

Panel on Education

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

Meeting on 4 July 2015

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

The Committee on Free Kindergarten Education ("the KG Committee") appointed by the Education Bureau ("EDB") and headed by Dr Moses CHENG published its report ("the Report") on 28 May 2015. The Subcommittee held a meeting comprising four sessions on 4 July 2015 to receive public views on the Report. A total of 121 organizations/individuals attended the meeting. The Subcommittee also received 52 written submissions.

Scope of free kindergarten ("KG") education

2. According to the KG Committee, existing evidence precludes drawing conclusions that whole-day ("WD") KG programmes are more favourable to young children than half-day ("HD") programmes. The Committee shares the view that it is the quality of the KG programmes, rather than the duration, that determines whether children can benefit from them. Taking into consideration the development needs of children and overseas practices, the KG Committee has recommended that government subsidy should cover HD KG service as the basic provision for all eligible children aged three to six.

3. In recognition of the much needed services provided by WD and long whole-day ("LWD") KGs, the KG Committee considers that appropriate and additional resources should be provided to KGs offering these services. Nevertheless, it has highlighted the need to distinguish between the availability of services (i.e. provision of places) and the subsidy provided (i.e. taxpayers' money), and has proposed to provide an additional subsidy at 25% to 30% of the basic funding to WD/LWD KGs. This will make WD/LWD KG services more accessible to parents in need of these services and at a more affordable cost. In view of the extra hours of LWD KG service, the KG Committee has recommended offering them additional resources to employ one to three headcounts on top of the

additional subsidy for WD KG service. It is the wish of the KG Committee that if its recommendations are implemented, about 60% of KG students attending local non-profit making KGs will not need to pay school fee.

- (a) Some deputations are concerned that if in future, only 60% of KG students attending local non-profit making KGs will not need to pay school fee, the objective of providing 15 years of free education can hardly be achieved.
- (b) Given that WD/LWD KGs have been an integral part of the KG sector providing vital services to many families with dual working parents, their roles should be duly recognized. For the benefit of children, the Administration should seriously consider the provision of "Educare" in the implementation of free KG education, instead of maintaining the dichotomy between "education" and "care" services currently administered by EDB and the Labour and Welfare Bureau respectively. There is wide support among the deputations that in addition to HD services, WD/LWD KG services should be fully subsidized. Some deputations call on the Administration to set a timetable for the implementation of fully subsidized KG education.
- (c) The provision of full subsidy for WD/LWD KG services will enable more women to join the workforce, which is in line with the Government's population policy to unleash the potential of the local labour force.
- (d) Quite a number of deputations point out that an additional subsidy of 25% to 30% of the basic funding cannot provide sufficient incentive to KGs for increasing the provision of WD/LWD places. Some deputations also question the basis for setting the additional subsidy at this level. Regarding the proposal to provide an additional grant to enable an LWD KG to employ one to three headcounts, some deputations consider that the additional manpower should be teaching staff.
- (e) Some deputations are of the view that the Administration should consider extending the provision of free education to pre-nursery services which cater for children between two to three years of age. There is also a view that to provide

parents with real choices, eligible KGs under the future KG education policy should not be confined to non-profit making KGs.

- (f) One deputation has expressed the view that the KG Committee's recommendations are practicable and sustainable. They are also consistent with international trends as not all jurisdictions provide fully subsidized KG education for their children. It is reasonable for free KG education to cover HD service as the basic provision while the extra costs for WD/LWD services are to be shared by the Government and parents.

Funding arrangements

Mode of funding

4. The KG Committee has recommended that to provide greater flexibility, funding for individual KGs will be provided partly on a per student basis (i.e. unit cost approach) and partly on a school-specific basis to cater for the special circumstances of the KGs or the students.

- (a) In the opinion of some deputations, this funding approach will have similar drawbacks of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. As funding will be provided on a per capita basis, there will be intense competition among KGs to enroll students, resulting in a commercialized and market-driven KG sector.
- (b) All KGs, irrespective of their scale, need to incur certain baseline expenditure. The proposed per capita subsidy is tilted in favour of large KGs. KGs of a smaller scale will be disadvantaged in terms of the subsidy received. The resource gap between large and small KGs will be aggravated.

Issues related to Lump Sum Grant ("LSG")

5. The KG Committee has commissioned a consultancy study on KG staff salary and related issues. On the funding arrangement for staff salary, the consultant is of the view that while the provision of funding in the form of a block grant will allow flexibility, clear guidelines should be

provided for KGs to ensure the funding for staff salary will be used properly for the designated purposes.

