

**Panel on Education**

**Subcommittee to Study the Implementation  
of Free Kindergarten Education**

**Meeting on 17 January 2015**

**Summary of deputations' views and concerns on issues related to the  
implementation of free kindergarten education**

A total of 96 organizations/individuals attended the meeting of the Subcommittee on 17 January 2015 to give views on issues related to the implementation of free kindergarten ("KG") education. The Subcommittee also received 52 written submissions. The major views and concerns of the deputations are summarized below.

Policy and proposed scope of free KG education

2. The deputations generally agree that KG education is a foundation stage of learning and whole person development of children with unique pedagogical characteristics that integrate care and education. With the exception of one written submission, all deputations submitting views to the Subcommittee strongly support the provision of free KG education and its early implementation. There is also a view that the term "early childhood education" (幼兒教育) should be used in lieu of "pre-school education" (學前教育).

3. It is noted that the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education ("KG Committee") has an emerging consensus that free KG education should cover half-day ("HD") service as the basic provision for all eligible children, and that free or subsidized whole-day ("WD") and long whole-day ("LWD") KG places should be provided on a "need" basis for children who meet certain prescribed eligibility criteria which are still under deliberation. The deputations have expressed the following views-

- (a) Given that WD and LWD KGs have been an integral part of the KG sector providing vital services to many families and working parents, their roles should be duly recognized. Provision of free KG education should not be confined to HD KG service only.

- (b) If only attendance at HD KGs is subsidized, there is grave concern that many KGs will only operate or switch to HD services. The possible reduction in WD KG places will adversely affect families in need of WD services.
- (c) According to some deputations, the global trend is the increased provision of WD/LWD KG places to cater for the needs of children for education and care. In terms of the enrolment rate of children in WD/LWD KGs, Hong Kong has a low ranking when compared with other European Union countries.
- (d) As the provision of education and care is now under the policy purview of two different bureaux (namely, the Education Bureau ("EDB") and the Labour and Welfare Bureau), the Administration should examine the provision of "Educare" in the implementation of free KG education, instead of maintaining a dichotomy between "education" and "care".
- (e) On the eligibility criteria for free or subsidized WD/LWD KG places, the Administration has been urged to take into account parents' actual needs instead of arbitrarily formulating a set of criteria which may have the effect of excluding those in real need of WD/LWD KG places.
- (f) Whether local private independent KGs should be covered under the provision of free KG education can be further deliberated.

#### Allocation of resources and the funding mode

4. Many deputations have suggested that as a longer-term target, the public expenditure on early childhood education should be increased progressively to 1% of Hong Kong's GDP, the 1% level being a recommendation of the European Union.

5. On the future funding mode for free KG education, the following views have been expressed –

- (a) Having regard to the implementation experience in the welfare sector, there is strong objection to the disbursement of lump sum grant ("LSG") to KGs as the funding mode for

the provision of free KG education. Given that the amount of LSG may likely be capped at the mid-point salaries of KG teachers, individual KGs will often need to find means to cut costs and achieve savings to sustain their operation. Ultimately, this may lead to exploitation of staff and deterioration of service.

- (b) According to many deputations, the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ("PEVS") should be abolished. Instead, the Administration should make reference to the funding mode for aided primary and secondary schools, and provide full and direct subsidy to non-profit-making ("NPM") KGs.
- (c) Instead of applying a single funding mode on all KGs, some deputations consider that a diversified approach should be adopted under which different funding modes should be adopted to support different types of KGs. For instance, there is a suggestion that LWD KGs should be provided with special subsidies or additional staff.
- (d) On the scope of subsidy, some deputations suggest that it should include both recurrent (e.g. rental, staff salaries, mandatory provident fund contributions, other overhead charges etc.) and non-recurrent (e.g. purchase of equipment etc.) expenditures.

#### Financial assistance for needy families

6. In addition to the subsidy under PEVS, parents in need of financial assistance may apply to the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme ("KCFRS") if their children are enrolled in a PEVS KG. Those children who pass the means test will be provided with fee remission with reference to the level of assistance they are assessed to be eligible for.

- (a) Quite a number of deputations have pointed out that under KCFRS, a child from a four-member family with a monthly income of less than \$15,867 would be eligible for full fee remission. They share the view that this income threshold should be raised in order that more needy families can benefit from full fee remission.

