

LegCo Panel on Education

**Subcommittee on
facilities in special schools for physically handicapped children**

**Report on the visit to special schools
on 18 November 1998**

Purpose

This paper reports on the observations and recommendations made by the Subcommittee on facilities in special schools for physically handicapped children (the Subcommittee) during the visit to three special schools for physically handicapped children on 18 November 1998.

The Subcommittee

2. The Subcommittee was established under the LegCo Panel on Education at its meeting on 26 October 1998. The Subcommittee is tasked to examine the facilities and learning environment in special schools for physically handicapped children, with a view to following up with the Administration on the improvements required.
3. The Subcommittee consists of four members of the Panel on Education. A membership list is in **Appendix I**. Representatives of the Education and Manpower Bureau, Education Department, Hong Kong Special Schools Council and Hong Kong Society for Rehabilitation Community Rehabilitation Network are also invited to attend meetings and visits of the Subcommittee.
4. Members of the Subcommittee have expressed concern about the difficulties encountered by physically handicapped students in special schools, and the adequacy of facilities and learning environment in these special schools. A visit has been arranged for members of the Subcommittee to visit some of these special schools to obtain first-hand information in this regard.

Visit to special schools

5. The Subcommittee visited the following special schools on 18 November 1998:

Hong Kong Christian Service Pui Oi School

Margaret Trench Red Cross School

John F Kennedy Centre (with boarding places)

Observations of the Subcommittee and suggestions of the special school principals

Hong Kong Christian Service Pui Oi School

6. The Subcommittee has noted that the school was reprovisioned in 1997 and is one of the better-provided schools for physically handicapped children. The school was built with a standard capacity of 100 places and currently has 64 students and 52 staff members.

7. Subcommittee members have noted the following concerns raised by the principal and her staff:

(a) *Air-conditioning*

Air-conditioners have been acquired for the classrooms by donations and the recurrent electricity and maintenance costs are borne by parents who pay about \$550 a year. The school principal considers that air-conditioning should be provided to the school hall which is subject to unbearable heat in summer, possibly due to the 'greenhouse effects' of the glass ceiling.

(b) *Kitchen/upgraded pantry*

Part of the staff quarters has been converted to a 'kitchen' for preparing meals for those children who have chewing difficulties. Due to space and design constraints, preparation of meals is partly carried out in the toilet.

(c) *Furniture and equipment*

The school has obtained certain second-hand physiotherapy equipment for use by the handicapped children. Most furniture items have to be tailor-made for children who have seating or positioning problems. Some existing desks and chairs and facilities in the toilets are made by staff of the school.

(d) *School bus*

The school has acquired two school buses (one large coach and one minibus) by donations. Drivers are provided by the Government. The large coach is not air-conditioned and its design (wooden seats and narrow passageway) is not catered for wheelchair-bound children. Parents have to pay for the school transport service as in normal schools.

(e) *Observation room*

Curtains are required for the windows in the observation room.

8. **Appendix II** gives a breakdown of the student composition, staff establishment and accommodation details of the school.

Margaret Trench Red Cross School

9. The Subcommittee has noted that this is the oldest of the three special schools visited. It was built in 1973 with a capacity of 60 places. The number of existing students in this school is 46, serviced by 35.7 staff members. The Subcommittee has also noted that the school is grossly under-provisioned, and that although it has been

scheduled for reprovisioning since 1996, no suitable site has been identified yet.

10. Members of the Subcommittee expressed much concern about the out-dated design and congested state of the building. They have also noted the following shortcomings in the facilities and environment of the school:

(a) *School design*

The school design has not catered for the wheelchair-bound children and those in need of support equipment in movements. The staircase of the fire exit and the uneven ground between the school hall and the open air playground have caused serious difficulties to handicapped children. The Subcommittee has asked the Education Department to make urgent improvements to the ground and the fire exit for the safety of children. The school principal has also pressed for urgent re-provisioning of the school in order to provide a long-term solution to the sub-standard accommodation and facilities of the school.

(b) *Kitchen/upgraded pantry*

As some handicapped children have chewing problems, the school has also converted part of the staff quarters to a 'kitchen' for further processing the cooked food bought from private caterers. The 'kitchen' is very small and not properly equipped for cooking purposes.

(c) *Toilets*

The toilets are not adjacent to lower form classrooms and some facilities are not tailor-made, making toilet training difficult.

(d) *School hall/multi-purpose room*

The school hall is small and without air-conditioning. It is also used as a gymnasium and activity room.

(e) *School bus*

There are two large, tailor-made coaches for transport of handicapped children. However, the school buses cannot always stop at locations preferred by parents due to traffic restrictions. Members have also noted that the lifting platforms are used only infrequently.

(f) *Physiotherapy /medical equipment*

Members have noted that due to insufficient space, mattresses are used instead of nursing beds. As medical items are not included in the list of standard items for special schools, such items have to be acquired by donations. The school principal considers that these should be provided by the Government.

(g) *Store rooms*

As there is insufficient space for storage of bulky equipment and stores, some toilets are also used as storerooms.

11. **Appendix III** gives a summary of the recommendations of the school principal and accommodation details of the school.

John F Kennedy Centre

12. The school was first established in 1967 and has been re-provisioned twice. It is currently under renovation. It has a capacity of 140 places for day students and 90 boarding places. This is the best of the three special schools visited.

