

For discussion on
8 November 2010

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Measures to Reduce the Impact of Declining Student Population on Secondary Schools

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the situation of the declining secondary student population and the corresponding measures of the Education Bureau (EDB) to reduce its impact so as to facilitate schools' development.

Background

2. The declining student population in recent years has led to a continuous decrease in the number of students progressing to secondary one (S1). The Government understands the concern of the school sector and has taken steps since a few years ago to allocate huge resources to implement a number of relief measures to facilitate the development of secondary schools and maintain the stability of the teaching force.

3. Since the 2006/07 school year, the EDB has adopted a more relaxed criteria in approving secondary school classes (i.e., 35 students per class), and provided about 700 additional teaching posts over three years to render better support to academic low achievers in order to stabilise the teaching force. Further relief measures were introduced in 2008, which included reducing year by year the number of students allocated to each S1 class to 34, and further relaxing the criteria for approving classes from 35 to 30 students (i.e., schools can operate three classes with a minimum of 61 students, giving rise to an average class size of about 21). Besides, we have imposed a cap for the number of students in each class to alleviate the impact caused by excessive student transfers. Furthermore, we also allow schools to carry the number of S1 and S4 classes approved after the September headcount forward to the subsequent S2 & S3 and S5 & S6 levels respectively in order to maintain the stability of the schools' class structure.

4. To facilitate continuous development of those schools not able to operate three S1 classes, we have also put forth a series of development options for their application. These development options include: (i) Conditional re-participation in Secondary School Places Allocation System, (ii) Collaboration with post-secondary institutions, professional/vocational

bodies, (iii) Merging with other schools, (iv) Collaboration with other schools, (v) Injection of additional resources, (vi) Undergoing Special Review, (vii) Joining the Direct Subsidy Scheme and (viii) Turning into private schools, etc. Schools operating less than three S1 classes may continue to operate junior secondary classes on the “per capita subvention mode” even if they do not apply for any development option or their applications are not approved.

Latest development

5. According to the latest projection of the Hong Kong population released by the Census and Statistics Department, it is projected that there will be a steady and notable decline in the annual intake of S1 students in the coming few years by 15,100 students, from 69,000^{note} in the 2010/11 school year to 53,900 in the 2016/17 school year, representing a decrease of more than 20%. According to the current projection, a slight rebound of student enrolment may appear only after the 2016/17 school year, but further assessment is required to ascertain the situation nearer the time.

Optimisation of class structure and sustainable development of schools

6. Noting the above trend, we started discussions with the school sector last year with a view to working out solutions acceptable to all. In sum, the majority hopes that the Government will encourage larger schools to downsize to 24 classes progressively, and allow quality schools or schools with proven record in providing effective featured programmes to sustain their development. In response to the request of the school sector, we have put forward the following four measures early this year to alleviate the impact of the declining student population on secondary schools:

- (a) Encouraging schools to participate in the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme, and facilitating the participating schools to adopt the new class structure in an orderly manner;
- (b) Encouraging sponsoring bodies to review schools under their sponsorship and consider reducing the number of schools in an orderly manner through merger or other means;

^{note} The Student Enrolment Survey for the school year of 2010/11 is still under way, the findings of which are due to be published by the end of the year.

- (c) Facilitating schools in collaboration with other schools or post-secondary institutions/professional bodies/vocational bodies in operating practical courses to sustain their development;
- (d) By means of Special Review, allowing quality schools and schools providing effective featured programmes (such as performing arts and sports programmes) to sustain their development.

7. We and the stakeholders generally agree that reducing the number of classes in an orderly manner is the foremost measure among the four to alleviate effectively the impact of a sharp decline in student population. However, if we are to see notable results, we need to have more schools participating in the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme.

Enhancement measures for the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme

8. To encourage more schools to participate in the Scheme, after discussions with the school sector, we consider that it would be necessary to provide enhancement measures for the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme. In response to the requests of the school sector, we are going to put forward a series of improvement proposals. The guiding principle is to provide additional teaching resources for participating schools volunteering to reduce classes, helping them address the issue of the declining student population, while enhancing the quality of teaching. The response of the principals and the majority of the school sponsoring bodies to our enhanced proposals has been very positive. They consider that the proposed measures could help schools stabilise their teaching force and provide schools with sufficient manpower to sustain their development. Schools can therefore take this opportunity to create teaching space and optimise their learning environment, while further enhancing the quality of teaching. We will continue to communicate and discuss with various stakeholders to encourage more schools to join the Scheme, with a view to stabilising the situation and ensuring that the overall quality of education would not be upset.

Other opinions

9. We also notice other suggestions from the sector that the Government should consider implementing small class teaching (SCT) in secondary schools amidst the student population decline. We would like to reiterate that SCT is a method of teaching, in that teachers have to undergo relevant training and schools' hardware should also meet the requirements (for example, more support facilities in classrooms). At the same time, we have to take into consideration the supply and demand of school places in each district. As such, it cannot be implemented overnight, and in the case of primary schools, it has to be carried out by phases. Besides, a long-lasting structural change will come with SCT, which

has a profound impact on the adjustment of teaching mode and the allocation of secondary education funding. Therefore, containing the decline of population in future as well as the scale of class reduction should not be the basis for the implementation of SCT.

10. To cope with the issues arising from the impact of the declining student population on secondary schools' development, we believe that encouraging schools to reduce classes voluntarily is the most effective means at the present stage. On the one hand, it can stabilise the overall situation in schools in the upcoming one to two years, maintaining a good mix of different types of schools in each district to cater for students with different learning needs and minimizing the mismatch between schools and students. On the other hand, schools can stabilise their teaching force, enabling them to concentrate on their teaching work and in turn maintaining the quality of education. When we have carried out effectively the enhanced proposal for the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme and stabilised the situation in schools, we are most willing to explore with stakeholders other measures for enhancing the quality of teaching.

The Way Forward

11. As mentioned above, we have been meeting with relevant school sponsoring bodies and schools, explaining to them the details of the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme. In the meantime, we are also prepared to explain to the primary school sector and parents of students in primary and secondary schools, to enhance their understanding of the Scheme. The EDB will continue to encourage schools to participate in the Scheme, and actively help schools solve the possible problems they might encounter during the process of class structure optimisation. We hope that more schools will participate in the Scheme, such that the goal of stabilising the teaching force and facilitating sustainable development of schools will be achieved.

Education Bureau

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