

Legislative Council Subcommittee on Poverty

**Enhanced Support for Secondary, Primary and Post-secondary Students with
Special Educational Needs and Financial Needs**

Purpose

This paper proposes to the Subcommittee on Poverty of the Legislative Council (LegCo) funding proposals for the Community Care Fund (CCF) to launch two programmes in enhancing support for primary, secondary and post-secondary students with special educational needs (SEN) and financial needs. The first proposal is the provision of funding for ordinary schools to arrange SEN coordinators (SENCO). The second proposal is to enhance the academic expenses grants for students with SEN pursuing post-secondary programmes.

(1) Provision of funding for ordinary schools to arrange SENCO

Background

2. The Chief Executive announced in his 2015 Policy Address that to enhance support for students with SEN, the Government would invite the CCF to consider providing a cash grant for ordinary schools with relatively more students with SEN and financial needs to strengthen the teaching team of the schools so that a designated teacher can be deployed to co-ordinate matters relating to SEN.

Existing Government support for ordinary schools

3. Under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, all schools have the obligation to admit students with SEN and provide them with appropriate support to facilitate the development of their potentials. According to the definition laid down by the Education Bureau (EDB), students with SEN can be categorised into eight types, namely specific learning difficulties (dyslexia), intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment and speech and language impairment. In the 2014/15 school year, there are approximately 36 000 students with SEN studying in more than 800 public sector ordinary secondary and primary schools.

4. To help public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools to cater for students with SEN, the EDB has all along been, on top of regular subvention, providing schools with additional resources, professional support and teacher training, as well as encouraging them to adopt the Whole School Approach (WSA) and the 3-Tier Intervention Model to cater for the learning needs of students. The Tier-1 support refers to optimising teaching in the regular classroom with basic resources for supporting students with transient or mild learning difficulties. Tier-2 support refers to “add-on” intervention for students assessed to have persistent learning difficulties. This may involve small group learning, pull-out programmes or after-school remedial programmes, and hired professional services. Tier-3 support refers to intensive individualised support for students with persistent and severe learning difficulties. This may include drawing up of an Individual Education Plan. The EDB provides schools with additional resources, including the Learning Support Grant (LSG), Capacity Enhancement Grant, Enhanced Speech Therapy Grant, additional teachers under the integrated education (IE) programme and Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme for Primary Schools, as well as additional teachers to cater for academic low achievers in secondary schools, etc. Schools may also apply for the Top-up Fund to procure special furniture and equipment or carry out minor conversion works for students with disabilities so as to cater for their learning needs. Moreover, to support schools in handling hardcore cases, the EDB will provide a time-limited additional grant for them to hire temporary teaching assistants to render intensive support to individual students with SEN in need.

5. To enhance the support for ordinary schools to cater for students with SEN, EDB has raised the ceiling of LSG for public sector primary and secondary schools from \$1 million to \$1.5 million per year with effect from the 2013/14 school year. Starting from the 2014/15 school year, the grant rates have been increased by 30%¹. EDB will also adjust the grant rates and the ceiling annually according to the change in the Composite Consumer Price Index (CPI) in subsequent years. Schools may pool together and flexibly deploy LSG and other school resources for employing additional teachers, teaching assistants or hiring professional support services to render appropriate support to students with SEN.

Proposal of creating the SENCO post

6. The Subcommittee on IE under the LegCo Panel on Education has had a comprehensive and in-depth discussion in relation to the resources and support provided to schools for implementation of IE. They proposed to the Government to consider creating SENCO post in schools on a pilot basis. Should the pilot programme be successful, the

¹ In the 2014/15 school year, the annual grant received by each student requiring Tier-2 and Tier-3 support increased to \$13,000 and \$26,000 respectively. The basic provision for the first one to six student(s) requiring Tier-3 support has also been raised to \$156,000 per school per annum.

Government should propose a timetable for establishing a regular SENCO post in each ordinary school.

7. The CCF Task Force and the relevant working group of the Special Needs Groups Task Force under the Commission on Poverty (CoP) have also discussed the existing support for students with SEN, including the proposal to deploy a designated teacher to co-ordinate matters relating to SEN in schools. They also suggested using CCF funding to run a pilot programme in ordinary schools with relatively more students with SEN and financial needs, as well as to assess its effectiveness.

