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Panel on Education

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 8 November 2010

Measures to address the declining secondary student population

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") about the measures adopted to address the declining secondary school student population.

Background

2. The three-year New Senior Secondary ("NSS") academic structure has been implemented since the 2009-2010 school year. Under the NSS curriculum framework, there are four core subjects, 20 elective subjects and a range of Applied Learning courses. According to the Administration, in the interest of students, schools should offer a broad and balanced curriculum to cater for the diverse needs of students. The Administration announced in August 2006 the adoption of 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 allowed 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. In the Administration's view, 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 38 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 ("S") 1 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 the development options which included injecting additional resources by the school sponsoring body, merging or collaborating with another school, undergoing special review, joining the Direct Subsidy Scheme and turning to private operation. 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.

5. In May 2008, the Education Bureau ("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 to 33 students per class, and further to 30 students in the following three school years. In other words, with effect from the 2009-2010 school year, a minimum of 61 students would meet the requirement for operating three classes. The number of students allocated to each S1 class under SSPA would be reduced from 38 to 36, for that year and further to 34 in the following two years.

Deliberations of the Panel

6. The Panel discussed issues relating to the closure of secondary schools as a result of class restructuring under the NSS academic structure at its meetings on 12 June 2006 and 10 November 2008. The deliberations of the Panel are summarized below.

Reasons for class restructuring

7. According to the projection of 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 and should not have 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.

8. 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 school 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.

9. Members maintained the view that the Administration should not resort to school closure to resolve its planning mistake. The measures introduced to stabilize school development were indeed destabilization measures without regard to the interests of students and teachers. Members opined that the quality of education was crucial to the success of Hong Kong, and resources should not be the sole consideration. Members were concerned whether class restructuring was the means to save resources for the implementation of the new academic structure.

10. The Administration clarified that the purpose of class restructuring was not to save resources, although the savings arising therefrom would be used to support the implementation of the NSS academic structure.

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 rejecting the suggestion.

12. 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.

13. The Administration pointed out 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. To adopt 24 classes across the board would create more instability than what the stabilization measures 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.

Options for under-enrolled schools

14. Members were worried that the declining student population would result in the closure of schools with a large enrolment of Band 3 students. Given the student diversity, members considered that there was a genuine need for such schools to exist. As one of the development options, schools with insufficient enrolment to operate three S1 classes might continue to operate junior secondary classes under the Per Capita Subvention Mode, and upon their completion of S3, students would be offered S4 places in other subsidized secondary schools through a central placement mechanism. Members noted from the Administration that some 9 000 secondary school students dropped out annually. In members' view, schools adopting the Per Capita Subvention Mode would be ready to admit these students should they wish to continue their studies. Members requested the Administration to consider extending the Per Capital Subvention Mode to senior secondary classes to enable the students to complete secondary education in the same schools.

15. The Administration clarified that the 9 000 students were not all school-drops and the figure included students who changed schools for various reasons. Whether students could complete secondary education in the same schools would depend on the wish of the schools concerned to continue operation, subject to the fulfilment of certain requirements. Schools without three S1 classes for the first time might apply for operating practical courses in collaboration with post-secondary institutions or professional or vocational bodies. In response to members' concerns about the tuition fees charged for attending these practical courses, the Administration advised that students should not be required to pay tuition fees but they might have to pay the material and transportation costs on a need basis. Since charging of fees by secondary schools would be subject to EDB's approval, EDB could monitor the situation.

16. Members sought information on the difference between practical courses and the Applied Learning ("ApL") courses under the NSS academic structure. The Administration explained that while the ApL courses placed equal emphasis on practical and theoretical aspects of studies, practical courses would enrich the scope of ApL courses, providing more choices for students who were less academically inclined. Such practical courses should provide multiple pathways for students to pursue higher level studies or to join the workforce after secondary schooling. Examples of practical courses included Maritime Studies, Physical Fitness, Network Management, etc.

17. Members enquired whether the Administration would assist under-enrolled schools with a large number of students with special educational needs ("SEN") to become special schools. In the Administration's view, the provision of integrated education for students with SEN to learn and interact with other students in ordinary schools was implemented after extensive consultation. Any change to the policy to revert to the provision of education for students with SEN in special schools had to be thoroughly discussed.

Implementation of small class teaching in secondary schools

18. Members held different views on whether small class teaching ("SCT") should be implemented in secondary schools in the light of the declining secondary student population. Some members pointed out that SCT had been implemented at junior secondary levels at many schools in Nanjing and Dalian in the Mainland. Given the proven effectiveness of SCT, the decline of the secondary student population provided a good opportunity for its implementation in secondary schools. A suggestion was made to reduce the class size of secondary schools by two students per year from the 2008-2009 school year onwards so that the cohorts of students receiving SCT in primary schools could proceed to secondary schools with small class size after completing their primary education in the 2014-2015 school year. Other members, however, held the view that reducing class size might help teachers to keep their jobs but this should not be the only solution. Schools should take into account the overall teacher-student ratio and the qualification of teachers when considering the implementation of SCT.

19. 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 before the implementation of NSS 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. Although the Administration had no plan to implement SCT in secondary schools at the present stage, it had relaxed

gradually the basis for calculating the approved S1 classes for schools with surplus teachers to 30 students per class from the 2009-2010 school year to the 2011-2012 school years. It had also provided additional resources for implementing the NSS structure which would facilitate schools to flexibly deploy resources according to their specific needs.

20. Some members pointed out that the objective of implementing SCT was not to keep teachers' jobs as there was already an uptrend in the number of primary school students.

Latest development

21. In early 2010, the Administration introduced the measures of Voluntary Optimization of Class Structure Scheme, formation of school networks and operation of featured schools to address the problem of declining secondary student population. As at September 2010, 23 secondary schools had reduced the number of S1 classes from five to four. The Administration announced on 13 September 2010 that as schools needed time to discuss and coordinate the future development options, for schools which had enrolled less than 61 students to operate three S1 classes in the 2010-2011 school year, a grace period of one year would be offered to enable them to prepare for their future development.

Relevant papers

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

**Relevant papers on measures to address the declining
secondary student population**

Meeting	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Panel on Education	12.6.2006 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	10.7.2006 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda CB(2)2680/05-06(01) CB(2)2680/05-06(02) CB(2)2680/05-06(03) CB(2)2792/05-06(01)
--	8.8.2006	Education Bureau circular memorandum No. 146/2006
--	2.5.2008	Education Bureau Circular No. 5/2008
Panel on Education	10.11.2008 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	27.1.2010	Question raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong on "Measures to Stabilize Development of School" Hansard (English) (page 25)
Legislative Council	17.3.2010	Question raised by Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan on "Demand and Supply of School Places for Primary and Secondary Schools" Hansard (English) (page 69)