

For information on
28 April 2015

Panel on Education

Subcommittee to Study the Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education

Planning for the Provision of Kindergarten Places and the Admission Arrangements for Kindergartens

Purpose

This paper provides the present situation and the initial views of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education (the Committee) relating to the planning for the provision of kindergarten (KG) places and the admission arrangements for KGs.

Planning for the provision of KG places

Present Situation

2. KGs are all privately-run and the KG sector, with very high operational flexibility, is able to respond efficiently to the demand for places from parents. In spite of the year-on-year difference of preferences and diverse choice of various types of KG services among parents, in term of the planning for the provision of KG places, the Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been making reference to the projected school-age population aged 3 to 5 (generally considered appropriate for KG education) residing in Hong Kong by district¹, student enrolment and relevant historical trends in projecting the demand and supply of different types of KG places. Specifically, according to the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, for nursery classes and KGs, the standard should be 730 half-day (HD) and 250 whole-day (WD) places for every 1 000 children in the age group of 3 to 5. Should there

¹ The projections of school-age population aged 3-5 residing in Hong Kong by district are compiled with reference to the latest population projections released by the Census and Statistics Department and the latest projections of population distribution released by the Planning Department.

be any new public housing estates or large scale residential development projects, the Government will reserve sites for educational services according to the above standard. For available KG premises in public housing estates, EDB will, on request of the Housing Department, conduct a school allocation exercise (SAE) if the demand and supply of KG places in the locality of the KG premises warrants setting up a new KG. The SAE, if conducted, is open to all KG operators including existing and new ones for establishment of new KG or relocation of KGs either in dilapidated condition or in area with diminishing population and demand for KG places. As for private development, the developer will rent the premises to KG operators on its own.

Deliberations and Views of the Committee

3. The Committee notes the flexibility and responsiveness of the sector in meeting parents' demand for places, including that for different types of KG places (i.e. HD, WD or long whole-day (LWD)) that always evolves over time according to changes in family situation and the children's development needs at different stages, etc. Besides, the choice of parents also hinges on the availability of places offered by the KGs they prefer. All along, in response to such evolving demand, KGs will optimize their campus capacities through optimal deployment of their registered classrooms, adjustment of the service modes from HD to WD or vice-versa. Also, new operators or new KGs will come into play when unmet demand surfaces. Taking the 2014/15 school year as an example, about 20 KGs closed down, and about 30 new KGs came into operation. The Committee is of the view that the present flexible mode of operation is conducive to fostering supply of school places to meet demand, including in districts facing the transient problems of cross-boundary students.

4. As regards the planning on the provision of WD and LWD KG places, the Committee notes that in local non-profit making KGs, the percentage of students attending WD sessions among total enrolment under all sessions is 31% in the 2014/15 school year. In this connection, the Committee is of the view that the existing planning standards (*i.e. having 730 HD and 250 WD places for every 1 000 children in the age group of 3 to 5*) should be reviewed to respond to, among others, the need to unleash the potential of local labor force by encouraging KGs to offer

more full-day services. The Committee finds that it is important that the Government should factor in the need for increasing WD places in the planning standards.

5. The Committee notes that some parents have raised the idea of introducing a central KG places allocation mechanism to allocate children to KGs, similar to the system adopted for allocation of primary one and secondary one school places. In this connection, there are calls for planning provision of KG places on a district basis. In this regard, the Committee notes that in reality, it is not uncommon for parents to choose KGs in districts other than the one they reside in. Some parents may choose a KG in the district where their relatives live so that they could help take care of their children; some may choose a KG near their working place; others may prefer KGs in other districts that could meet their particular preference for curriculum or with characteristics that suit their children's aptitude. Statistics available show that actual KG enrolment in certain districts significantly outnumbers the corresponding projection on school-age population, which indicates that some KG students in these districts actually reside in other districts. For example, the actual KG enrolment in Kowloon City in the 2014/15 school year is 22 873 while the projected population size of those aged 3 to 5 residing in that district is only 10 100. The Committee holds the view that while the Government should provide more free premises for operation of KGs, setting numerical target for supply of KG places on a district basis to match projected population may not be warranted.