Details of recommendations

(i) Amount of grant

8. EDB has been encouraging schools to adopt a WSA to implement IE and incorporate support for student diversity in the overall school policy, culture and practices. Ordinary primary and secondary schools have generally formed student support teams, and assigned vice-principals or senior teachers to lead and co-ordinate various support measures. That notwithstanding, it is still challenging for schools with relatively more students with SEN to implement IE effectively.

9. EDB proposes to launch a pilot programme with funding from CCF to assess the implication of the SENCO post on the effective implementation of IE. Under the pilot programme, CCF will provide a cash grant, which is equivalent to the mid-point salary of Graduate Masters/Mistresses and Assistant Primary School Masters/Mistresses, to public sector ordinary secondary and primary schools with relatively more students with SEN and financial needs respectively to strengthen the teaching team of the schools so that a designated teacher can be deployed as SENCO to co-ordinate matters relating to SEN support.

(ii) Designated use of cash grant for SENCO

10. As mentioned above, schools have generally formed student support teams and assigned experienced teachers to coordinate the related work. Schools may consider appointing a member of the student support team as SENCO and recruit additional teaching staff with the cash grant to relieve the workload of the SENCO so that he/she may take up more related duties. Alternatively, schools may choose to recruit an additional teacher as appropriate as SENCO to provide enhanced support to students with SEN. To ensure that the cash grant is mainly used to provide additional manpower which is in line with the objective of the pilot programme, schools will be required to deploy at least 90% of the cash

grant for employment of staff. Upon completion of the pilot programme, any unspent sum have to be returned to CCF.

(iii) Requirements and duties of SENCO

11. SENCO should assume a leading role in coordinating the formulation, implementation and review of SEN support measures in school to enhance the effectiveness of IE for the benefit of the students concerned. SENCO should lead the student support team to perform the following duties:

- Strategically formulate, implement and monitor, review and evaluate various support measures and resource deployment of the school, including appropriate deployment of the LSG and manpower resource, according to the basic principles² for promotion of IE;
- Promote early identification and early intervention for students with SEN through a multi-disciplinary team approach;
- Collaborate with other teachers/functional teams in the school through WSA to devise support programmes, curriculum and teaching adaptations, and special examination and assessment arrangements for students with SEN;
- Enhance home-school co-operation and work together with parents to support students with SEN;
- Review the special education training needs and profiles of teachers in the school, arrange for teachers to receive relevant training in a systematic manner, and plan and organise school-based professional development activities to enhance the capacity of the teaching team;
- Strengthen external liaison with parties such as professionals, community resources providers and parents to muster support for students with SEN; and
- Encourage fellow teachers in the school to make use of effective support strategies to enhance the learning effectiveness of students with SEN through collaborative lesson planning and co-teaching.

² EDB promotes IE in accordance with five basic principles, namely early identification, early intervention, WSA, home-school co-operation and cross-sector collaboration.

SENCO should continue to take up teaching duties in order to enrich their experience in supporting students with SEN and put various support measures into practice. However, to ensure that SENCO has sufficient capacity to perform the above duties and undergo relevant training, as well as to provide support to students with SEN on a need basis, his/her teaching load should be equivalent to about 30% and not more than 50% of the average teaching load of fellow teachers in the school.

12. Since the SENCO is tasked to lead, plan and implement various initiatives, schools should assign a senior teacher to assume the post. SENCO should have at least three years' experience in teaching and implementing IE, as well as having completed training in special education (for example, completed training courses on supporting students with SEN pitched at Basic, Advanced and Thematic levels (BAT Courses), or equivalent qualification). Designated teachers who have yet to fulfill the above training requirements must complete the relevant courses within the first year of the pilot programme to satisfy the training requirements. The Government is planning to invite overseas experts with rich relevant experiences to provide training to SENCOs participating in the pilot programme.

(iv) Number of participating schools and eligibility criteria

13. In regard to the number of participating schools and eligibility criteria, the details are as follows:

- i) To ensure effective follow-up and evaluation of the outcome of the pilot programme, the programme will cover around 100 public sector ordinary secondary and primary schools (including government, aided and caput schools). The actual number of participating schools depends on the number of schools meeting the eligibility criteria;
- ii) To ensure that CCF funding is mainly spent on supporting those in need, the number of financially-needy students should account for at least 55% of the total number of students of the participating schools in the 2014/15 school year. Financially-needy students include students receiving the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, full grant or half grant under the student financial assistance schemes; and
- iii) Eligible schools should have at least 50 students with SEN in the 2014/15 school year. To ensure that the provision from CCF is spent on the most needy students, these students with SEN should be those in need of Tier-2 or Tier-3 support under the 3-Tier Intervention Model.

