textbooks by schools for loan to students. The response from parents and students was not encouraging as local children were accustomed to making notes on textbooks. The Administration noted members' view that schools had no confidence in the pilot scheme because textbook revision was frequent. The Administration would continue to promote textbook recycling. It would plan the implementation schedule of curriculum changes to enable schools to have regard to such changes for individual subjects, and hopefully this would enhance the feasibility of textbook recycling.

Gifts and donations

20. Members were concerned that publishers provided free gifts, donations, luxurious hospitality as well as ceremonial and promotional items to schools. These items added to the costs of textbooks which would inevitably be passed onto parents. Under the existing guidelines concerning the acceptance of advantages by schools, the approval of the school management committee concerned was required for such acceptance and no personal advantage should be involved. Members were of the view that such criteria were inadequate as school management committees readily accepted donations to schools which seldom involved personal advantage. Members called on the Administration to review the current criteria and to issue guidelines to schools to forbid their acceptance of luxurious gifts and donations from publishers. Members suggested that textbook publishers should make use of e-learning platforms to promote their products.

21. 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. The Notes 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.

E-learning resources

22. Members acknowledged the value and the need for printed textbooks given the local culture and learning environment. However, in order to reduce textbook prices, they considered it necessary for the Administration to explore the feasibility of electronic textbooks. Since teachers could not afford the time to produce e-resources, members considered it important for the Administration to collaborate with the HKEdCity to provide resources for schools to develop school-based e-resources. Many deputations urged the Administration to provide assistance to teachers to develop electronic learning materials and to address related issues such as copyright of e-learning materials, revision of software, increased workload of teachers, and changed mode of teaching.

23. The Administration pointed out that it had undertaken under the Third Information Technology (IT) in Education Strategy to develop the Depository for Primary to Secondary 3 levels in Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and General Studies (Science for secondary). The original intention was to complete the Depository for the primary level by the end of the 2010-2011 school year, and the secondary level by the end of the 2012-2013 school year. In line with the Working Group's recommendations, the Administration proposed that the completion of the

Depository for the primary level should be advanced to the end of the 2009-2010 school year, and the Depository should be further strengthened, updated, and enhanced thereafter for two years. The Depository for the primary level collected free resources, both online and printed, provided by local and overseas government organizations, tertiary institutions, schools and non-profit-making organizations. The resources were selected and organized into thematic units based on the local curriculum framework, with teaching suggestions as well as user guides. A sum of \$20 million had been earmarked under the Third IT in Education Strategy for the staff costs to develop the Depository for the primary to junior secondary levels. In order to expedite and strengthen the development, an additional \$2.5 million would be required for the primary level and about \$9.5 million for the secondary level, totaling \$12 million from the 2010-2011 to 2013-2014 financial year.

Support measures for needy students

24. 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 subsidies under the Scheme insufficient to meet the total textbook costs. Members called on the Administration to expedite the release of subsidies under the Scheme.

25. 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 subsidies before the start of the school year. The Administration allayed members' concern, and confirmed that the amount of subsidies under the Scheme was adjusted in accordance with the findings of the annual textbook prices surveys conducted by the Consumer Council.

26. Many deputations pointed out that since students were required to access the Internet for research and completing assignments, the cost of computers and Internet access fee had become a financial burden on many needy families. Extensive use of e-learning materials would create a "digital gap", marginalizing the students of these families. Members noted that the Financial Secretary was co-ordinating the efforts of relevant bureaux to examine options to provide convenient and suitable Internet learning opportunities for needy students. They considered it important to ensure that students of low income families would have equal opportunities as other students in the implementation of e-learning.

27. The Administration explained that at the school level, EDB had granted recurrent subsidies to all primary and secondary schools to facilitate them to make available computer rooms and facilities for the use of needy students after school. At the community level, EDB had launched a "Computer Recycling Programme" for

primary and secondary students. Under the Programme, recycled computers and one-year free Internet access service were provided for successful applicants. The funds for the Programme had been increased from \$25 million to \$62 million having regard to the positive responses to the Programme.

28. The Administration further pointed out that the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer was spearheading the District Cyber Centres (DCCs) pilot scheme in partnership with the private sector, professional associations and community organizations. DCCs provided computing facilities, Internet connectivity and technical support as well as laptops on loan for students from low income families. Free Internet facilities were also made available to students at various locations across the territory such as at Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres and public libraries.

29. Members considered that recycled computers might not be compatible with the software necessary for completing school assignments and the provision of one-year free Internet access service for needy students was far from adequate. Furthermore, as the demand for use of computers in public libraries was heavy, students had to wait for a long time to use the computers for a limited period. There was also concern about the safety of students staying after school to use the school computers if the schools were located in remote areas. Given that Internet access service fee was a recurrent expenditure, members called on the Administration to consider including such expenditure in the School Textbook Assistance Scheme as a recurrent grant.

Relevant papers

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

Relevant papers on prices of school textbooks and e-learning

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	28.7.1998 (Item III)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 15)
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 17)
Legislative Council	17.10.2001	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 7 - 12 (Question)
Panel on Education	11.6.2007 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	17.12.2008	[Question 8] Access to computers and internet by students from recipient families under CSSA Scheme (Hansard English – page 69-71)
Panel on Education	11.5.2009 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	13.5.2009	[Question 11] High prices of school textbooks (Hansard Floor - page 59-61)
Legislative Council	3.6.2009	[Question 18] Prices of school textbooks (Hansard English – page 101-105)
Panel on Education	14.12.2009 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Executive Summary of Main Report of the Working Group on Textbook and e-Learning Resources Development		CB(2)518/09-10(01)