

(English translation prepared by the
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(Letterhead of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union)

Proposed Improvements to Practical Schools
(Discussion Paper for LegCo Panel on Education)

The disciplinary problems among students in practical schools have aroused public concern recently. Given that practical schools are established to provide a more flexible and practically-oriented curriculum for children of junior secondary school age who are academically less enthusiastic, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union ("the Union") is therefore of the view that these schools should be provided with sufficient resources in respect of teaching, teacher training and supporting services. Otherwise, they will not be able to perform their intended functions to the full. The Union calls on the Administration to implement comprehensive improvement measures based on the recommendations in the review on special educational services carried out by the Sub-committee on Special Education ("the Sub-committee") under the Board of Education in 1996, so as to address the difficulties faced by practical schools as a whole.

The Union supports the outcome of the Sub-committee's review and calls for the adoption of the following proposed improvements to practical schools:

(1) Reduction of class size

Practical schools adopt a counselling-based approach. Given the current size of 30 students in each class, teachers come under great pressure as they have to assume various duties, ranging from classroom teaching, individual counselling and discipline keeping etc.. The Union proposes that the class size be reduced to 25 students in order to improve ratio of teachers to students.

(2) Provision of additional teachers

The ratio of teachers to classes in practical schools is 1.5 : 1. As teachers are generally tied down by heavy classroom teaching commitments, they are unable to spare time to carry out the equally important supportive works such as curriculum design, paired teaching, small group teaching and student counselling. As such, there is a need to improve the ratio of teachers to classes. The Union proposes

that additional teachers be provided to practical schools with reference to the provision of resource teachers to special schools at a rate of one teacher for every eight classes. In this way, teachers' excessive workload will be reduced, which in turn will enable the schools to flexibly enhance teachers' patrolling duties to step up discipline, which is very conducive to maintaining order in schools. The provision ratio of additional teachers is proposed as follows:

No. of classes	No. of additional teachers
1 to 8	1 (1 Certificated Master)
9 to 16	2 (1 Certificated Master and 1 Graduate Master)
17 to 24	3 (2 Certificated Masters and 1 Graduate Master)

(3) Review of the referral system and admission criteria

Although the difference between target students of practical schools and their counterparts in schools for social development is written in explicit terms, it is difficult in practice to differentiate the two categories of students. As the lack of motivation for academic subjects is taken as a criterion for admission to practical schools, many students fall under this category. In contrast, the procedure for referring students to schools for social development is relatively complicated and time-consuming. As a result, schools tend to refer their students to practical schools. In fact, some students with serious behavioural problems have been referred to practical schools, giving rise to great difficulties in maintaining discipline in those schools. In this connection, the Union proposes that a review on the standardization of the referral systems for practical schools and schools for social development be conducted and their admission criteria be clearly defined. Moreover, the flow of information between schools should be strengthened to avoid incorrect referrals as much as possible.

(4) Addressing the wastage of educational psychologists

Although the Education Department has improved the staffing ratio of school social workers in practical schools, there is a serious shortage of educational psychologists who play an equally important role in schools by providing psychological counselling to students. The shortage and wastage of educational psychologists are due to their unattractive terms of employment, salary scale as compared with those of clinical psychologists. An educational psychologist is required to possess a degree in Psychology, a Master's degree in Educational Psychology plus 4 years' relevant post-graduate

experience. In contrast, a clinical psychologist does not need any relevant experience.. Moreover, the maximum salary point of clinical psychologists is higher than that of educational psychologists, the direct result of which is a "brain-drain" among educational psychologists. In order to attract serving teachers to enter or stay in this profession, the Union proposes that the maximum salary point of educational psychologists be brought in line with that of clinical psychologists and that relevant experience be recognized for additional salary increments.

(5) Provision of additional clerical staff

Due to a shortage of clerical staff, the teaching and specialist staff have to carry out clerical work in order to alleviate the heavy workload of clerical staff. The Union proposes that additional clerical staff be provided and that supply staff be employed so that the teaching and specialist staff can concentrate their efforts on teaching and student counselling.

The Union further calls on the Administration to expedite the provision of training to teachers of practical schools. As a matter of fact, a vast majority of newly recruited teachers in practical schools have not received any training in this field. Although teachers can receive a two-year special education training after employment and additional salary increments are awarded to encourage serving teachers to receive formal special education training. However, the present mode of training can neither increase the proportion of trained teachers effectively nor address the immediate needs of serving teachers for further studies because serving teachers have to attend a one- year full time course. The need to employ substitute teachers has rendered it difficult for the school management to release several teachers at one time to attend the training course. As a result, serving teachers may need to wait for a long time before they can receive training. Moreover, a high turnover rate among substitute teachers has also affected the quality of teaching to a certain extent.

The Union proposes that alongside the existing one-year full-time course, the Administration should introduce a two-year part-time day-release course. As regards the arrangement in respect of substitute teachers, schools should be allowed to employ one substitute teacher when one of the serving teachers is released to attend the one-year full-time course or when two of the serving teachers are released to attend the two-year part-time day release course. This arrangement will help to quicken the pace of teacher training. Teachers who have undergone relevant training should be required to remain in the practical schools for a certain period of time. This will also be effective in

raising the proportion of trained teachers and reducing the level of wastage among teachers.

The Union has sought the views of principals and teachers of practical schools on the above proposals. Schools will be able to provide a school-based teacher training programme under which teachers will be given systematic training in groups. As for the contents of the teacher training courses, it is proposed that courses on basic and special education theories and knowledge be provided to teachers who have not received any relevant training, and that courses on practical teaching skills for special education be provided to teachers who have received teacher training at colleges of education. These two kinds of courses should be tailored to the practical teaching needs unique to practical schools.

The Union hopes that this issue will be discussed by the Legislative Council. The Union also calls on the Education Department to adopt the proposals put forward in this paper and to implement improvement measures as soon as possible with a view to assisting practical schools to overcome the problems encountered in teaching and counselling.

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