

Panel on Education
Follow-up to meeting on 14 November 2011

(a) Provision of up-to-standard premises for special schools

Special schools, like ordinary schools, were built at different times and are different in size and design. The Education Bureau (EDB) regularly assesses the needs for improvement of the premises of special schools, and will enhance school facilities through various means according to the latest service needs and school operation.

2. There are a number of feasible options for improving school premises, including conversion in existing premises, making use of vacant school premises for conversion, extension or redevelopment, or identification of site for reprovisioning, etc. As for special schools, we will identify suitable old school premises or school sites for reprovisioning, having regard to the specific requirements of various types of special schools.

3. In determining whether to reprovision/redevelop a special school, the EDB needs to consider a number of factors, including the physical conditions of the school, demand for school places, feasible options for improvement and prioritisation of resources. In respect of the physical conditions of a school, we will consider whether and how the school has benefited from the School Improvement Programme, the size of the existing site and the age of the school premises, etc. As regards the demand and supply of special school places, apart from the overall demand for places for the particular category of special school, we will also consider the projected demand for such places in the region of the existing school premises and the proposed new premises. As mentioned above, there are a number of feasible options for improving school premises. We will also consider whether there are any alternatives that are more efficient and effective than reprovisioning/redevelopment, such as conversion and improvement of the existing school premises, in order to benefit the school and students as early as possible.

4. We wish to supplement on the various demands for improving the school premises of special schools. For the implementation of the Improvement Measures on Extension of Years of Study (EoS) for special schools, we have formulated short-term, medium-term and long-term plans, based on the principle of “those schools having the physical capacity to proceed first”. In brief, full implementation will take place in schools where the objective conditions so permit. In the medium and long terms, conversion works will be carried out in schools where full implementation of

the measures is difficult. Subject to the number of additional classrooms and boarding places made available by the conversion works, we will explore other possible options, including identifying suitable sites for new school premises, to meet the demand. In short, apart from reprovisioning, special schools also need new premises for building schools to implement the above improvement measures on EoS and to meet new demand for school places. Therefore, the Government has to be prudent in prioritising land resources and school building projects so as to balance the demands of different sectors.

5. In Hong Kong, land is scarce and subject to many competing demands. As far as education is concerned, some primary schools have yet to identify suitable sites for conversion into whole-day schools; some secondary schools are in need of more space to cope with the new senior secondary academic structure; and universities need land for student hostels, etc. For these demands, in view of the keen competition, the EDB has to take the overall situation into consideration. Should there be premises or a site suitable for a specific type of school or education purpose, all relevant public schools or educational organisations will be invited to apply, and selection will be conducted through a fair and open mechanism.

(b) Student guidance service for primary schools

6. Regarding the four proposals put forward by the Alliance for School Guidance and Counselling Service (the Alliance) in the letter dated 20 October 2011 to the Legislative Council Panel on Education (LC Paper No. CB (2) 179/11-12 (01)), the EDB's responses are as follows:

Proposal 1 : To increase the manpower for student guidance by providing each school with one student guidance teacher and one social worker

7. Since the 2002/03 school year, the EDB has implemented the Comprehensive Student Guidance Service in all primary schools across the territory with a view to helping schools establish a system to provide school-based, holistic and integrated guidance service. Under the system, schools provide developmental and preventive school-based guidance service for all students, as well as individual and group counselling for those in need.

8. Resources for student guidance service are provided to primary schools in the form of student guidance personnel and Student Guidance Service (SGS) Grant. Concerned about the development of SGS service for primary school students, the EDB has constantly reviewed the development of such service and increased the resources progressively. Since the 2002/03

school year, the manning ratio of student guidance personnel has been raised significantly. From one student guidance personnel serving 1 680 students, the ratio was improved to one student guidance personnel for each 24-class primary school with around 800 students or an equivalent amount of SGS Grant [in the 2002/03 school year]. In the 2006/07 school year, the ratio was further improved by extending this arrangement to 18-class primary schools with about 600 students each. As for primary schools operating 17 or fewer classes, they are each provided with 0.5 student guidance personnel or an equivalent amount of SGS Grant. With the full implementation of small class teaching in the 2014/15 school year, each primary school with around 450 students will be provided with one student guidance personnel or an equivalent amount of SGS Grant.

