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Panel on Education

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 14 December 2009**

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 of Textbooks and E-learning Resources Development

5. In October 2008, EDB set up a Working Group on Development of Textbooks and E-learning Resources (the Working Group) to study the use and development of textbooks and electronic learning resources. The Working Group is chaired by the Under Secretary for Education, and its members include information technology experts, school principals, teachers as well as representatives from the Curriculum Development Council Committee, tertiary institutions, the textbook publisher industry, the Consumer Council and the parent sector.

Deliberations of the Panel

6. In the Second and Third Legislative Council, the Panel had discussed the subject of prices of school textbooks and e-learning twice. 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

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. The Administration also advised that EDB had all along 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.

Debundling textbooks from complimentary resources

11. 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. EDB should provide a certain amount of fund to schools for purchasing materials for teachers' reference.

12. According to the Administration, it supported debundling textbooks from complimentary resources, and considered that parents should be given the option to purchase textbooks and learning resources separately. Schools had been provided with funds for purchasing teaching resources. The Administration was discussing

with publishers on separate pricing of textbook and teaching resources. For the time being, the Administration had no intention of imposing a mandatory requirement for debundling textbooks from teaching and learning resources.

13. The Administration also advised that it had requested publishers to announce early the prices of textbooks for primary and secondary levels to facilitate teachers' selection of textbooks. Publishers had responded positively and had announced the textbook pricelists for the new senior secondary curriculum in April 2009 and other levels in May 2009.

Textbook recycling

14. 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.

15. 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

16. Members were concerned that publishers provided free gifts, luxurious hospitality or donations to schools, and included them in the costs of textbooks. 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 suggested that gifts and donations to schools should be restricted to ceremonial purpose within a prescribed

ceiling.

17. 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.

Electronic textbooks

18. 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 Hong Kong Education City (HKEd City) 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.

19. The Administration pointed out that it 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 portal for knowledge dissemination and provide professional development programmes to better prepare teachers for the use of e-resources, including textbooks. In the implementation of the three strategies for the use of information technology in education, the Administration had allocated substantial resources to assist schools in the development of school-based as well as network-based e-learning and e-teaching resources and had also collaborated with other stakeholders to develop on-line depository of learning and teaching resources, initially for Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and General Studies at the primary level, hosted in the HKEd City for teachers' use. The Administration would develop a gradual and diversified approach to develop the infrastructure for and a culture in the use of e-learning resources in schools.

School Textbook Assistance Scheme

20. 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.

21. 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 called on the Administration to expedite the release of subsidies under the Scheme and to include Internet access service fee in the Scheme for low-income families.

22. 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.

Latest development

23. In the 2009-2010 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that to mitigate the impact of the digital divide on the quality of learning, the Financial Secretary would coordinate the efforts of relevant bureaux to examine, through tripartite collaboration between the community, business sector and the Government, options to provide convenient and suitable Internet learning opportunities for students in need.

Relevant papers

24. 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	[Question 15] Prices of textbooks
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	[Question 17] Regulating textbook prices
Legislative Council	17.10.2001	[Question 1] Prices of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks (Hansard English – page 7-12)
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)