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From : Clerk to Panel

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LegCo Panel on Education

Follow-up to meeting on 28 July 1998

I forward for members' information the Administration's response to members' suggestions on textbook prices and schoolbag weight at the Panel meeting held on 28 July 1998. The paper was tabled at the Panel meeting on 21 September 1998.

(Mrs Constance LI)
Clerk to Panel

Encl.

c.c. Hon Christine LOH	}	
Hon CHAN Kam-lam	}	Non-Panel Members
Hon Jasper TSANG Yok-sing, JP	}	
Hon LAU Chin-shek, JP	}	
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Textbook Price and Schoolbag Weight

Purpose

At the meeting of the Panel on Education held on 28 July 1998, Members made a number of suggestions to address concerns about textbook price and schoolbag weight. We are still in the course of considering the suggestions. Meanwhile this paper sets out the latest position of some issues.

Background

2. Some Members made the following suggestions at the July Panel meeting:
 - (a) to impose more specific requirements on publishers who wish to have their textbooks included in the Recommended Textbook List (RTL). The suggested requirements include:
 - complying with certain maximum weights for textbooks prescribed by the Education Department (ED) so as to reduce printing costs and schoolbag weights;
 - separating exercise books / workbooks from textbooks so as to reduce schoolbag weights;
 - (b) to prohibit publishers from donating school equipment or other gifts to schools; and

- (c) to ascertain whether there are marketing practices in contravention of the competition policy in the textbook industry.

Schoolbag Weight

Prescribing maximum weights for textbooks

3. The primary objective of the RTL is to ensure quality of textbooks, and that weights of individual textbooks is just one of the many factors determining schoolbag weights (other factors include subject mix, timetabling, accompanying exercise books / workbooks, student habits etc.). Hence, we do not consider it appropriate to require publishers to keep their textbooks under certain prescribed weights for individual textbooks as a pre-requisite for including their textbooks in the RTL.

4. However, we agree that more could be done to help ensure that textbook weights are duly taken into account in textbook selection. We will:

(a) update the relevant circulars to schools to:

- provide information on desirable schoolbag weights for different levels upon advice by the Department of Health;
- remind schools that they should request publishers to specify weights of the finished textbooks;
- remind schools to take account of the above two factors in textbook selection and timetabling.

- (b) remind schools that they should provide guidance to pupils, especially primary school pupils, on use of lockers (at present, over 85% of government and aided primary schools already have lockers); and
- (c) strengthen parents' participation through:
- reminding schools that they should specify weights of individual textbooks in their textbook lists;
 - liaising with the Home-School Co-operation Committee to explore means to involve parents in keeping the weights of their children's schoolbags at acceptable levels.

Separate publication of textbooks and exercise books

5. ED has all along been encouraging separate publication of textbooks and exercise books. Indeed, ED does not review exercise books for inclusion in the RTL, except for a few subjects for which supplementary material is considered necessary. In the latter case, ED requires publishers to submit the textbooks and exercise books in separate volumes for review, and if found necessary, they will be listed separately in the RTL.

6. Moreover, ED has repeatedly urged publishers to separate textbook into volumes so as to reduce schoolbag weights. At primary level, the percentage of textbooks separated into volumes has increased from 83.34% in 1989 to 100% since 1991, and at secondary level, from 0% in 1989 to 29.5% in 1998.

Textbook Prices

Donation to schools

7. Upon ED's request, the Independent Commission Against Corruption is now reviewing schools' textbook selection process, with a view to preventing inappropriate donations from publishers to schools.

8. Also upon ED's request, a case panel under the Council on Professional Conduct in Education has been formed to study whether the integrity of the teaching profession is compromised in the process of textbook selection.

Marketing practices of the textbook industry

9. Upon our request, the Consumer Council is conducting surveys among publishers and booksellers to understand more about the marketing practices in the textbook industry.

10. In due course, we will report to the Panel the findings of the studies mentioned in paras. 7 to 9 above and our proposed way forward.

Education Department

September 1998