9. Primary schools receiving SGS Grant may, based on their actual circumstances and students' needs, flexibly deploy the funding and pool together other school resources to procure student guidance service from non-government organisations (NGOs) or directly appoint student guidance personnel. Such personnel can be teachers with counselling experience and qualifications or social workers. These diversified modes of funding are well received by schools and sponsoring bodies, and can meet the different needs of different primary schools for student guidance service. Hence, the EDB has no plan to change the existing funding modes. The proposal of the Alliance for creating additional social worker posts on top of the existing student guidance personnel in primary schools involves substantial additional resources. Moreover, there are still many outstanding demands for resources from frontline education workers for enhancement of learning and teaching. Therefore, we must prioritise government resources carefully.

10. In fact, to further enhance student guidance service in primary schools, the Chief Executive announced in his 2011-12 Policy Address that a top-up SGS grant (top-up grant) would be provided for public sector primary schools. The enhanced measure has taken into account the requests of relevant organisations, and the amount of grant will depend on the number of classes of a school. Primary schools may, based on their actual circumstances and students' needs, flexibly deploy the top-up grant to procure additional student guidance service from NGOs, or pool together the top-up grant and other resources to recruit additional full-time or half-time student guidance personnel, to better serve the developmental needs of their students, helping them prevent and handle problems that they may encounter.

Proposal 2: To create supervisory posts

11. From the information provided by schools, the EDB is aware that currently they procure student guidance service solely from organisations which offer professional social work services, and these organisations have in general put in place professional quality assurance mechanisms. In deploying SGS Grant to procure student guidance service, schools may specify in the service contracts the specific services needed (including professional supervision) and their requirements based on their own needs.

12. In addition, to better ensure the quality of student guidance service, the EDB's professional staff responsible for student guidance has been providing support for frontline student guidance personnel. During regular school visits, they discuss with the principals/vice-principals the work and supervision of their student guidance personnel. Whenever necessary, our professional staff and school-based educational psychologists will provide consultation, professional advice and school-based support to help student guidance personnel handle difficult cases. Moreover, the EDB regularly holds network meetings with student guidance personnel to help them understand and familiarise with relevant policies, services, resources and professional skills. Such meetings also provide an opportunity for experience sharing and collaboration among peers.

Proposal 3: To cancel the tendering mechanism

13. Following the principle of open and fair competition, the EDB requires public sector schools to select suitable contractors/suppliers through competitive quotation/tender exercises at regular intervals in procuring services. This requirement has also taken into account the graft prevention guide of the Independent Commission Against Corruption. Based on this principle, schools should also conduct tender exercises in deploying grants to procure student guidance service. Schools may, according to their own needs, enter into service contracts for a longer period with service providers to ensure the continued provision of services by the providers and their student guidance personnel. In selecting service providers, schools should devise objective assessment criteria to take into account the service providers' experience, quality of service, etc. We understand that most primary schools which procure student guidance service did not change their service providers over the past three years. There is no evidence that conducting competitive quotation/tender exercises at regular intervals has had an adverse impact on the continuity of service. We consider it necessary to retain the existing tendering mechanism.

Proposal 4: To conduct a comprehensive review on the student guidance service in primary schools

14. The EDB has been monitoring the implementation of student guidance service in primary schools, and has enhanced the service according to students' needs, subject to availability of resources. By regularly collecting information from schools (including manpower arrangements, guidance plans and review reports, etc.) and during school visits, we gain a clearer picture of student guidance service currently provided. In addition, we maintain close contact with the relevant stakeholders (including tertiary institutions, teacher organisations and school sponsoring bodies) to exchange views on professional issues. Through the arrangement of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, the guidance and counselling staff of the EDB also meet regularly with NGOs that provide student guidance service for primary schools to exchange views on the development of such service. We do not see the need to conduct a large-scale comprehensive review of the service at present. Nonetheless, the EDB will continue to monitor the implementation and development of student guidance service in primary schools and review the service in the light of students' needs and the actual operation of the measures.

