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Panel on Welfare Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 13 September 2021**

Support services for students with hearing impairment

Purpose

This paper provides background information and gives an account of the past discussions of Members on the support services for students with hearing impairment.

Background

Identification and assessment

2. To facilitate early identification of children with hearing impairment, the Hospital Authority ("HA") will conduct neonatal hearing screening to babies born in public hospitals while the Maternal and Child Health Centres of the Department of Health ("DH") will provide Otoacoustic Emissions hearing test to newborn babies who have not been screened in their birthing hospital. Babies suspected to have hearing impairment will be referred to specialists for further assessment and follow-up. In addition, in respect of children under 12 years of age who are suspected to have developmental problems, the Child Assessment Service of DH will provide them with assessment (including hearing assessment) and refer them to appropriate units for support services including treatment, rehabilitation, special education, etc. As regards children studying at schools, Student Health Service of DH provides, among others, hearing screening¹ for enrolled students at student health service centres.

¹ Hearing screening is routinely conducted for all primary one and secondary two students; students attending Student Health Service for the first time; and students who have missed the screening opportunities in primary one and secondary two. Other students who have hearing concerns may also request hearing screening during annual health assessments.

Learning support

3. Under the "dual-track" approach, the Education Bureau ("EDB") would, subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and the consent of parents, refer students with severe or profound hearing impairment or those who cannot construct knowledge because of inadequate speech abilities (i.e. those students who may need to use sign language in communication and learning) to the special school for children with hearing impairment ("HI School") to receive intensive support services.² As at September 2020, there are 63 students with hearing impairment in one HI School in the 2020-2021 school year. Other students with hearing impairment would attend ordinary schools. In the 2020-2021 school year, there are around 380 and 270 students with hearing impairment in public sector ordinary primary schools and secondary schools respectively.

4. Professional officers of EDB visit ordinary schools to render school-based support and advice to address the needs of students with hearing impairment in areas of auditory, communication, learning, psychosocial and use of hearing devices, as well as introduce related resources, recommend appropriate support strategies, and assist schools to implement school-based support programmes to facilitate students' integration into school life. Depending on the needs of individual students with hearing impairment, schools may apply for the Top-up Fund³ to procure the wireless transmission system for them in order to enhance their listening and communication effectiveness. Starting from April 2019, instead of outsourcing the hearing aid fitting services, EDB has deployed educational audiologists to provide the services free of charge for students with hearing impairment direct if needed, and give professional advice and guidance to parents so that they can help their children with hearing impairment use the hearing aids effectively, and promote their children's learning effectiveness and adaptation. If students with hearing impairment in ordinary schools display persistent difficulties in adaptation, learning or communication after provision of school-based support, they will be arranged to receive the "Enhanced Support Service for Students with Hearing Impairment".⁴ EDB has also developed

² HI School provides primary one to secondary six education services for students with severe or profound hearing impairment, so as to help them overcome their hearing impairment and develop their potentials.

³ The Top-up Fund is an additional resource provided by EDB to schools for procuring assistive equipment and facilities like special furniture or equipment and carrying out minor conversion works according to the needs of students with disabilities.

⁴ Under "Enhanced Support Service for Students with Hearing Impairment", resource teachers provide guidance to students with hearing impairment and share experience and teaching strategies with their teachers in ordinary schools to enhance the students' speech, language, communication and social skills and increase the effectiveness in learning and communication for better adaptation to school life; and equip parents with the required

various resource packages, information leaflets and guidelines to provide teachers and parents with knowledge, strategies and skills in supporting students or children with hearing impairment.

5. EDB has been working with the Working Group on Promoting Sign Language of the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee to promote sign language. With the support from EDB, HI School has proactively implemented various projects of sign-assisted instruction in recent years to continuously integrate and develop new sign vocabularies needed in teaching for the teachers to cope with the curriculum requirements. If ordinary schools opt to use sign language in providing support for students with hearing impairment in need, schools could also utilize the additional resources such as Learning Support Grant⁵ and other school resources to employ teaching assistants who know sign language to assist students with hearing impairment in learning. As regards post-secondary educational institutions, some institutions provide students with hearing impairment with professional sign language interpretation service, as well as other support measures such as Frequency Modulation system, teaching accommodations, special examination arrangements, etc.

Medical support

6. HA has a professional team comprising medical specialists, audiologists, speech therapists, nursing staff, etc. to provide screening, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation services for children with hearing impairment. The Audiology Centre provides patients of different age groups with audiological services, including hearing assessments and counselling, whereas the Speech Therapy Department provides speech therapy service for pre-school children with hearing impairment where necessary. Besides, HA has been performing cochlear implant surgeries for clinically eligible patients with hearing impairment since 1991. For children confirmed to be suffering from profound hearing impairment, HA will assess whether cochlear implant⁶ will further improve their hearing

knowledge, skills and strategies in supporting their children with hearing impairment more effectively.

⁵ Learning Support Grant is provided to schools according to the number of students with special educational needs and academic low achievers (applicable to primary schools) enrolled in the school and the tier of support the students require. Schools may deploy the grant flexibly to provide various kinds of support services for students.

⁶ Cochlear implant is made up of an implant and an external speech processor. Under normal circumstances, the implant can last for lifetime. The current supplier of cochlear implants of HA provides ten-year warranty for occasional malfunctioning of the implant. Within the warranty period, the supplier is responsible for repair and maintenance of the implant. In case the implant malfunctions after expiry of the warranty, since the implant has to be replaced together with the external speech processor, HA will provide the clinically eligible patients with a full set of cochlear implant at standard fees and charges.

ability. If assessment results are affirmative and consents are obtained from their patients or guardians, HA will perform cochlear implant surgeries for them.