- (b) Some deputations consider that textbook subsidies should be provided to KG students in order to relieve the financial burden on parents.
- (c) As reflected by some parents, some KGs have charged exorbitant fees for items such as stationery and other sundry items. The Administration is urged to step up monitoring of the fees charged by KGs upon implementation of free KG education.

### Salary and qualifications framework for teachers

7. Upon implementation of PEVS in the 2007-2008 school year, the Recommended Normative Salary Scale for KG teachers was abolished. Henceforth, individual KGs have full discretion to determine the salaries for their teachers. Deputations deplored the abolition of the Salary Scale as it was not conducive to maintaining a stable and quality KG workforce, or attracting young people to join the profession. As informed by EDB, according to a teacher survey conducted in September 2013, the monthly salaries of teachers working whole-day in KGs under PEVS ranged widely from about \$8,300 to over \$71,000.

- (a) There is wide support among the deputations for the establishment of a mandatory KG teacher salary scale for compliance by KGs. The Administration has been urged to make reference to the existing arrangements for aided primary and secondary schools and formulate a salary scale which is linked to that applicable to civil servants.
- (b) A qualifications framework and rank structure should be put in place to give due recognition to teachers' experience, years of service and academic qualifications, as well as to provide a clear career path. To improve the career prospect of KG teachers, some deputations consider that the posts of vice-principal and senior teacher should be created.
- (c) The mandatory salary scale should give effect to the rank structure and the level of remuneration should be commensurate with the qualifications and experience of KG teachers. There is a suggestion that teachers with a Certificate in Early Childhood Education, teachers with a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education and

principals should be remunerated along different points on the salary scale.

- (d) There is strong objection to the disbursement of LSG for deployment by individual KGs. The deputations consider that the Government should reimburse NPM KGs the salaries of their KG teachers.

#### Professional development and upgrading

8. According to some deputations, nearly all KG teachers possess the Certificate in Early Childhood Education. About 40% possess a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education or equivalent qualification.

- (a) Some deputations share the view that the Administration should formulate a continuous professional development policy for KG teachers, with reference to a teacher competency framework and principal competency framework to be devised.
- (b) The Administration is urged to encourage the professional development of serving KG teachers by providing them with training subsidies.
- (c) There is a view that the number of places for degree programmes in early childhood education should be increased.
- (d) To take forward professional upgrading, some deputations consider that five years after the implementation of free KG education, 50% of KG teachers should be degree holders. In the long run, the entry qualification of KG teachers should be raised to degree level to enhance the quality of KG education.

#### Manpower planning

9. The existing KG teacher establishment does not make reference to any class-to-teacher ratio. At present, the teacher-to-student ratio is 1:15 for all KG classes.

- (a) There is a suggestion to set the class-to-teacher ratios of HD, WD and LWD KGs at 1:1.25, 1:1.3 and 1:1.4 respectively.

- (b) To ensure the quality of KG education, some deputations have put forward a number of suggestions to improve the existing teacher-to-student ratio. For instance, there is a suggestion that the teacher-to-student ratio should be 1:10 for the age group of two to four years; and 1:12 for the age group of four to six years.
- (c) To provide a robust KG workforce for the effective implementation of free KG education, some deputations consider that the posts of vice-principal, senior teacher, school-based social worker, support teacher and teaching assistant should be created. These posts should not count as teaching posts when computing the teacher-to-student ratios. Many also stress the need to set up additional clerical posts to take up administrative duties.

Support for students with special educational needs ("SEN") and non-Chinese speaking students

10. Under existing arrangements, rehabilitation services for pre-primary children are provided by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") through Special Child Care Centres, Early Education and Training Centres and the Integrated Programme ("IP") in kindergarten-cum-child care centres. IP provides training and care to mildly disabled pre-school children between 2 to 6 years of age in an ordinary kindergarten-cum-child care centre with a view to facilitating their future integration into mainstream education. For the enrolment of every six children with special needs, EDB sponsors the employment of an IP teacher who is also responsible for teaching regular students.

