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To: Education Panel, LegCo

Submission on the issue of TSA

We think the current hot debate about TSA (which is a part of the BCA) can be seen positively as an opportunity for revisiting our educational vision set out in the curriculum reform policy (2000). That policy was widely discussed before adoption. But, it has been quite a long time since then. It is time to review whether TSA, a measure brought about by the policy, is achieving the policy goal, or has actually undergone some sort of mutation over the years. At the special meeting on 29th Nov, we wish to present what we have observed, and identify certain technical and social aspects that may have made TSA currently so controversial. We think it is highly necessary that such aspects be studied in the TSA review.

First of all the acute problematic situation cannot be denied. It is really important now to question why a basic competence test can mutate into a seemingly evil and oppressive examination, with its original meaning twisted. The EDB points out that many of the so-called "difficult" questions are actually from the supplementary exercises published by the press and not the real questions from the TSA, and that TSA relates to the testing of basic competence only and no training would be needed as long as the teaching and learning goes well. However, parents also point out the reality they experienced and blame that TSA become one of the major burdens creating pressure on their children.

Actually, there have already been similar voices of concern from the professional community of education years ago, way before this outburst of resistance from parents. In the past years, educational research repeatedly questioned that the TSA had been moving away from its original motive. TSA has gradually become longer and more difficult, and it has also been used to monitor how well the overall teaching and learning is going on in schools. Though claimed as low-stake, TSA has resulted in excessive drilling (especially in primary schools) which has been shown by evidence ranging from anecdotal to research-based (e.g. survey by various organizations).

Apart from the burden or even stress posed upon the innocent young kids, excessive drilling is a sign of miseducation in that it conveys to students a disappointing message about learning and helps develop a very poor habit of studying starting at elementary levels of education. This is surely against what has been intended in the educational reform (2000). If the situation continues and the wrong message persists, TSA is doing more evil than good even if it brings the satisfactory test results which seem to suggest to those at management levels that basic competency is safeguarded.

TSA is one part of "Basic Competency Assessment" (BCA). According to "Learning for Life, Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong" (by Education Commission, September 2000), BCA has two desirable objectives, to: "(a) enable teachers and parents to understand students' learning needs and problems so as to facilitate timely assistance ... and (b) provide the Government and school management with information on schools' standards in key learning areas so that the Government will be able to provide support to those schools in need of assistance, and to monitor the effectiveness of education policies." (EC, 2000, Para 8.2.30)

So it is important in the review to question whether each of these two objectives has really been achieved. Noteworthy is the obsession that some stake-holders (particularly the management board members of some school organization bodies, School Management Board members of some schools, and some principals) have towards the results of TSA as way for managing schools, and more disappointing is that many of such stake-holders often reduce the results into a percentage figure (the so-called percentage achieving Basic Competency) on the three core subjects. What neglected or even not passed down to teachers, are the

abundant results concerning educational objectives and common errors of items, which are actually beneficial information to teachers and students. And ironically, when the percentage achieving Basic Competency is excluded from the school report since 2014, the listing of the percentage of correct responses among students to each and every item (with no reference to the varying difficulty measure of the item) can make the report even more misleading and discouraging.

The other part of BCA, which is supposed to be directly related to the needs of teachers and students, namely the 'online student assessment' has not been continuously expanded and improved over the years. The online system allows teachers and students to do their assessment on demand to address their needs. Expansion of the items and the function of 'adaptive testing' have been suggested (in which later items will be selected from the item bank according to the user's current level of performance as indicated by his or her responses to the earlier items), but has not really got off the ground. So in looking back at the two objectives (a) and (b) mentioned above, the implementation tend to lean towards the management of people rather than to serve the students and their teachers in the process of learning and teaching.

While the present debate is mostly about TSA, we suggest we should not lose our focus on BCA of which TSA is only a part. On the same token, while we review whether BCA has achieved the objectives of (a) and (b), we also need to review whether the objectives have successfully laid out the right way for achieving the goal of the whole educational reform of "Learning for Life, Learning through Life". There is also a need to reflect on the managerial mindset that has caused such leaning towards more and more monitoring devices in education that might have crowded out the original intention of cultivating people's own quest for self improvement and excellence. While the name of TSA brings the association of it to system-wide assessment, yet whether it is actually assessing the system or assessing the individual schools or learners is also debatable.

The review should also cover a number of incompleteness in the implementation of BCA. (1) Putting aside the current dispute on whether some TSA test items are too difficult or not, it is a disappointing fact that the descriptors for Basic Competency are still in "Trial Version" of the official documents (e.g. in the case of primary mathematics) after a decade of implementation. Surely, they need to be settled, or refined to reflect clearly what "basic competency" means, and their relevance to learning and teaching as well as the applicability of the descriptors to assessment. (2) BCA is introduced at the time shortly after the abolishment of HKAT, and soon after the implementation of the BCA, the new secondary school place allocation mechanism is announced (including the submission of school-based assessment results and the moderation by the pre-secondary test). But the fact that the different changes were announced at different times may have led to a lot of confusion about the relation between them. The purposes of the different tests should be clearly contrasted and distinguished. Besides, the timing of the different tests should also be reconsidered holistically.

Certainly, there are many other problematic areas. This short statement for the current submission cannot elaborate further. To reiterate, TSA as part of a more general policy measure of BCA has to be kept on the original track as it was proposed along with the education reform. In the middle of ample evidence suggesting the distortion of its original purposes, and before any actions (scrapping or, on the other hand, allowing any add-on purpose), a comprehension review is called for. Policy and ideals are not enough; side-effects are inevitable, not to mention the particular social circumstances we have in Hong Kong (e.g. the overwhelming concern of parents about their children's academic performance, the insecure status of some schools and so on). The participation and open deliberation of different stake holders on the basis of data and rational analysis is essential. Hopefully, we can elaborate also on this last point in our oral presentation.

The views in this submission represent the views of the authors in personal capacity, and NOT the Faculty of Education of The University of Hong Kong. (THE END)