- (a) Having regard to the implementation experience of LSG in the social welfare sector, there is strong objection to the adoption of a similar funding arrangement for the KG sector. As the amount of LSG related to personal emolument is recommended to be referenced to the mid-point salaries of the respective ranks of the staff, KGs may not have sufficient funding to meet expenses on staff salaries and will be reluctant to employ experienced teachers. This will have a negative impact on the quality of KG education.
- (b) Some deputations are aware that as recommended by the KG Committee, the Government should explore ways to address the KG sector's concern over insufficient funding to meet the salary expenses of KGs and consider providing a safety net under which KGs may apply for additional funding on a case-by-case basis. However, they are concerned that no further details on the "safety net" are available for consideration.
- (c) Some deputations consider that the Government should provide full reimbursement to KGs for expenses on teachers' salary.

Salary for KG staff

6. Instead of recommending a mandatory salary scale for compliance by KGs, the KG Committee has recommended that the Government should set a salary range for each of the teaching positions and core supporting staff positions for reference of KGs.

- (a) Many deputations are gravely concerned that in the absence of a mandatory salary scale, the seniority or years of service of KG teachers will not be recognized in their remuneration, in particular when the teachers changed employment from one KG to another. According to some KG teachers, their salaries are not commensurate with their qualifications and level of responsibilities.

- (b) Many deputations are of the view that a mandatory salary scale not only provides equitable remuneration for KG teachers, but is also vital for maintaining a stable teaching force as well as attracting and retaining talents. They opine that the salary-related practices of aided primary and secondary schools should be adopted for the KG sector.
- (c) Noting that the proposed salary range for each of the teaching and supporting staff positions are set at the 2014 price level, there is a view that the Administration should suitably adjust the reference salary ranges according to changes in price level, if it will take some time before the KG education policy can come into operation.

Staff structure and establishment

7. The KG Committee recognizes that KGs should offer a career ladder for teachers. The staff structure of a typical KG should consist of staff at management level, teaching and supporting staff. A vice-principal may be needed for KGs with an enrolment of more than 300 HD students. The KG Committee also proposes that, as a general guide, KGs with about 600 HD students may have up to five senior teachers while very small scale KGs may not have any senior teachers. For a KG with an enrolment of more than 300 HD students, the KG Committee also proposes that there should be at least one clerk.

- (a) Quite a number of deputations does not subscribe to the idea of determining the staff structure of KGs solely on the basis of their enrolment size, as certain administrative and teaching duties are common to all KGs irrespective of their scale. They are concerned that small-scale KGs will be particularly disadvantaged in terms of teaching and non-teaching support.
- (b) Apart from the number of students admitted, other factors such as the operating costs and servicing hours of KGs should be taken into consideration when determining the staff structure of KGs.

8. To support the delivery of quality KG education, the KG Committee sees a need to increase the teaching manpower to bring about

an improved teacher-to-pupil ("TP") ratio from the existing 1:15 to no worse than 1:12.

- (a) While welcoming the improved TP ratio, some deputations consider that WD/LWD KGs should be entitled to a further improved TP ratio of 1:10 in order to relieve teachers' workload and enhance the quality of education.
- (b) Some deputations have urged that apart from the TP ratio, reference should also be made to the class-to-teacher ratio when computing the teaching staff establishment of KGs. There are suggestions to set the class-to-teacher ratios for HD, WD and LWD KGs at 1:1.25, 1:1.3 and 1:1.4 respectively. In this way, additional manpower resources will be provided to create capacity for KG teachers to undertake other class-related duties such as curriculum development and lesson preparation.
- (c) According to some deputations, WD/LWD KGs have encountered high turnover rates and difficulties in retaining experienced teachers. To improve the career prospect of KG teachers, some deputations consider that the basic staff establishment of each KG should comprise a principal, a vice-principal, senior teachers and class teachers irrespective of the operating scale.
- (d) Some deputations have given views on strengthening the supporting staff for KGs. For example, noting that the KG Committee has recommended the ratio of one janitor staff for about 50 to 60 HD KG students, they consider that there should be one janitor staff for every 25 to 30 WD/LWD KG students in view of the long servicing hours and the operational needs of WD/LWD KGs.

Teacher professionalism

9. The KG Committee is of the view that a continuous professional development ("CPD") policy with appropriate targets could be developed for the KG sector. The KG Committee has recommended a soft target of around 150 CPD hours for every three years for KG teachers and principals. The KG Committee has also recommended that the

Government should aim at raising the entry qualification requirements of KG teachers to degree level.

- (a) According to the deputations, in view of the heavy workload of KG teachers during school hours and the relatively lean staff establishment at KGs, the Government should provide additional resources to create capacity for KG teachers to attend CPD trainings, such as providing subsidy for hiring of substitute teachers.
- (b) There is a view that the Administration should provide free CPD training programmes to serving KG teachers.
- (c) Some deputations point out that currently, some 30% of KG teachers have already obtained degree qualifications. To raise the quality of KG education, it is necessary for the Government to work out a timetable in consultation with stakeholders for upgrading the professional qualifications of KG teachers to degree level.