(a) *Air-conditioning*

The school principal has asked for air-conditioning of the boarding section to provide a more comfortable environment for handicapped children, many of them have to wear thick protective garments and braces during sleep.

The school hall is not air-conditioned. The glass ceiling has aggravated the heat in the hall during summer.

(b) *Hydrotherapy pool*

This is the only special school provided with a hydrotherapy pool. According to the school physiotherapist, hydrotherapy is beneficial to handicapped children especially those with neurological impairment. For those schools without a hydrotherapy pool, arrangements have to be made for students to attend hydrotherapy sessions in rehabilitation centres or public hospitals. Members have noted that hydrotherapy sessions have to be conducted by qualified physiotherapists to ensure safety of the children.

(c) *Kitchen*

The school is provided with a kitchen (and four Cooks) for preparation of meals for about 200 persons including the boarders. The kitchen is well-equipped with modern cooking/refrigerating facilities and utensils.

13. **Appendix IV** gives a summary of the accommodation details of the school and the recommendations of the school principal.

Recommendations

14. The Subcommittee expressed disappointment over the inadequate facilities in the special schools visited. Members have urged that improvements should be made as soon as possible in the following areas.

Furniture and Equipment Grant

15. The Subcommittee has noted that most of the furniture and equipment items have to be tailor-made to suit the special needs of the physically handicapped children. Such items are expensive and the cost per item often exceeds the current spending limit of school principals. To allow more flexibility for school principals to acquire tailor-made furniture and equipment, the Administration should increase the present

spending limit for special school principals to at least \$8,000 for each item.

16. Some school principals have expressed reluctance or difficulties in applying for funds from the Education Department, resulting in under-utilization of provisions such as the Class Grant for special schools in recent years. The Subcommittee considers that the application procedures should be streamlined and made more user-friendly to encourage school principals to make the best use of provisions.

17. The Subcommittee also recommends that the Education Department should take immediate action to replace the rusted or non-serviceable furniture and equipment in the special schools.

Air-conditioning

18.. The Subcommittee recommends that air-conditioners should be installed in all classrooms and the boarding section to provide a more comfortable environment for physically handicapped children especially those who have to wear thick protective garments and braces or require support equipment in movements. Subcommittee members have also noted that the glass ceiling of school halls is not suitable for special schools in Hong Kong due to the hot, humid weather in summer. Air-conditioning in the school hall and activity rooms is desirable.

19. The Subcommittee has noted that the recurrent costs for air-conditioning are now borne by parents if the air-conditioners are acquired by donation. Subcommittee members consider that the Government should actively consider negotiating a preferential rate for electricity for air-conditioning in special schools.

School design

20. The Subcommittee considers that special schools must be purpose-built to cater for the special requirements of the handicapped children. The design should take into account of the educational and rehabilitative needs of the handicapped children. Facilities such as kitchen/pantry, toilets, nursing rooms, activity rooms and access roads must be adapted to enable safe and comfortable use by the handicapped children.

21. In this connection, the Subcommittee also recommends that the Administration should expedite action to re-provision Margaret Trench Red Cross School to alleviate the congested accommodation and to provide suitable facilities for the school.

22. Noting that some handicapped children with chewing problems must have special meal service which is not available from private caterers, the Subcommittee considers that an upgraded pantry with sufficient space and cooking facilities should be provided for special schools where a full-scale kitchen is not justified.

23. The Subcommittee also recommends that the Education Department and Architectural Services Department should take immediate action to improve the fire exit and the uneven ground (between the school hall and the playground) in Margaret Trench Red Cross School.

Hydrotherapy pool

24. The Subcommittee has noted that hydrotherapy is beneficial to handicapped children particularly those with neurological impairment. Members have also noted that the existing arrangement for special schools children to attend hydrotherapy sessions in rehabilitation centres or public hospitals is time-consuming and labour intensive. However, the construction and operation of a hydrotherapy pool in each special school will have financial and staffing implications. The Subcommittee therefore considers that the Administration should further examine the cost-effectiveness of providing hydrotherapy pools in special schools, and other feasible measures to improve hydrotherapy service for handicapped students.

School bus

25. The Subcommittee has noted that sometimes the school buses cannot stop at locations near the residence of the physically handicapped children and this has caused practical difficulties to the handicapped children and their parents. The Subcommittee has urged the Transport Department to make concessionary arrangements for schools buses transporting handicapped children to stop in restricted zones.

26. The Subcommittee has noted that some school buses of special schools are old and not tailor-made for physically handicapped children. This has caused difficulties for students who require special assistance to get on/off the buses. Members consider that school buses for handicapped children should be tailor-made and the old-fashioned models should be replaced as soon as possible.

List of standard items for special schools

27. The Subcommittee recommends that whiteboards and intercom/ emergency call bell device be included in the list of standard items for special schools. Members also recommend that the Education Department should review the list of standard items for special schools in consultation with the special school principals. In drawing up the list, consideration should be given to the special needs of handicapped children in view of their physical and health conditions. Basic ambulating and medical items should be provided.

Role of parents

28. The Subcommittee considers that parents also play an important role in the care and education of the handicapped children. As parents are more familiar with the needs and habits of their children, they can also contribute to the preparation of packed lunch for their children as far as possible. The Government and concerned parties should further examine the role and contribution of the parents in enhancing the quality of special education for handicapped children.

Legislative Council Secretariat

23 November 1998