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Panel on Security

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 7 February 2012**

Trial scheme on school drug testing

Purpose

This paper summarizes major views and concerns expressed by members of the Panel on Security ("the Panel") on the evaluation research on the trial scheme on school drug testing in Tai Po District for the 2009-2010 school year.

Background

Youth drug abuse situation

2. According to the 2008-2009 survey on drug abuse among secondary school students, Hong Kong observed a significant increase in the number of young people under the age of 21 abusing psychotropic substances in recent years. Compared with findings of the 2004-2005 survey, the age of drug abusers had lowered and psychotropic substances, such as ketamine, had become the predominant substance of abuse among drug-taking students, with abuse of heroin becoming less significant. The problem of youth drug abuse tended to become much more "hidden" as a majority of drug-taking students took drugs at homes of friends or schoolmates or at their own homes, and they had low motivation to seek help.

Anti-drug strategies and measures

3. In view of the worsening situation, the Chief Executive appointed in October 2007 the Secretary for Justice to lead a high level Task Force to tackle the youth drug abuse problem. The Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse ("the Task

Force") published a report in November 2008 with some 70 recommendations spanning over the five prongs of the anti-drug policy, namely community mobilization, community support, drug testing, treatment and rehabilitation, and law enforcement. An inter-departmental working group was also set up in early 2009 to steer, coordinate and monitor the implementation of the Task Force's recommendations. Additional resources were allocated in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 financial years to take forward a host of new anti-drug initiatives. Among others, the Administration announced the launch of a trial scheme on school drug testing in Tai Po District ("the Scheme") in December 2009.

Trial scheme on school drug testing

4. Following intensive consultations since mid-2009, 23 public sector secondary schools in Tai Po District launched the Scheme in the 2009-2010 school year. The Scheme was a joint initiative by the Administration and public sector secondary schools in Tai Po District, supported by parties in the social welfare, healthcare and other sectors.

5. According to the Administration, the purposes and imperatives of the Scheme were to boost the determination of those students who had not taken any drugs to stay away from drugs, and to say no to their peers even when they were tempted to try drugs. This would help prevent the spread of drugs in schools. The Scheme would also trigger the motivation of those students abusing drugs to quit drugs and seek help, especially those who had tried drugs at an early stage. In addition, the Scheme would ensure that appropriate support services were provided to those students who wished to pull themselves out of the drugs environment.

6. The Scheme was designed in accordance with the following four guiding principles -

- (a) to help students in their best interest;
- (b) voluntary participation;
- (c) personal information to be kept strictly confidential; and
- (d) professional testing and support services to be put in place.

Implementation of the Scheme in the 2009-2010 school year

7. The Scheme was completed in June 2010. More than 12 400 students joined the Scheme, representing some 61% of the student population in Tai Po. A total of 2 495 students were randomly selected for the screening test. Of these, 1 975 students took the test and no confirmed positive case was found. For those not taking the screening test, they were mainly assessed as being not suitable for the test in view of their physical condition or having taken medications, together with a few who could not provide a urine specimen for the test at the relevant time. A total of six students refused to take the test and the schools contacted their parents according to the protocol. Some 80 students troubled by drugs volunteered themselves or accepted referrals to the Counselling Centre for Psychotropic Substance Abusers ("CCPSA"), joining the support programme of the Scheme and receiving services.

Evaluation research

8. The Administration had commissioned a professional research organization to undertake a parallel comprehensive assessment of the design, implementation and effectiveness of the Scheme, study other local and overseas experience in school drug testing, and suggest appropriate refinements and revisions to the Scheme. Key findings, observations and recommendations are summarized below.

Findings and Observations

9. The Scheme had a positive impact on enhancing students' resolve to refuse illicit drugs, building an anti-drug culture in schools and triggering motivation of those in need to seek help, with more prominent effect on students who participated in the Scheme than those who did not. It generally achieved the declared dual objectives of prevention and rendering support for students troubled by drugs.

10. Nevertheless, the research could not quantify or be conclusive about the effectiveness of the Scheme or the school drug testing in improving the awareness, attitude and behaviour of students, given the short time span of the Scheme and inherent constraints in the research design.

Recommendations

11. In view of the positive feedback of stakeholders, the absence of possible adverse implications, and the apparent success of creating awareness to help arrest the trend of youth drug abuse, the Scheme in Tai Po should be extended to

the school year 2010-2011. This would reinforce the grounds gained in the previous school year and to sustain the overall momentum of school drug testing. The evaluation study should continue in parallel to better address the limitations associated with the earlier research and assess the effectiveness of the Scheme over a longer period of time. It would also help gather more data and experience for further developing school drug testing strategies in Hong Kong.

12. Other than urine testing, hair testing might also be used for the benefit of a longer detection window, subject to prudent considerations of higher costs and students' likely resistance. The choice would be rested with schools according to their own circumstances. It was relevant that the Administration should not mandate any option that might discourage students' participation (e.g. mandatory hair testing).

