

For information on
23 June 2015

Panel on Education

Subcommittee to Study the Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education

Subjects: (a) **Research on early childhood education**
(b) **Issues related to parents' participation**
(c) **Tuition fees and miscellaneous fees charged by kindergartens, the Government's monitoring, the financial assistance available to children from needy families**

Purpose

This paper sets out information, i.e. extracts of relevant chapters of the Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education (the Report) released on 28 May 2015, in respect of the following subjects:

- (a) Research on early childhood education (Appendix 1)
- (b) Issues related to parents' participation (Appendix 2)
- (c) Tuition fees and miscellaneous fees charged by kindergartens, the Government's monitoring, the financial assistance available to children from needy families (Appendix 3)

2. The Education Bureau is examining the recommendations made in the Report and will further gauge views from the sector and the general public for consideration in formulating policies and specific measures as appropriate to foster quality kindergarten education in future.

Views Sought

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

Education Bureau
June 2015

(a) **Research on early childhood education**

Extract from Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education

11.2 Strategies for Local Research on Kindergarten Education

11.2.1 The Committee is of the view that currently, local research studies about KG education are limited. More research should be encouraged to help keep the sector better-informed of the latest trends in child development, children's learning needs and the development of KG education all over the world. Research could also be conducted to examine the impact of the new KG policy on KG education, particularly how the five principles of KG education (as mentioned in paragraph 3.1.9) are upheld and promoted in the sector.

11.2.2 The Committee recommends that the research topics should be policy-oriented with a focus on quality KG education. Possible topics might include –

- 11.2.2.1 transition from KG to primary school;
- 11.2.2.2 teacher professionalism;
- 11.2.2.3 children with diverse needs;
- 11.2.2.4 longitudinal studies on children's learning; and
- 11.2.2.5 effects/impacts of different modes of services (e.g., HD and WD KG services) on children.

[Paragraph 3.1.9 is also extracted below for reference :

3.1.9 The following five principles, formulated by the Committee, lay a foundation for working out various implementation strategies and measures to attain the above-mentioned objectives.

3.1.9.1 Uniqueness - KG education is a foundation stage of learning and whole person development with unique pedagogical characteristics by using a comprehensive approach which integrates care and education.

- Proposals (2000) positioned KG education as a foundation stage of learning and whole person development. The needs of KG-age children are very different from those of school-age children. The provision of education should

cover not only cognitive learning but also socialisation and a range of other non-cognitive aspects.

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses the significance of a child-centred approach to KG education. It recognises that every child has unique characteristics and learning needs, and thus the curriculum should be able to respond to the child's social, cultural, environmental and economic context¹⁸.
- The Committee is of the view that the uniqueness of KG education should be respected and the sector should uphold the values of child-centred curriculum that integrates the elements of care and education.

3.1.9.2 Equity - All children between the age of three and six should have equitable access to quality KG education.

- “Equity measures” is the most common policy goal of ECE across the OECD countries. It emphasises that ECE system should be “fair and inclusive, acting against child poverty and educational disadvantage”¹⁹. At present, the Government starts providing children with compulsory education when they turn 6 years old. Children can enjoy free primary and secondary education in public-sector schools. Although KG education is not compulsory in Hong Kong, with the implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme in the 2007/08 school year, the non-means-tested subsidy further ensures that KG education is accessible, fair and inclusive for all KG-age children. Needy families can obtain additional assistance under KCFRS to cover the part of the tuition fees which is in excess of the voucher value. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the enrolment rate here is over 100%. When compared with the data collected in different parts of the world, this enrolment rate of Hong Kong is high not only when compared to OECD average (82%), but also to other Asian countries such as Singapore (88%) and Korea (83%). The Committee considers this equitable and universal access to KG education for all children between the age of three to six should be maintained and ensured.

¹⁸ *Education for ALL: The Quality Imperative. Global Monitoring Report 2005.* (2004). Graphoprint: UNESCO, France.

¹⁹ *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care.* (2012). OECD Publishing, p.45.

3.1.9.3 Quality - Quality KG education, with professional teachers, sound regulations and appropriate funding mode, should provide for a child-centred curriculum, quality pedagogy and learning opportunities. In turn, it will ensure all-round and balanced development of children. It is also dedicated to developing respectful and engaging relationships between children and others.