14. According to the criteria above, 118 eligible public sector ordinary secondary and primary schools (including government, aided and caput schools) will be invited to participate in the pilot programme. 57 are secondary schools and 61 are primary schools. It is estimated that around 8 500 students with SEN will benefit.

(v) *Duration of the pilot programme*

15. The proposed programme will commence from the 2015/16 school year for three school years until the 2017/18 school year. The participating schools can stay in the pilot programme within the three school years even though there are changes in the number of eligible students in the period. For the sake of continuity, the number of participating schools will not be increased during the pilot period.

(vi) *Estimated provision*

16. The estimated provision should take into account pay adjustment of teachers of public sector schools, which is pegged to the civil service pay adjustment. According to the pay scale of the 2014/15 school year, the annual mid-point salary of a Graduate Master/Mistress of secondary school and Assistant Primary School Master/Mistress is \$520,000 and \$450,000 respectively. The total funding provision for the three-year pilot programme is around \$200 million based on the 2014 civil service pay adjustment level (i.e. 4.71%)³.

(2) **Enhancing the academic expenses grant for students with SEN pursuing post-secondary programmes**

Background

17. The Chief Executive mentioned in his 2015 Policy Address that, to strengthen the support for students with SEN, the Government will invite CCF to consider launching a programme to enhance the academic expenses grant for post-secondary students with SEN and financial needs.

Information on post-secondary students with SEN

18. As set out in the Operation Guide on the WSA to IE by EDB, there are eight types of SEN, namely specific learning difficulties, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders,

³ The salary ranges of a Graduate Master/Mistress of secondary school (MPS 15-33) and Assistant Primary School Master/Mistress (MPS 15-29) fall within the pay scale of mid-ranking civil servants.

attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, and speech and language impairment. According to the information provided by individual students to their institutions, there are around 900 students with SEN pursuing publicly-funded or full-time locally-accredited self-financing sub-degree or first degree programmes in the 2014/15 academic year.

Existing assistance offered to post-secondary students with SEN by the Government

19. Currently, eligible students pursuing publicly-funded or locally-accredited self-financing post-secondary programmes can apply for financial assistance under the Tertiary Student Finance Scheme-Publicly-funded Programmes (TSFS) or Financial Assistance Scheme for Post-secondary Students (FASP) administered by the Student Finance Office (SFO) of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency. Students who have passed the income test and asset test are provided with grants to meet tuition fees and academic expenses, in addition to a low-interest loan to cover their living expenses. Apart from those receiving Disability Allowance⁴, there is no difference between the financial assistance received by post-secondary students with SEN and other post-secondary students.

20. Under TSFS, the maximum grant for a beneficiary is equal to the tuition fee payable to his/her institution, academic expenses grant for his/her discipline of study plus the compulsory student union fees⁵. The maximum amount of tuition fee grant and academic expenses grant under FASP are \$71,580 and \$4,940⁶ respectively in the 2014/15 academic year. The ceilings of the assistance are adjusted annually in line with the movement of the CPI(A).

21. To strengthen the support for post-secondary students with SEN, the Government has introduced the following measures in recent years:

⁴ A student who is certified by the Department of Health or the Hospital Authority to be severely disabled and his/her disabling condition will persist for no less than six months is entitled to the Disability Allowance. These students may apply for an additional discretionary loan for living expenses.

⁵ The amount of academic expenses grant awarded under TSFS ranges from \$6,670 to \$41,750 in the 2014/15 academic year, depending on the discipline of study.

⁶ Starting from the 2014/15 academic year, CCF has provided an additional academic expenses grant of up to \$2,000 for each eligible recipient of FASP assistance in each academic year. This initiative aims to strengthen the support for needy students pursuing locally-accredited self-financing post-secondary programmes and will be implemented for three years. The amount of grant for students will be adjusted annually in line with the movement of the CPI(A).

