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Subcommittee on Poverty

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 23 March 2015**

Support for students with special educational and financial needs

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussions at meetings of the Council and its committees regarding support measures for students with special educational needs ("SEN") and financial needs.

Background

2. According to the Administration, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance and the Code of Practice on Education require all educational establishments to provide equal education opportunity to eligible students, including those with SEN. The Education Bureau ("EDB") will, subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and with parents' consent, refer students with more severe or multiple disabilities to special schools for intensive support services. Other SEN students may attend ordinary schools.

3. Generally speaking, SEN students refer to students who need special educational support because of certain learning difficulties. The major types of SEN include the following –

- (a) specific learning difficulties;
- (b) attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder ("ADHD");
- (c) autistic spectrum disorder ("ASD");
- (d) speech and language impairment;
- (e) hearing impairment;
- (f) visual impairment;
- (g) physical disability; and
- (h) intellectual disability.

4. According to the information provided by EDB in April 2014, the number of SEN students studying in public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools in the 2013-2014 school year was about 33 830. Regarding the higher education sector, the provisional number of full-time SEN students enrolled in University Grants Committee-funded undergraduate and sub-degree programmes in the 2013-2014 school year was 247 and 11 respectively.

Members' deliberations

Early identification and assessment of SEN children

5. Members noted that due to improvement in assessment tools and increased awareness of SEN, the number of students in ordinary schools identified to have SEN had been on the increase. They had repeatedly called on the Administration to enhance the support for the growing number of SEN students. Some Members were concerned about the long waiting time for child assessment service in public medical institutions, which served children who were under 12 years of age with developmental-behavioral problems or disorders. They urged the Community Care Fund ("CCF") Task Force under the Commission on Poverty to consider providing a one-off subsidy for children with ASD or ADHD to procure child assessment service in the private medical sector. The CCF Task Force advised that it would explore the provision of such a subsidy to children with ASD and ADHD who were at the age of zero to six.

Financial support for SEN students

6. Noting that CCF had implemented several assistance programmes to provide assistance for needy students (including SEN students), some Members called on the CCF Task Force to consider providing financial assistance or services support for needy post-secondary students with disabilities, e.g. for students with visual impairment, hearing impairment or mobility difficulties.

7. According to the Administration, post-secondary students with financial difficulties, including those with special needs, might apply for financial assistance from the Student Finance Office ("SFO") of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency¹

¹ With the establishment of WFSFAA on 1 March 2015, which comprised two arms, namely SFO (renamed from the previous Student Financial Assistance Agency) and the Working Family Allowance Office, all duties and responsibilities of the previous Student Financial Assistance Agency were undertaken by SFO.

("WFSFAA"). For needy students who were receiving Disability Allowance from the Social Welfare Department, and whose applications for living expenses loans were approved, SFO would provide them with a top-up loan, the amount of which was determined according to their needs. In addition, all meritorious students (including SEN students) enrolled in eligible post-secondary programmes could be nominated by their respective institutions for various types of scholarships and awards under the Government Scholarship Fund and the Self-financing Post-secondary Education Fund through the Self-financing Post-secondary Scholarship Scheme. Furthermore, some private scholarship schemes had been set up specifically for awarding scholarship to SEN students to pursue undergraduate or postgraduate programmes locally or abroad.

8. Some Members held the view that the high medical-related expenses borne by students with disabilities should be deducted from their household income for the purpose of income assessment for SFO's financial assistance schemes. The Administration advised that medical expense was a deductible item in the income assessment. The deductible ceiling was \$17,920 per family member. Comparing with other financial assistance programmes, the income requirements for student financial assistance schemes were lower to help students move upward.

9. Members noted that the Low-Income Working Family Allowance ("LIFA") Scheme would provide a Basic Allowance (\$600 per month) to each of the eligible households and a Child Allowance (\$800 per month) for each eligible child² in these households. Some Members were of the view that instead of offering a standard rate of the Child Allowance under LIFA, the amount of allowance should be adjusted according to the children's needs. The Administration advised that the amount of the Child Allowance was set after considering the public views received. It would continue to provide other assistance for needy students.

10. At its meeting on 27 November 2013, the Council passed a motion urging the Administration to enhance subsidies and support services for students with disabilities to purchase, repair and maintain assistive devices. The Administration advised that for those students with hearing impairment who were referred to EDB for support services, after being assessed to be in need of hearing aids by audiologists and upon parental consent, they would be provided with free hearing aid fitting, its related repair and maintenance and regular hearing aid replacement services, etc. until they graduated from secondary education. In addition,

² An eligible child has to be aged below 15 or aged between 15 and 21 receiving full-time education (but not post-secondary education).

for those children with profound hearing impairment who were suitable to use cochlear implant, the Hospital Authority would arrange cochlear implantation for them. Eligible persons (i.e. Hong Kong residents) would only need to pay standard charges. Children with hearing impairment in need could obtain financial assistance from the Samaritan Fund for the replacement of external speech processors and accessories of cochlear implant.