Catering for student diversity

Support for students with special needs

10. Currently, the Administration has been providing various services for children with development problems through the collaborative efforts of EDB, Department of Health, Hospital Authority and Social Welfare Department. The KG Committee considers that support for KG students with special needs should be enhanced. It has also recommended that a cross bureau/department platform should be set up to advise on initiatives to cater for KG children with special needs.

11. The KG Committee is aware that the Government is proactively seeking suitable sites for providing rehabilitation services. It has recommended that in the short- and medium- term, due resources should be allocated to Parents/Relatives Resource Centres to further support those disabled children on the waiting list of subvented pre-school rehabilitation services and their parents/carers. According to the KG Committee, it is pleased to note that the Government will try out a new service mode whereby operators of subvented pre-school rehabilitation services will provide on-site rehabilitation services to children studying in

KGs or Kindergarten-cum-child care centres ("KG-cum-CCCs") under a scheme supported by the Lotteries Fund.

- (a) In the view of some deputations, it is necessary to extend the policy on integrated education to the KG sector so as to ensure that the five basic principles, namely early identification, early intervention, whole school approach, home-school cooperation and cross-sector collaboration, can be properly implemented.
- (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. There is a suggestion that the Administration should consider providing a subsidy, such as through the Community Care Fund, to enable children from needy families to acquire assessment services from non-government organizations.
- (c) To shorten the waiting time for pre-school rehabilitation services, there is a suggestion to set a service pledge to limit the waiting time to within six months. Some deputations consider that the Administration should increase the quota of integrated programme ("IP") in KG-cum-CCCs and extend IP to KGs to strengthen services for children with special needs.
- (d) The Administration is urged to provide more in-service training programmes for KG teachers to enhance their capacity in identifying and catering for students with special needs. Some deputations share the view that local universities and higher education institutions should provide more structured courses on supporting children with special needs.
- (e) Deputations concur with the need to strengthen support for children with special needs attending KGs. There are suggestions that additional resources should be provided to KGs which have admitted six or more children with special needs, EDB should establish a multi-disciplinary team comprising various allied health professionals to visit KGs regularly to offer early identification, assessment and counseling services.

- (f) A number of deputations consider it necessary for the Administration to provide more details about the provision of on-site rehabilitation services, including the eligibility criteria, service output and service targets.

Support for Non-Chinese Speaking ("NCS") students

12. The KG Committee has recommended that additional assistance, in the form of a grant comparable to the salary of a KG teacher, should be provided for KGs admitting a cluster of NCS students (say eight students or more) to enable them to enhance support for these students. The KG Committee has also recommended that school-based professional support services should be strengthened to help KGs build up the expertise in facilitating NCS students' learning of the Chinese language for a smooth transition to primary schools.

- (a) While welcoming the KG Committee's suggestion to provide additional resources, there is a view that the proposed grant and school-based support should not be limited to KGs with eight or more NCS students. They should also be available for all KGs which have admitted NCS students for purposes such as providing translation or hiring teaching assistants.
- (b) According to some deputations, many KGs are reluctant to admit ethnic minority and NCS students. As a result, NCS students tend to cluster in certain KGs amounting to *de facto* racial segregation. There is concern about continuing to allow KGs to admit students at their own discretion and according to their admission mechanism.
- (c) There are suggestions that EDB should provide clear guiding principles on KG admission including procedures, criteria and language requirements in order to ensure non-discriminatory, open and just admission arrangements.
- (d) Some deputations are concerned that the KG Committee has not mentioned any need to design a "Chinese as a Second Language curriculum" for pre-primary NCS students. In their view, this is important for enabling NCS students to effectively learn Chinese at an early age and for facilitating a smooth transition between KG and primary school education.

- (e) To ensure equal access to information, EDB has been urged not to provide information in Chinese only. For example, exemplars on Learning and Teaching Activities, Quality Children Books Recommended by Kindergartens etc. are only available in Chinese. Much of the crucial information such as Curriculum Details and School Characteristics in the Profile of KGs and KG-cum-CCCs is in Chinese only.
- (f) The Administration should promote the district-based programmes organised in collaboration with non-government organizations for NCS children aged three to nine. Furthermore, the on-site support for KGs with NCS students through the "University-School Support Programme" should be enhanced.