11. According to available information, there are about 1 860 places provided by SWD under IP in kindergarten-cum-child care centres. In 2012-2013, the average waiting time for IP places was 12.7 months. While waiting for subvented services, children from low-income families may apply for a monthly subsidy to acquire rehabilitation services from non-government organizations.

- (a) In the view of some deputations, it is necessary to formulate a policy on integrated education for the KG sector. Consideration should be given to providing appropriate support to KGs for assisting their SEN students. Some

suggestions include the creation of the post of Co-ordinator for SEN students and the provision of social workers.

- (b) Some deputations are seriously concerned that as a result of the long waiting time, children with special needs will miss the prime time (i.e. before they reach six years of age) for effective and timely assistance.
- (c) It has been suggested that EDB should introduce a training framework similar to that for primary and secondary school teachers for KG teachers to receive structured training in supporting children with developmental disorders, notably SEN.

12. EDB encourages parents to send their non-Chinese speaking ("NCS") children to KGs offering a local curriculum. Apart from inviting all KGs to participate in the school-based professional support services provided by EDB on an annual basis, EDB will continue to enhance the school-based professional support and professional development of KG teachers through the University-School Support Programme and the Quality Education Fund projects.

- (a) There is a suggestion that to support students with different learning needs, such as NCS students, additional teaching and guidance staff should be provided to KGs.

#### Premises-related issues

13. Currently, KGs are operated in different types of premises and the rental costs vary considerably. They may be operated in Government-allocated premises (such as public housing estates), in self-acquired premises, in privately leased premises or private sites owned by the school sponsoring bodies. In 2013-2014, 394 KGs (i.e. about 50% of all NPM KGs), received rent reimbursement under the Rent Reimbursement Scheme with the amount of rent reimbursed ranging from \$3,100 to \$35,000 per month. According to many deputations, the exorbitant increase in rental or non-renewal of leases has created an unstable operating environment for many KGs accommodated in private premises.

- (a) Some deputations have cautioned that the provision of rent reimbursement to KGs may have the unintended effect of driving up the rental levels of KG premises.

- (b) Many deputations consider that in the longer-run, the Administration should include the provision of KGs in its overall development planning, and set aside government land and premises for the operation of KGs. EDB should also work in conjunction with the Housing Authority in the planning and provision of KGs in public housing estates. The allocation of KG premises should be taken up by the Government, similar the current arrangements for aided primary and secondary schools.
- (c) The Operation Manual for Pre-primary Institutions stipulating various requirements on location, maximum height and space etc. of KG premises should be reviewed to suit contemporary needs.

#### Supply of and demand for KG places

14. According to EDB, on a territory-wide basis, there are sufficient KG places to meet the demand. However, the panic of parents over securing a KG place for their children in certain districts (e.g. the North District and Tai Po) has given rise to concerns about the overall planning in the provision of KG places.

- (a) Some deputations consider that the Administration should critically re-examine the requirements under the "Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines", and plan for the provision of HD, WD and LWD KG places in different districts according to their population profiles and family structures in individual districts.
- (b) In planning for the provision of KG places, the principle of vicinity should be upheld so that children can attend KGs in their resident or neighbouring district.

#### Local research on early childhood education

15. Some deputations consider that there is a serious lack of local research on early childhood education.

- (a) There is a view that with its unique social, economic and political contexts, Hong Kong needs to actively encourage the academia and the early childhood sector to conduct local researches and develop evidence-based early childhood



practices that meet the needs of the community, in areas of curricula, service delivery models and human resources.

- (b) To inform long-term early childhood education policy formulation, it has been suggested that 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 0 and 8 years of age.

#### Transition from KG to primary education

16. Some deputations have highlighted the need for a smooth transition from KG to primary education.

- (a) To facilitate children's smooth transition from KG to primary education, mutual understanding in education philosophies, curricula, pedagogies and theories of child development between KG teachers and primary school teachers should be actively encouraged and strengthened.
- (b) A proper system should be put in place to facilitate the transfer of information, continuity of learning and development of pedagogies. This is particularly important for the growth and development needs of children with SEN.

17. The written submissions received in connection with the meeting can be viewed at the following link :

[http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr15-16/english/panels/ed/ed\\_fke/papers/fke\\_c.htm](http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr15-16/english/panels/ed/ed_fke/papers/fke_c.htm)