11. Some Members noted with concern that the support service for students with hearing impairment would cease upon the graduation of the concerned students from secondary education. These Members urged the Administration to consider providing a subsidy for post-secondary students with hearing impairment to meet their hearing aids expenses. According to the Administration, it would invite CCF to consider launching a programme to enhance the academic expenses grant for post-secondary students with SEN and financial needs. The Subcommittee on Poverty would be briefed on the programme at its meeting on 23 March 2015.

Support for SEN students at school level

12. According to the Administration, EDB had been providing public sector primary and secondary schools with additional resources which included the Learning Support Grant ("LSG") to help schools cater for SEN students. Under the New Funding Model, EDB encouraged schools to cater for student diversity through the 3-tier intervention model³, and the actual amount of LSG received by the school would depend on the number of SEN students and the tier of support required. Schools might pool and flexibly deploy LSG and other school-based resources to provide support for their SEN students.

13. Members noted that the annual expenditure incurred by EDB on additional support and services for integrated education had risen from \$859 million in the 2008-2009 school year to about \$1.08 billion in the 2013-2014 school year, representing an increase of about 26%. However, the number of students assessed with SEN had risen during the same period by some 92% from 17 600 to about 33 830 students. Members were deeply concerned that the increase in relevant expenditure might not adequately meet the needs arising from the significant increase in the number of SEN students. Some Members urged the

³ Tier-1 support : quality teaching in classroom to support students with transient or mild learning difficulties;
Tier-2 support : "add-on" intervention such as small group learning, pull-out programmes etc. for students with persistent learning difficulties including SEN; and
Tier-3 support : intensive individualized support for students with severe learning difficulties and SEN, including drawing up Individual Education Plans.

Administration to enhance the support for SEN students by increasing the rates of LSG subsidy per student, and to keep the rates under periodic reviews and adjustments.

14. The Administration advised that from the 2013-2014 school year, EDB had raised the ceiling of LSG from \$1 million to \$1.5 million per annum for each ordinary school to support SEN students. In the 2014-2015 school year, the rates of LSG per year per student requiring tier-2 and tier-3 support were increased by 30% to \$13,000 and \$26,000 respectively, with the basic provision per school per annum for the first one to six students requiring tier-3 support being raised to \$156,000. The rates and ceiling of LSG would be adjusted annually according to changes in the Composite Consumer Price Index.

15. Some Members urged the Administration to enhance the assistance for SEN students in their learning of application of information technology ("IT"). They further said that more resources should be allocated to schools with mentally handicapped students and students with learning difficulties to procure computer equipment for meeting teaching needs. The Administration advised that from the 2008-2009 school year, EDB had increased the provision and relaxed the usage of the Composite Information Technology Grant. Schools could deploy the resources as appropriate to meet their operational needs, such as upgrading and replacement of school's IT facilities, purchase of digital resource materials for learning and teaching, hire of technical support services, etc.

16. In December 2012, the Panel on Education set up a subcommittee to study integrated education. In its report issued in September 2014, the subcommittee recommended that the Administration should, inter alia, consider implementing a pilot scheme of providing a functional post ("SENCO post") in schools to take up the responsibility to steer and co-ordinate services and support for SEN students. According to the Administration, it had taken on board the recommendation and would invite CCF to consider providing a cash grant for ordinary schools with relatively more students with SEN and financial needs, so that a teacher could be designated to co-ordinate matters relating to SEN support ("the proposed pilot programme on SENCO post").

17. Members in general welcomed the proposed pilot programme on SENCO post. Some Members urged the Administration to consider allowing flexibility for schools to deploy such a cash grant according to their needs, and creating the same SENCO post in individual post-secondary institutions to co-ordinate the provision of support for post-secondary SEN students. Some Members were concerned about

the qualification requirements of the SENCO post. It was suggested that a full-time Senior Graduate Master/Mistress ("SGM") rather than a teaching assistant should take up the SENCO post, as an SGM should be more familiar with acquiring the necessary services for supporting SEN students and more effective in coordinating professionals of different disciplines and in leading other teaching staff to implement integrated education. The Administration advised that subject to discussion by the CCF Task Force, the qualification and training requirements as well as the implementation details of the aforesaid pilot programme would be clearly set out. The Administration would brief the Subcommittee on Poverty on the pilot programme at its meeting on 23 March 2015.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
18 March 2015

Appendix

Relevant papers on support for students with special educational and financial needs

| Committee | Date of meeting | Paper |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Legislative Council | 27 November 2013 | Official Record of Proceedings Pages 286 to 389 Progress Report |
| Subcommittee on Integrated Education | 13 December 2013 (Item II) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Poverty | 17 December 2013 (Item II) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Integrated Education | 18 March 2014 (Item I) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Poverty | 24 March 2014 (Item I) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Poverty | 27 May 2014 (Item I) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Integrated Education | 17 June 2014 (Items II & III) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Integrated Education | - | Report (Issued on 30 September 2014) |
| Legislative Council | 10 December 2014 | Official Record of Proceedings Pages 11 to 24 |
| Subcommittee on Poverty | 16 December 2014 (Item I) | Agenda Minutes |
| Subcommittee on Poverty | 29 January 2015 (Item I) | Agenda |

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