- Providing universal access to KG education services without giving due attention to the quality of it does not ensure good individual and social outcomes, or effective use of financial resources. A quality-focused policy goal in KG education provides directions for the government and the community to plan resources strategically with prioritised areas. Hence, the Committee considers quality KG education vital to the well-being and future learning of children.

3.1.9.4 Diversity - Diversity in children's abilities and backgrounds has to be respected and catered for through different modes of operation, forms of support, curriculum design, learning environment, etc. so as to unfold children's full potential.

- As mentioned in Chapter 2, the KG sector in Hong Kong has long existed as a vibrant private sector to flexibly cope with parents' diverse demands and the needs of children. Like the rest of the world, Hong Kong is undergoing unprecedented changes in social, cultural, economic, political and environmental aspects, and thus school curriculum should enable children to face the changes²⁰. Stakeholders also reflected that growing diversity in children's learning needs, family and cultural backgrounds, parent's values, etc. was observed.
- The Committee is of the view that KG education should continue to respect learner diversities and help realise every child's full potential. In this connection, the KG sector should remain to be a vibrant private sector that flexibly copes with parents' diverse demands and the various needs of children.

²⁰ *Basic Education Curriculum Guide –To Sustain, Deepen and Focus on Learning to Learn (Primary 1 – 6)*. (2014). The Curriculum Development Council.

3.1.9.5 Sustainability - A coherent infrastructure to achieve the objectives of KG education has to be sustainable in the long run to maximise the benefits of KG education.

- To achieve the objectives of KG education, the provision of full and consistent support and strategic planning of resource allocation is essential. The Committee is of the view that stable and well-established groundwork can ensure the sustainable development of the KG sector, which in turn facilitates the all-round development of children.]

(b) Issues related to parents' participation**Extract from Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education****Chapter 10 Parents' Involvement and Education****10.1 The Role of Parents in Promoting Children's Learning and Development*****Current Situation***

10.1.1 Parents play a very important role in their child's early life and are their role model. Parents, being the child's primary educators at home, can be a major influence on the child's healthy development and effective learning at schools. Their support and proactive involvement with KGs help consolidate the child's learning and development during the schooling in KGs.

10.1.2 Parent education has been promoted collaboratively by different departments and bureau with foci/themes relevant to their policy perspectives. Specifically, EDB has been organising seminars for parents with children at KG age every year with a view to helping parents understand the developmental needs and the age-appropriate expectation of their children aged three to six and what quality KG education is. EDB has also published and distributed booklets to all KG parents to recommend ways to provide children with pleasurable and diversified life experience that meets their developmental needs. Furthermore, EDB provides Home-School Co-operation Grants⁴² to encourage KGs to set up Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)⁴³ and organises home-school co-operation/ parent education activities such as parent seminars, voluntary work, etc. to promote parent participation in school activities and to support their children in learning.

10.1.3 Parent education has also been promoted by Department of Health and Social Welfare Department. Department of Health's Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs) organises parent education activities under its "Parenting Programme" which aims at empowering parents by imparting knowledge and skills on child-rearing; and working in partnership with families, school and the community. Its Family Health Services run a 24-hour hotline which provides information on common issues of concern and also consultation service during office hours. Social Welfare Department,

⁴² There are three types of grants: Subsidy for PTA, Subsidy for Home-School Co-operation Activities, and Subsidy for Joint Home-School Co-operation Project.

⁴³ In the 2013/14 school year, about 30% of KGs had set up PTA.

through its “Family Life Education” programmes and services of its Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres, organises a wide range of educational and promotional programmes such as seminars, talks, groups, family activities and exhibitions, etc. to enhance family functioning.

The Stakeholders’ Views and Committee’s Deliberations

10.1.4 The Committee takes note of the views on parent education collected through focus group meetings as well as views/suggestions received from various concern groups. Stakeholders and concern groups, in general, shared that the Government should allocate more resources to strengthen parent education so as to facilitate parents in making smart choices of KGs for their children. To provide more information on KG education, the Government may consider organising KG exhibition or setting up resource centres. To facilitate children’s learning and development, there were views that key messages about age-appropriateness and children’s developmental needs should be promoted to parents. Some noted that while some parents had access to different information through EDB webpage or other channels on the Internet, a large proportion of parents did not have access to the Internet at all. They thus suggested that in addition to distributing leaflets / publications and organising talks, seminars, etc. for parents, other means of parent education should be used to reach out to more parents.