Support for students from needy families

13. The KG Committee considers that government subsidy should fund KG education at a level which enables KGs to provide quality education. The basic provision should cover school fees related to the expenses directly attributable to students' learning and school operation. Other above-standard services should be borne by parents. To ensure that no student will be denied access to education due to lack of financial means, the KG Committee is of the view that the existing Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme ("KCFRS") should be maintained to provide financial assistance for children from needy families. It also has recommended that the Government should provide an additional grant for supporting needy families to pay for the expenditure incurred from the learning or schooling such as for purchase of books and school uniforms, etc.

- (a) Some deputations suggest that the Administration should review the eligibility criteria for KCFRS and provide full subsidy to KG students from low income families to defray tuition fees even if they opt for WD/LWD KG services.
- (b) As reflected by some parents, some KGs have charged exorbitant fees for items such as stationery and snacks. Some deputations consider that textbook subsidies should be provided to relieve the financial burden of parents.

Premises-related issues and longer-term provision of KG premises

14. The KG Committee has commissioned consultancy studies on accommodation requirements and rental related issues of KG. It has recommended that a rental subsidy should be provided in the form of a school-specific grant for all eligible KGs to lessen the KGs' rental-related financial burden. The ceiling may be set with reference to the rentals of comparable KGs operating in premises situated in public housing estates. KGs should be allowed to charge a fee to be approved by EDB in case the actual amount of rental exceeds the government subsidy.

15. From the planning angle, the KG Committee has recommended that the existing planning standards for the provision of KGs (i.e. 730 HD and 250 WD places for every 1 000 children in the age group of three to under six) should be revised progressively to 500 HD and 500 WD places for every 1 000 children in the aforesaid age group.

- (a) Quite a number of deputations agree that the Administration should take appropriate measures to increase the supply of government-owned KG premises in order to maintain a stable supply of quality KG premises. This will obviate the need for KGs to rent expensive private premises and collect additional fees from parents to defray rental expenses.
- (b) There are views that while the Administration should take up the responsibility of planning for the provision of KG premises, in the interim, transitional measures such as providing KGs in commercial premises with full rental subsidy or relocating KGs should be explored.
- (c) Some deputations however caution that the provision of rental subsidy by the Government to KGs may have the unintended effect of driving up the rental levels of KG premises. They consider that parents should bear the financial burden to a certain extent if they opt for KGs operating in premises with rental exceeding government subsidies. They urge for careful consideration on the implementation of the rental subsidy.
- (d) The deputations generally agree that the existing planning standards should be progressively increased to 500 WD and 500 HD places for every 1 000 children between three to six

years of age, and consider that a clear timetable should be set to achieve these targets.

School governance

16. The KG Committee is of the view that with the substantial increase in government funding under the future KG education policy, the governance structure of KGs will need to be strengthened with a well-established structure or system in place. The KG Committee also considers it necessary for each KG to have a management committee with well-defined roles and responsibilities. To ensure that KGs have a well-established mechanism in handling various administrative matters such as school finance and budgeting, staffing and appointment matters, student admission, etc, the KG Committee has recommended drawing up comprehensive administrative guidelines and operation manuals under the future KG education policy for compliance by eligible KGs.

- (a) There is concern that the guidelines and manuals should not affect the flexibility and diversity of KGs. The KG sector should also be thoroughly consulted.
- (b) Some deputations express support for enhancing parents' roles in school governance. There is a suggestion that for KGs with NCS students, parents from different ethnic diversities should be included on their management committees.

Parents' involvement and education

17. The KG Committee has recommended that parent partnership with KGs should be improved and further enhancement measures should be in place through three-pronged collaborative efforts among the Government, KGs and the community. It also considers that different strategies, apart from parent seminar/talks, should be deployed so as to reach target parents of different social-economic and cultural backgrounds.

- (a) The deputations express support for promoting parents' education to enhance their awareness and understanding of child development.

- (b) There is a suggestion that the Administration should set up a Parents/Relatives Resource Centre in each district to provide more direct service to parents.

Research on early childhood education

18. The KG Committee is of the view that currently, local research studies about KG education are limited. More local research studies about KG education should be encouraged to help keep the KG sector better-informed of the latest trends in child development, children's learning needs and the development of KG education worldwide.

- (a) Many deputations consider it unsatisfactory that the KG Committee has made a lot of reference to overseas practices while overlooking local circumstances. The lack of systematic and evidence-based local research is also of concern.
- (b) There is a view that with its unique social, economic and political context, Hong Kong needs to actively encourage the academia and the early childhood sector to conduct local researches that meet the needs of the community.

Implementation

19. As recommended by the KG Committee, the Government should appoint a Steering Committee to oversee the implementation of the future KG education policy.

- (a) The deputations urge for the early appointment of the Steering Committee.
- (b) There are suggestions that the Steering Committee should be established on a permanent basis and comprise representatives from different stakeholders of early childhood education, professionals from various disciplines and government officials.

20. 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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
8 October 2015