Deliberations of the Panel

13. The evaluation research on the Scheme for the 2009-2010 school year was discussed at the Panel's meeting on 11 November 2010.

Resources for anti-drug efforts

14. Members noted the recommendations that school drug testing should be further developed in Hong Kong and schools be allowed to group into a cluster to decide on their own drug testing scheme which suited their needs. Concern was raised as to whether the Administration would strengthen the downstream support services provided by CCPSAs and allocate sufficient resources to schools to facilitate their drug testing and anti-drug efforts.

15. Members were advised that -

- (a) schools were an important platform for fighting drug abuse. The Administration had all along been providing advice and guidance to schools, with a view to assisting them to draw up healthy school programmes with an anti-drug focus and to apply for the Beat Drugs Fund ("BDF") for implementation of various anti-drug initiatives;
- (b) the Administration would make reference to the model of the Scheme in designing support for the future drug testing scheme which would be funded by BDF. An injection of \$3 billion into BDF in the 2010-2011 financial year had enabled it to generate an enhanced level of annual investment return of about \$100 million for supporting sustained anti-drug efforts in various sectors of the

community, in which school drug testing was one of the major initiatives. The Administration had not specifically budgeted for the future drug testing schemes. Applications from schools and non-government organizations ("NGOs") would be handled in a dedicated manner for arranging appropriate funding; and

- (c) following the establishment of two CCPSAs in December 2008 and commencement of four additional CCPSAs in October 2010, the total number of CCPSAs was increased to 11. These 11 CCPSAs could serve more cases and each of them would be staffed with a sufficient number of professionals, including social workers and nurses, to provide counselling services and necessary support to the identified students and their parents or guardians.

16. Members noted the Administration's plans to strengthen school social work services in all secondary schools by a 20% increase in manpower so as to support possible drug testing schemes that might be put in place. Information was sought on the provision to be set aside for such purpose and the strategies to be adopted by the Administration for further developing school drug testing in Hong Kong.

17. According to the Administration, in 2011-2012, it planned to further strengthen school social work services in all secondary schools by a 20% increase of manpower so as to combat drug abuse in a focused manner through, among others, enhancing the counselling services. NGOs offering school social work services would be provided with additional resources for conducting counselling sessions and education programmes in schools. NGOs could flexibly deploy the extra school social workers, depending on their caseload.

18. Members were also advised that since the release of the evaluation research report on the Scheme, the Administration had begun a series of consultation. Stakeholders including school sponsoring bodies, school heads' associations, parent-teacher associations and NGOs were engaged. The Administration aimed to enhance through consultation and dialogue with relevant stakeholders their understanding of the research findings and proposals and to enlist their support for implementing the recommendations in the report. For schools and NGOs which had shown immense interest, the Administration would discuss with them the specific contents and arrangements of the programmes, the grouping of schools, the matching with NGOs, the resources involved and the application procedures of BDF. Advice and guidance would be provided to the schools and NGOs, with a view to assisting them in drawing up healthy school programmes with drug testing elements pertaining to the circumstances of different groupings as well as applying for BDF for implementation of school drug testing in the 2011-2012 school year.

Perception of the Scheme

19. Information was sought on the perception of stakeholders about the Scheme. According to the Administration, some stakeholders, including some school principals, teachers and students, advocated that early identification could only be achieved through compulsory drug testing in schools. On the other hand, a number of social workers cautioned that compulsory drug testing might run the risk of labelling the students. Findings of the survey revealed that more than half of students (66%), parents (69%) and teachers (82%) were of the view that school drug testing should be conducted. In addition, 46% of parents and 40% of students supported voluntary drug testing, as compared with those supporting compulsory participation (23% of parents and 26% of students) or objecting to drug testing (7% of parents and 12% of students) or having no opinion (24% of parents and 22% of students). Results of the survey also revealed that most students were of the view that selection of students for drug testing should be based on reasonable suspicion.

20. Concern was raised as to whether the study had examined the possible labelling effect of drug testing. According to the research organization, the study had examined the labelling effect of drug testing. The findings showed that most students did not consider it necessary to keep information related to their participation in the Scheme or their having been sampled to take drug tests confidential. The study also indicated that students' participation or non-participation in the Scheme had no labelling effect on the students.

21. Members expressed disappointment at the Administration's decision not to develop school drug testing widely in the territory after the trial in Tai Po. Members considered that the mere continuation of the Scheme for another school year in 2010-2011 would unlikely bring about any notable effect in combating the territory-wide drug abuse problem among secondary school students. There was a suggestion that school-based drug testing should be rolled out to schools in other districts as soon as possible, given the perceived effectiveness of the Scheme in achieving the intended objectives.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
1 February 2012

**Relevant papers on
Trial scheme on school drug testing**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Security	11.11.2010 (Item II)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>

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