10.1.5 The Committee shares the view that good parenting requires lifelong learning of the knowledge and skills in child-rearing and nurturing the development of the child. Not only do parents need to learn how to form age-appropriate expectations for their child at the right pace with the child’s development stage so as to provide suitable support to achieve positive educational outcomes, parents also have to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the child at home and provide care for the child’s health, physical and emotional development. It is the responsibility of parents to ensure a balanced development of their child in literacy, aesthetics, physical health and social skills.

10.1.6 The Committee also considers that a close partnership and constant communication between parents and teachers are essential for the child’s learning. Parents should communicate with the teachers to understand the child’s learning at school and then provide support at home accordingly. Effective KG education requires the parents and the school to work together for the child⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ Greenwood, G. E. & Hickman, C. W. (1991). Research and practice in parent involvement: implications for teacher education, *the Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 91, No. 3, pp. 279-288.

The Committee's Recommendations

Parents' involvement

10.1.7 The Committee considers that PTA is an important bridge between parents and teachers to foster communication, understanding and mutual support in promoting the well-being of students. Building on the existing resources and support for parent education, the Committee recommends that parental partnership with KGs should be improved and further enhancement measures should be put in place through three-pronged collaborative efforts among the Government, KGs and the community.

10.1.8 Specifically, the Government, including EDB and other government departments as appropriate, may (i) further encourage KGs to set up PTAs and to offer further support to KG PTAs through organising tailor-made briefing/sharing sessions/workshops on the setting up/running of PTA for KG principals/senior teachers/executive members of individual PTAs; (ii) enhance the accessibility of reference materials and resources through different electronic means such as providing a platform for disseminating the latest development in KG education, school information and parenting skills; and for easy access to relevant electronic resources for parents, the development of e-Apps, etc.; (iii) enrich the resources in the "Parent Corner" at EDB's Central Resources Centre; and (iv) set up regional parent resource centres in the long run for providing, among others, one-stop access to various educational services/resources on parent education, children's learning and development and home-school cooperation, etc.

10.1.9 As for the KGs, they should (i) nurture a warm/inviting school atmosphere in order to enhance the sense of belonging of children, parents and teachers; (ii) encourage and facilitate parent participation in PTAs and school activities; (iii) involve parents as resources, e.g. story-telling for children at KGs; and (iv) encourage parents to get familiar with the operation of the school and learning of their child. In the long run, KGs should involve parents in the school management, such as having parent representatives in the school management committees.

10.1.10 Last but not least, the community, such as early childhood education institutes, NGOs, SSBs, and Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations, etc. may help to (i) develop parent education programmes for KGs and parents (may apply for public funding such as Quality Education Fund if necessary); (ii) conduct researches on partnership with KGs and children learning in KG; (iii) organise theme-based training courses / workshops for KG parents and teachers; and (iv) organise (district-based) Joint KG/Primary School Open Day to facilitate parents in making smart parental choices with better understanding of the characteristics of individual KGs.

Parent education

10.1.11 Having regard to the importance of good parenting on the healthy development of children, parents' misconception about "Losing at the Scratch Line" and stakeholders' concerns about preparing children to progress from KG to primary school as deliberated in Chapter 11, the Committee recommends that important messages relating to (i) "Roles and Responsibilities of Parents in Nurturing Children"; (ii) "Transition from KG to Primary – Ready children, Ready Families"; (iii) "Learning with Pleasure, Learning through Play", and (iv) "Smart Parental Choices of KG" be promulgated in parent education.

10.1.12 To address the diverse educational and social needs of parents and families in Hong Kong, the Committee considers that different strategies, apart from parent seminars/talks, should be deployed so as to reach target parents of different social-economic and cultural backgrounds. In general, mass media promotion is considered effective for reaching a wide audience of families whereas more complex and categorised information would be better received when conveying through the social/online/print media. Furthermore, resource centres or public/NGOs tend to meet the demand from parents seeking specific information relevant to their individual contexts more effectively.