6. The Committee acknowledges that the great diversity in rental expenses among different KGs is a critical issue to be addressed in the implementation of free KG education in a practicable and sustainable manner. In this connection, the Committee is of the view that stable supply of quality KG premises at low or nil rental is crucial to enable an increase in the number of KGs that will not have to charge any school fees to defray rental expenses. The Committee recommends that the Government should consider putting in place some long-term planning to meet the above objective.

Admission arrangements

Present Situation

7. All along, KGs handle student admission matters at their own discretion subject to relevant rules and guidelines issued by EDB. At the same time, parents can freely choose KG places suitable for their children. To help parents make an informed choice, KGs are requested to provide parents with relevant school information² through different channels such as leaflet, school website, etc. Also, EDB issues the Profile of Kindergartens and Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centres (KG Profile) annually with essential information about individual KGs, including their approved school fees, number of teaching staff and their qualifications, etc. The KG Profile can be accessed on the EDB website.

8. In 2013, in view of the public concern over the admission arrangements for nursery classes (K1) in Tai Po and North districts (TP&N), EDB implemented a number of special measures in the two districts with a view to improving the KG admission procedure and better utilizing the KG places in view of the relatively stringent supply in the two districts. Among others, to prevent the hoarding of more than one place by a student, thereby releasing vacant places for students on the waiting list, EDB issued a “registration letter” to parents and required them to register with only one KG within a period specified by EDB (“centralized registration dates”). To assist parents in securing a K1 place for their children, EDB also released KG vacancy information after the “centralized registration dates” and updated it at regular intervals.

9. In view of the positive experience of the above measures in TP&N, the relevant practices were extended to all KGs under Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme in their K1 admission for the 2015/16 school year. The sector considered that the arrangements facilitated smooth operation of the admission process and could facilitate early confirmation of enrolment for manpower planning. As for the parents, the long queue situation had been considerably improved or disappeared and they could confirm a K1 place for their children earlier than before. In fact, it is noted that there are still K1 vacancies available in all districts as at March 2015.

² The information should include the estimated number of vacancies for application, approved school fee, other approved charges and a list of school items/paid services (which parents may purchase on a voluntary basis) and their charges.

Deliberations and Views of the Committee

10. The Committee notes that the feedback from the KG sector and parents on the admission arrangements is positive in general, though some KG operators have raised concern about the increase of administrative workload in processing the increased number of applications received. Some opined that instead of requiring all KGs to follow, EDB might consider implementing the measures only in districts where the supply of KG places was more stringent. The Committee is of the view that the K1 admission arrangements in the 2015/16 school year should continue in subsequent years, subject to suitable enhancement to address the stakeholders' concerns, while KG student admission should remain a school-based matter.

11. As regards the idea of introducing a central KG places allocation mechanism to place children in KGs, similar to the system adopted for allocation of primary one and secondary one school places (paragraph 5 refers), the Committee has great reservation about the creation of KG nets under a central allocation system, which will affect the sector's overall operational flexibility to cope with the rise and fall of students in different districts. Unlike the aided schools that are operated mainly on government-owned or rental-free private lands, the operation of KG in commercial premises will render the planning of KG places in a holistic manner like aided school places not practicable.

12. The Committee has also deliberated on the admission of students in pre-nursery (PN) classes for children aged below 3 to K1 in the same KG. It is noted that in the KGs where PN classes are operated, most of the K1 places would be filled by the PN class children and in some cases no K1 places are available for other applicants. The Committee is of the view that this is undesirable because children who are not enrolled in a PN class for one reason or another would virtually be deprived of equal opportunities to access a K1 place in the relevant KG. To tackle the issue, some suggested the option of requiring the KG-cum-Child Care Centres (CCCs) to open all K1 places for application. However, the sector had great reservation in introducing such a requirement as it would in effect force some PN students to transfer to other KGs to continue their study in K1. They considered that for such small children, continuing to study in the same KG would be more beneficial as they had already

adapted to the school environment. In this connection, the Committee is of the view that the Government needs to strike a careful balance among factors like equity in access to KG places (especially when such places may be subvented by the Government in future), KG's discretion in student admission, parental expectation and possible impact on the affected children. On this basis, the Committee suggests that EDB should explore the feasibility of requiring KG-cum-CCCs to set aside a reasonable number of K1 places for application from students other than PN ones.

13. With a view to providing more support for working parents to tie in with the population policy, the Committee is of the view that children with working parents might be given priority in admission to WD/LWD classes.

Views Sought

14. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

Education Bureau
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