(c) Support provided by schools for students with mental illnesses

15. Students with mental illnesses need treatment by medical professionals. They are usually followed up by psychiatrists, clinical psychologists or medical social workers. While some need outpatient treatment, others have to be hospitalised. If a psychiatrist diagnoses that a student requires no hospitalisation and is suitable for school life as long as he continues to receive outpatient follow-up treatment and take prescribed medications regularly, the role of the school and teachers is to help the student adapt to school life and restore normal routine in accordance with the treatment and rehabilitation requirements.

16. Professionals in schools, including student guidance teachers, school social workers and educational psychologists, can take care of students with diverse needs by rendering services in their respective professions, such as providing support and counselling for students with mental illnesses to meet their medical and rehabilitation needs.

17. We encourage parents to communicate with schools about their children's special needs so that schools can provide appropriate support in the light of the specific conditions and needs of individual students. Such support includes:

- Drawing up appropriate support strategies to help students reduce stress and adapt to school life, such as allowing students to adopt a flexible timetable for attending schooling and be exempted from some homework at the initial stage after resumption of schooling;
- Providing a caring environment, setting up a student-centred support network and communicating with the parents regularly;
- Arranging school social workers or student guidance personnel to provide in-depth individual counselling;
- Seeking professional advice and support from educational psychologists when necessary, such as requesting them to provide emotional counselling for students, assist teachers and parents in handling students' emotional, social integration and learning problems; and
- Arranging case conferences when necessary with professionals from various disciplines, including educational psychologists and psychiatrists, to discuss support plans.

18. To help schools support students with mental illnesses, we provide a set of guidelines entitled “Schools should take proper care of students with mental problems” in the School Administration Guide (SAG). Schools may refer to the guidelines to take proper care of students with mental illnesses. There are also some sections in the SAG advising schools on how to take care of students with health problems. For example, schools should request parents to report the medical history of their children, keep students' health records for reference, disclose related information to other parties only with the consent of the parents concerned, make suitable arrangements for students with health problems during school activities, and follow doctors' advice on how to take care of such students.

19. The EDB also provides teachers with relevant training programmes, such as the Certificate Courses on Student Guidance and Discipline for Teachers, which cover topics on understanding and managing students with learning/emotional/behavioural difficulties and preventive measures.

Starting from the 2007/08 school year, the EDB has commissioned annually a tertiary institution to run a 120-hour thematic course on Psychological Approach to Effective Strategies in Handling Students' Challenging Behaviour. The main objective of the course is to enhance teachers' understanding of students' developmental needs, including students' deviant and unruly behaviour, low self-esteem and some common emotional and mental problems. Through theoretical discussions and case analysis, the course helps teachers develop positive attitudes and effective strategies in helping students handle crises that they may face in different stages of development. Last year, the EDB and the Hospital Authority (HA) jointly organised district-based seminars for teachers, with psychiatrists and educational psychologists invited to share their experience in supporting students with mental illnesses.

20. We recognise that there is a need to further enhance the support for students with mental illnesses and that support from medical professionals is essential to the rehabilitation of these students. Therefore, the EDB is working with the HA to review and discuss the enhancement of the current reporting and support mechanism, including the arrangements for resumption of schooling after discharge from hospital, cross-disciplinary collaboration and communication, and training for teachers and professionals, etc.

21. The EDB will continue to work with the HA to organise district-based seminars/workshops for school social workers, student guidance personnel and teachers. The EDB will also incorporate topics on supporting students with mental illnesses in the appropriate courses under the teacher professional development framework on integrated education. Through these channels, we hope to enhance the stakeholders' understanding of and support for students with mental illnesses.

Education Bureau
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