(c) *Tuition fees and miscellaneous fees charged by kindergartens, the Government's monitoring, financial assistance available to children from needy families*

Extract from Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education

9.1 Transparency and Accountability in School Operation

Current Situation

9.1.1 All KGs are registered under the Education Ordinance and are required to comply with the related regulations such as requirements on staff, school premises, health and safety, etc. In addition, the Operation Manual for Pre-primary Institutions specifies requirements for operators in areas covering premises design, furniture and equipment, safety measures, health, sanitation, nutrition and diet, curriculum and activities, staffing, etc. to ensure quality service delivery. Also, KGs should formulate their curriculum according to the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (2006) which has been fully implemented in all pre-primary institutions since 2007.

9.1.2 KGs under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) are required to fulfill a set of criteria and requirements as mentioned in paragraph 2.2(b) above. They are also required to observe various financial and administrative requirements as well as instructions issued by EDB from time to time, such as those on the sale of school items and provision of paid services.

9.1.3 KGs are required to apply to EDB for collection or revision of school tuition fees. EDB will process the applications in accordance with a set of criteria such as the income and expenditure situation of the KGs, and whether the expenditure items are allowable. For collection of any other fees, such as application fee and registration fee, prior approval has to be obtained from EDB.

9.1.4 KGs may also collect charges from parents for the sale of school items such as textbooks and exercise books, school uniforms and school bag, tea and snack, stationery, etc. and provision of paid services, such as school bus services, interest classes and activities outside regular school hours. The sale of these items and services must be on a voluntary basis. While approval of the collection of such fees from EDB is not required, EDB has set rules and guidelines on the collection of such charges from parents.

9.1.5 To enhance the transparency of the operation of KGs to facilitate public scrutiny, all KGs under PEVS are required to disclose to the public their key operational details (including but not limited to staff information, school facilities, the curriculum and school finance information and any additional charges for optional activities and items) and consent to the publishing of such information in the Profile of Kindergartens and Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centres issued by EDB annually.

9.1.6 To ensure prudent use of public funds, EDB has instituted a system of regulatory measures on the financial operations of PEVS KGs, including annual review of audited accounts, conducting on-site inspections and surprise headcount inspections.

The Stakeholders' Views and Committee's Deliberations

9.1.7 Members take note of the various measures already put in place to monitor the operation of PEVS KGs, particularly in matters relating to the use of public funds and collection of fees from parents. There were views that under the future free KG education policy, the Government should consider further strengthening the requirements and guidelines on collection of additional fees or miscellaneous charges. Some opined that to further increase transparency of KG operations, EDB might prescribe a list of key fee-charging items, and require all KGs to provide the information on their school website.

9.1.8 There were views that KGs should not be allowed to collect tuition fees for offering above-standard services such as employing more teachers for teaching in smaller groups. On the other hand, some were of a different view that it would be desirable to allow KGs to provide a variety of services, which some parents welcome, having regard to the students' needs in order to maintain the diversity of the KG sector. However, EDB should exercise more stringent control on the collection of tuition fees by KGs.

The Committee's Recommendations

9.1.9 The Committee is of the view that the Government would need to step up monitoring and regulation of eligible KGs, and to put in place an effective governance framework. In particular, the governance of individual KGs should be enhanced, and EDB should vigorously vet individual KGs' proposals for revising school fees.

9.1.10 On the collection of additional charges (or the so-called miscellaneous fees) for school items or trading activities, the Committee considers that EDB should strengthen its monitoring role to ensure KGs' compliance with the relevant guidelines and regulations. In this regard, EDB

should set out clearer guidelines on trading activities. In addition, EDB should explore ways to further strengthen the monitoring and control over the use of surplus in KGs. To enhance the transparency of KG operations, EDB should encourage KGs to provide key operational information on their school websites. EDB should also consider prescribing the key information or items that all eligible KGs would be required to disclose to the public, such as the types of fees and the amounts collected by KGs, including the miscellaneous charges.

9.1.11 To ensure that KGs have well-established mechanism in handling various administrative matters such as school finance and budgeting, procurement, trading operation, staffing and appointment matters, remuneration package, student admission, use of funds, surplus and reserves, etc., comprehensive administrative guidelines and operation manual under the future free KG education policy would need to be drawn up for compliance by eligible KGs.

