



Blueprint for Developing Quality Early Childhood Education

(1) Set up an early childhood research and policy unit and promote local research on early childhood education

- The Education Bureau (EDB) should set up a research unit to study specifically early childhood education policies and related issues on early childhood development, and adopt an integrated approach to education, care and health for children between the ages of 0 and 8. The unit shall comprise talents from various areas and ensure objectivity and independence of research with the aim of informing long-term early childhood education policy formulation. In fact, using a pluralistic approach, dedicated research departments in the USA, UK, Macau, and Korea do facilitate the formulation of education policies and allocation of resources. With its unique social contexts and politico-economic conditions, Hong Kong needs to actively encourage the academia and the early childhood sector to conduct local research and develop evidence-based early childhood practices that meet the needs of the community, in areas of curricula, service delivery models, and human resources. These concerted efforts can raise public awareness of the importance of appropriate understanding of education and thereby promote quality early childhood education.

(2) Promote teacher training and professionalism

- A large body of research has shown that the educational attainment of early childhood teachers is directly related to young children's learning effectiveness. The Government should, therefore, gradually enhance the quality of early childhood education by developing a path for advancement of the professional qualification of early childhood teachers. The entry qualification requirements for all newly appointed teachers should also be raised. We recommend that, by 2019, all newly appointed teachers should have attained a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Subsidies should be provided for upgrading the qualifications of serving teachers to degree level and for continuous professional development. We recommend that a kindergarten or a kindergarten-cum-child care centre should eventually have at least 50% of its teachers having attained a bachelor's degree.
- Quality early childhood teachers are great assets and largely beneficial to the sustainable development of quality early childhood education in Hong Kong. Hence, the Government should coordinate the entry qualification requirements of different early childhood teachers (including special child care workers, kindergarten teachers and child care workers). To attract more talents to join the early childhood education workforce, kindergarten teachers should have parity of pay with their primary and secondary school counterparts. The Government should thus establish an appropriate professional development ladder as soon as possible; optimise the establishment of teaching and non-teaching staff; develop a pay structure for holders of certificates and bachelor's degrees; and review the quota on and quality of teacher training.

(3) Unify services for young children between the ages of 0 and 8 and develop a long-term plan for early childhood education

- Research has shown that early childhood education is a very important human capital investment for a nation. Many countries have already increased their investments in the early years; some have even integrated education, care and health services for children between the ages of 0 and 8 to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Therefore, we recommend the Government to gradually reorganise inter-bureaux planning of early childhood policies and unify service provision to the ages of 0 to 8 during the review of 15-year free education. For instance, the Government should establish quotas on half-day kindergarten places as well as whole-day and long whole-day kindergartens-cum-child care centre places in the long run. At the same time, it should plan and reserve land use for constructing new kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres or for re-provisioning schools. The Government should also include early childhood education as an integrated and important part of formal education. By all means, the government should have a holistic approach in education policy, manpower planning and health care so as to ensure close collaboration among sectors.
- To facilitate children's smooth transition from kindergarten to primary education, mutual understanding in education philosophies, curricula, pedagogies and theories of child development between kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers should be actively encouraged and strengthened.

(4) Support the learning of young children with special educational needs (SEN) and achieve early identification and intervention

- Inclusive education should be an important part of 15-year free education. While students may have different needs, the current provision of services cannot cater all young children with SEN studying in kindergartens/ kindergarten-cum-child care centres, most of whom are "unidentified". Hence, we recommend the Government to establish a team of professionals (including educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, teachers with special education qualifications) to support schools by conducting regular visits to offer assessment for early identification, provide counselling strategies and create individual development profiles for children with SEN. In addition, the team will organise educational seminars and provide parents and teachers with support.
- We also recommend the Government to increase the number of places for children in the Integrated Programme in kindergarten-cum-child care centres and extend the programme to kindergartens to alleviate the shortage of services for children with SEN. Such programme, of which services are provided by schools, will cater for young children with mild disabilities. Each participating kindergarten-cum-child care centre or kindergarten should have teachers trained with special education qualifications and facilities to support individual counselling. The regular support from medical practitioners is also essential.

- The Government should also assist kindergartens in referring and transferring young children with moderate and/or severe disabilities to appropriate training places, such as Early Education and Training Centres or Special Child Care Centres as soon as possible to allow timely treatment and rehabilitation.
- Training courses in special education should be increased in availability as far as possible. Universities/ training institutes should be encouraged to provide 2 to 3 courses in special education. The Government may consider supporting the training of teachers and encouraging teachers' continuous professional development by offering a lump-sum grant. In the long run, all early childhood teachers should obtain special education qualifications.
- The Government should co-ordinate between different government bureaux and departments to provide quality early childhood education. In the long run, kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres should become a system of social inclusion.

(5) Promote universal early childhood education and increase support for needy families

- We recommend the Government to adopt the principle of “proportionate universalism” to allocate resources according to the needs of families with young children and the modes of education of kindergartens (including half-day, half-day-whole-day-mixed and long whole-day). In particular, the Government should increase its support for needy families including low-income, non-Chinese-speaking and new immigrant families.

(6) Enhance parent education and provide diversified services to support families

- Schools, families and the society lay the foundation for the growth of a person. To enhance parent education and assist parents in tackling parenting issues, we recommend employing “parenting consultants” or setting up “parent hotlines” and a “parent education website”. At the same time, under the principle of equitable distribution of resources, parents should be allowed to choose among a variety of affordable services to meet their needs.
- The Government should also increase the availability of resources including funding for kindergartens or kindergarten-cum-child care centres to extend services for parents, which may include conducting parent education courses or providing advice on child rearing.
- In order to equip young people to be capable parents in the future and develop attributes enabling them to nurture their future children properly, they should have some basic knowledge of the developmental needs of children between the ages of 0 and 8 and develop an interest in lifelong learning. The EDB may thus consider adding the topic on “How to be a parent” in the New Senior Secondary curriculum.