Rehabilitation services

7. At present, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") provides pre-school rehabilitation services for children from birth to six years old who are assessed as having hearing impairment, including the On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services,⁷ early education and training centres ("EETCs"),⁸ special child care centres ("SCCCs"),⁹ Integrated Programme in Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centres¹⁰ and Training Subsidy Programme for Children on the Waiting List of Subvented Pre-School Rehabilitation Services.¹¹ Apart from normal rehabilitation services, EETCs and SCCC specially set up for children with hearing impairment provide more intensive aural, pronunciation and language training to assist children with hearing impairment to make use of their residual hearing to communicate in oral language in their early development stage.

Deliberations of Members

8. Issues relating to the support services for students with hearing impairment were discussed at a number of meetings of the Subcommittee on Integrated Education formed under the Panel on Education in the Fifth Legislative Council ("LegCo") and the Subcommittee on Children's Rights formed under the House Committee in the Sixth LegCo. The major deliberations and concerns of

⁷ SWD launched the Pilot Scheme on On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services from November 2015 to provide on-site pre-school rehabilitation services for children with special needs in kindergartens or kindergarten-cum-child care centres through inter-disciplinary service teams coordinated by non-governmental organizations, with a view to enabling pre-school children with special needs to receive necessary training early in their prime learning period. The Pilot Scheme has been regularized since October 2018, providing over 8 000 service places in the 2020-2021 school year. The Administration plans to further increase the number of service places to 10 000 by the 2022-2023 school year.

⁸ EETCs provide early intervention programmes for children aged from birth to six assessed to have mild to moderate disabilities with emphasis on the caring and training role of children's families.

⁹ SCCC provide special training and care for children aged from two to six assessed to have moderate to severe disabilities to facilitate their growth and development.

¹⁰ The Programme provides training for children aged from two to six assessed to have mild disabilities with emphasis on facilitating their integration into mainstream education.

¹¹ The Training Subsidy was launched by the Community Care Fund in December 2011 with a view to enabling children from low-income families in need of rehabilitation services to acquire self-financing services run by Recognized Service Providers to facilitate their learning and development while waiting for subvented pre-school rehabilitation services. SWD has regularized the programme from October 2014.

Members are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Provision of assistive hearing devices

9. Taking the view that the free hearing aids provided by EDB could not meet the specific needs of some children, Members suggested that the Administration should provide children the option of using the hearing aids provided by EDB or purchasing suitable hearing aids from a list of approved suppliers with government subsidy or vouchers.

10. According to the Administration, the current arrangement for the provision of hearing aids by the Government was in the best interest of students with hearing impairment and their parents. The practice eliminated parents' inconvenience in choosing hearing aids everywhere and the risk of purchasing overpriced hearing aids, and allowed EDB more effective monitoring of the quality of hearing aids and related services. Nevertheless, EDB would continue to review the specifications of the hearing aids, taking into account the feedback from stakeholders.

11. There was a view that as the repair and replacement of external speech processor was costly after the warranty period, subsidies should be provided to relieve the financial burden of students with hearing impairment from low-income families. According to the Administration, similar to other medical items of similar nature (e.g. prostheses), external speech processors were not covered by the standard fees and charges of HA. The current supplier of external speech processors of HA provided three-year warranty. Upon expiry of the warranty period, patients were responsible for the repair and maintenance of the external speech processors. Since April 2013, HA had included the replacement of external speech processors of cochlear implants to the non-drug subvented items under the Samaritan Fund ("SF") to provide financial assistance to patients in need. In assessing patients' eligibility for SF subsidy, SF would consider both the clinical and financial conditions of patients. For cases with overriding social grounds, SF would exercise discretion in their consideration of individual cases.

Use of sign language

12. Some Members were of the view that the role of sign language should be covered under the education policy to safeguard the right of deaf and hard-of-hearing children to access an inclusive and quality education. There was a suggestion that sign language should be included in the regular school curriculum so that deaf and hard-of-hearing children could choose to learn either oral language or sign language, or both. The above apart, the Administration should promote the use of sign language in the community through the provision

of sign language interpretation in the delivery of public services and the building up of a sign language database.

13. The Administration advised that it had no plan to include sign language into the ordinary school curriculum. If ordinary schools opted to use sign language in providing support for students with hearing impairment, schools should have appropriate arrangements, such as formulating the criteria of using sign language by these students, arranging subject teachers and teaching assistants to learn sign language, etc. EDB would further enhance the communication with these schools to ensure that schools could provide appropriate support for students with hearing impairment.

Support to parents

14. Members noted that to support parents whose children were newly identified as deaf or hard-of-hearing, medical social workers of child assessment centres under SWD would provide specific information on social rehabilitation services for their reference. Some Members were concerned that the current information was unable to disseminate to parents clearly relevant support service according to individual circumstances of their children. They suggested that the Administration should strengthen the counselling services and assistance to the parents for facing their children's problem and difficulty.

15. The Administration advised that SWD would review and integrate the existing information provided to relevant parents and step up training for relevant frontline staff, with a view to assisting relevant parents in obtaining the most appropriate support, including provision of relevant information to facilitate parents in choosing the most appropriate teaching method and support for their children.

Relevant papers

16. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

**Relevant papers on support services
for students with hearing impairment**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Subcommittee on Integrated Education	30 September 2014*	Report of the Subcommittee on Integrated Education to the Panel on Education
Subcommittee on Children's Rights	23 May 2018*	Report of the Subcommittee to the House Committee
Panel on Education	4 June 2021 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes

* Issue date

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