8.1 Additional Support for Kindergarten Students from Needy Families

Current Situation

8.1.1 The Government's student finance policy is to ensure that no student would be denied access to education due to lack of financial means. Apart from the non-means-tested fee subsidy provided under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS)²⁶, KG students from needy families can apply for fee remission under the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme (KCFRS)²⁷. Eligible applicants who pass the means test could receive fee remission²⁸ by subsidy level of 100%, 75% or 50%²⁹. The level of subsidy mainly depends on the applicants' gross annual household income and the number of family members. Before the 2011/12 school year, applicants were required to pass the social needs assessment apart from the means test for fee remission for children attending WD classes in PEVS KGs. To enhance the accessibility of families having passed the means test to WD KG education, such assessment has been removed. Besides, meal

²⁶ An account of PEVS is in Chapter 2.2(b).

²⁷ An account of KCFRS is in Chapter 2.2.

²⁸ With a view to providing further assistance to needy families and broadening their choice in respect of KG education, approval was given by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in February 2014 for the fee remission ceilings under the KCFRS to be lifted from the weighted average to the 75th percentile of the school fees of KGs under PEVS. The fee remission ceilings for HD and WD places are \$26,500 and \$40,500 respectively in the 2014/15 school year, representing an increase of about 24% and 17% as compared to \$21,300 and \$34,500 in the 2013/14 school year.

²⁹ In the 2013/14 school year, 36 699 KG students benefited from KCFRS, with 23 692, 2 715 and 10 292 students receiving fee remission by subsidy level of 100%, 75% and 50% respectively.

allowance³⁰ is provided for students studying WD KG class.

8.1.2 For children from families receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), they can receive grants under CSSA, which cover school fees and meal charges. A flat-rate grant³¹ is also available under CSSA to cover school-related expenses (e.g. books, stationery and school uniforms) for KG students.

The Stakeholders' Views and Committee's Deliberations

8.1.3 There were views that the thresholds for fee remission should be further relaxed so that more students can benefit from it. In this regard, the Committee understands that all the nine existing means-tested financial assistance schemes for students from pre-primary to post-secondary levels are subject to the same means test mechanism. The Committee also understands that a review on the current means test mechanism has been conducted and the recommendation of relaxation of the threshold for full level of assistance was approved by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in May 2011. The Committee appreciates that with the relaxation, the number of KG beneficiaries has substantially increased from 25 057 in the 2010/11 school year to 36 699 in the 2013/14 school year, representing an increase of 46%. The percentage of KG students who receive full remission among the total beneficiaries under KCFRS has also significantly increased from 52% in 2010/11 to around 65% in the 2013/14 school year. In the light of the above, the general view was that the existing thresholds should be maintained.

8.1.4 There were views that apart from fee remission under KCFRS, additional financial support should be provided for needy families. In this connection, the Committee understands that apart from school fees, it is a common practice for KGs to charge students for school items (such as textbooks, exercise books, school uniforms, school bags, tea and snacks) and paid services (such as school bus services and interest classes), which parents may choose to purchase on a voluntary basis. The amount of such charges varies among KGs and could range from several hundred to several thousand dollars a year. There was a suggestion that student travel subsidy and school textbook assistance be provided for needy KG students. In this connection, some members were of the view that parents should be encouraged to choose schools in their neighbourhood for their children so as to minimise the travelling time for small kids. As such, providing travel subsidy to KG students might not be appropriate. As for textbook assistance, some

³⁰ The maximum meal allowance (WD KG class only) is \$480 per student per month for the 2014/15 school year.

³¹ The amount is \$3,425 and \$3,600 for the 2014/15 school year and 2015/16 school year respectively.

members opined that KG education should emphasise children's learning through play, doing and sensory stimulation and should avoid over-reliance on textbooks; a grant specifically provided for textbooks at KG level was therefore not advisable.

The Committee's Recommendations

8.1.5 Upon the introduction of the future KG education policy which shall cover the basic provision for HD KG places and provide additional support for WD and LWD services, most HD KG services will be free while WD or LWD programmes will become more affordable. However, some KGs may still need to charge tuition fees for extra rental expenses on top of the rental subsidy, or to cover the expenses arising from above-standard services. To ensure that no child would be deprived of the opportunity to receive quality KG education due to lack of financial means, the Committee recommends that the existing KCFRS be maintained to provide additional financial assistance for children from needy families.

8.1.6 The Committee also recommends that the Government should provide an additional grant for supporting needy families (i.e. those who can pass the means test) to pay for the expenditure incurred from the learning or schooling of the students such as for purchase of books and school uniforms, etc. As for the grant level, reference may be made to similar grant available under CSSA.