- i) Supporting the establishment of a new Youth College by the Vocational Training Council (VTC) in the 2012/13 academic year to provide more alternative articulation opportunities for the youth, with dedicated support services for students who are ethnic minorities and students with SEN to enable them to receive appropriate professional education and training;
- ii) Starting from the 2013-14 financial year, providing an additional recurrent provision of \$12 million to VTC each year for the purchase of equipment and learning aids for students with SEN, provision of psychological and student counselling services, and enhancement of the support for teaching and learning; and
- iii) Injecting \$20 million each into the HKSAR Government Scholarship Fund and Self-financing Post-secondary Education Fund, bringing the total to \$40 million, to establish new scholarships in the 2013-14 financial year to give recognition to deserving post-secondary students with SEN in the pursuit of excellence in academic and other areas. About 100 students with SEN pursuing locally-accredited full-time post-secondary programmes are awarded scholarships each year, with each receiving \$10,000.

22. Besides, there are also scholarship schemes⁷ set up by the private sector that provide scholarships specifically for students with SEN for pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate programmes locally and overseas.

Detailed Recommendations

(i) Target recipients and disbursement mode

23. Post-secondary students with SEN generally face a greater challenge than other students in their studies. They need to purchase equipment to assist in their learning, thus incurring greater academic expenses than other students. For instance, students with hearing impairment have to wear hearing aids and use frequency modulation (FM) system for their studies, while students with visual impairment require low-vision aids, such as magnifying glass, telescope and television magnifier, to make learning easier. Besides the acquisition

⁷ Examples include: Sir Edward Youde Memorial Fund, Sir Edward Youde Memorial Overseas Fellowship for Disabled Students, Zonta Club of Victoria Bursary, Simon K.Y.Lee & Lee Chi Hung Scholarship for the Hearing Impaired Students, The Jockey Club IT Scheme for People with Visual Impairment, Association for Engineering and Medical Volunteer Services—Independent Living Fund, and LI Kwan Hung Education Fund.

cost, they are required to bear the repair and maintenance cost of the equipment as well as the expenses of consumable, such as batteries for hearing aids and the software/ hardware necessary for the computer for use of the visually-impaired students. These additional academic expenses add a considerable financial burden on needy students. To ensure their learning will not be affected due to inability to meet such costs and expenses, EDB suggests that an allocation of funds from CCF be made to enhance the academic expenses grant for the post-secondary students with SEN.

24. Target recipients of the proposed programme must be –

- i) identified with at least one of the eight types of SEN set out above in paragraph 18;
- ii) pursuing exclusively University Grants Committee-funded or publicly-funded full-time post-secondary programmes in Hong Kong, or full-time locally-accredited self-financing post-secondary programmes; and
- iii) eligible for assistance under TSFS or FASP and having passed the SFO's income test and asset test.

Each eligible student shall receive an additional academic expenses grant up to \$8,000 in each academic year, depending on their level of assistance⁸. It is estimated that about 540 students will benefit from the proposal on average each year.

25. To ensure that CCF's funding will be put to efficient use and that the assistance is provided to those with genuine needs, as well as to facilitate the application process for students, eligible students may submit their consent to SFO for transferring their personal data to EDB for verifying their SEN records, alongside their applications for financial assistance. If there is no SEN record held by EDB in respect of the student, he or she should submit to the SFO a valid professional assessment report to certify that he or she has been identified with at least one of the eight types of SEN mentioned above.

(ii) *Duration of the pilot programme*

26. The assistance programme is proposed to be implemented for a period of three years from the 2015/16 to 2017/18 academic year. During the period, the level of assistance

⁸ There are five levels of assistance under the income test, i.e. 100%, 75%, 50%, 25% and 15% of the maximum amount of grant. The level of assistance as assessed by the income test is subject to discounting according to the asset value of the applicant's family (i.e. -0%, -20%, -40%, -60%, -80% or -100%).

will be adjusted annually in line with the movement of the CPI(A), as is the case of the ceiling of the existing academic expenses grant.

(iii) *Estimated provision*

27. Assuming that CPI(A) will increase at an average rate of 5% each year in the next three years, the total provision required over the three-year period will amount to around \$12.5 million.

CCF Task Force's Proposals

28. The CCF Task Force has discussed the above two proposals at its 11 March 2015 meeting. The Task Force has agreed to propose to CoP that the two proposed programmes be implemented for three years from the 2015/16 academic year to the 2017/18 academic year with CCF funding to enhance the support for primary, secondary and post-secondary students with SEN and financial needs. The proposals include the provision of funding for ordinary schools to arrange SENCOS and increasing the academic expenses grant for post-secondary students with SEN.

Advice sought

29. Members are invited to note the paper and comment on the above two proposals.

Education Bureau

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