

Information Paper

Support for Students with Learning Difficulties in Mainstream Schools

Purpose

This paper outlines the current provision of services by the Education Department (ED) for students with special educational needs (SEN) and with or without disabilities who are attending mainstream schools, and the future direction.

Existing Support for Students with SEN in Mainstream Schools

2. Since the 1970's, the Government's education policy is to help students with a disability integrate into the mainstream schools as far as possible so that they can receive appropriate education along with their peers. A spectrum of support services has been provided by ED to the students with SEN (e.g. learning difficulties, whether or not arising from developmental dyslexia, special language impairment and mild grade mental handicap; autism with average intelligence; behavioural problems; hearing impairment; visual impairment; physical handicap) attending mainstream schools. It includes assessment and services for children with learning, behavioural/emotional problems, hearing or speech disorders; and consultation and support for school and school personnel on learning support and behaviour management.

3. Intensive remedial teaching is offered to students with severe learning difficulties through ED's Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme (IRTP) in primary schools and the School-based Remedial Support Programme (SBRSP) at the junior secondary level. Additional teachers are provided for small group / split class / collaborative teaching. For target students who are not accommodated by the

aforementioned programmes, outside-school-hour intensive remedial support services are provided at ED's eleven regional resource teaching services centres.

4. Pre-school and school-aged children suspected of having hearing disorder are offered hearing assessment, and if necessary, customer-made ear-moulds and issuance of one free hearing aid with follow-up audiological services. Speech therapy services are provided to school-aged children with all types of speech and language problems. For students with transitory behaviour and adjustment problems, therapeutic intervention is arranged in the Adjustment Programme (AU) at the resource teaching services centres.

5. At primary and secondary levels, pursuant to the pilot project on integration conducted in 1997-99, an increasing number of schools are adopting a whole-school approach to integration under the Integrated Education (IE) programme. This is designed to accommodate students with any one of the following types of disability, namely mild grade mental handicap, hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical handicap, autistic disorder with average intelligence. Additional teacher and professional support in the form of induction workshops and a 10-hour school-based staff training are provided. Target students who are not covered by the IE programme or the special education classes for visually impaired and hearing impaired are supported by ED's AU or Resource Help Service (RHS) which provides on- and off-school-site remedial teaching and support. Parallel to the IE programme in primary and secondary schools, the Integrated Programme for Mildly Disabled Children in Kindergarten (I K/G) provides similar service for the pre-primary group.

6. Apart from the support services, ED has also set up a Top-up Fund for schools for procurement of special furniture/equipment or for carrying out minor

school conversion work so as to cater for the students with SEN. Schools not adopting IE can apply for the Special Education Needs Incidental Charges Grant (SEN Grant) to augment learning resource and activities. Since November 2000, the Special Education Resource Centre (SERC) has come into operation to give support to both special school staff and special education personnel in mainstream schools. The website also provides a platform for teachers to share their teaching resources and experiences in teaching students with SEN.

7. Other forms of support include the production of resource kits with VCDs and CD-ROMs for teachers on understanding the diverse needs of students and on support and training for children with autistic disorder, mental handicap, physical handicap, hearing and visual impairments, special learning difficulties (SpLD), and voice problems. A teaching guide on “Understanding and Helping Children with Special Educational Needs”, “Information Guide to Support Services for Students with Special Educational Needs in Ordinary Schools” and “The Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Behaviour Checklist (For Primary School Pupils)” have also been produced and distributed to all schools for use by teachers and a CD-ROM is also being developed to help parents of students with SpLD.

Curriculum Development

8. Curriculum usually takes the centre stage when addressing students' learning problems. Recent curriculum reform initiatives focus on the multiple intelligence and diverse learning needs of students; the structuring of tasks and refinement of teaching strategies to suit students' abilities; and different modes of assessment to support learning. Action research projects are being conducted on learning strategies which will generate insights and good practices for implementation in primary schools.

Future Direction

9. ED will organize briefing sessions and workshops for schools to promote and facilitate the implementation of the following:

(a) Whole-School Approach to Integration

To create an accepting and supportive environment to include SEN students, the entire school should be mobilized in the provision of collaborative teaching, curriculum adaptation, flexibility in teaching and assessment methods, school improvement projects and peer support groups, etc. Schools should also inform parents concerned of such support and encourage them to enter into partnership in helping their children.

(b) Streamlining of resources

In support of all students whether or not with SEN, ED has, in the course of time, allocated various resources to schools. Such resources are in form of additional teachers for RTP, SBRSP, IE, special education classes, ordinary remedial, guidance and career counselling, and/or grants such as the Capacity Enhancement Grant (CEG), SEN Grant, grants for the various programmes, etc. Schools' streamlining and optimum use of these resources would enhance their coverage and effect in addressing students' diverse needs and difficulties of which some are of a transient nature.

10. Teachers play an important role in the actual delivery of services to SEN students to cater for their diverse learning needs. Hence the following are suggested to better prepare the teachers for this challenging task:

(a) Teacher training

The course content of both pre-service and in-service teacher training, in particular the practical aspect of differential teaching will be reviewed and strengthened.

(b) Continuous professional development

Territory-wide seminars, short-term courses, workshops and experience-sharing sessions by local or international experts on knowledge and teaching strategies on specific areas such as dyslexia and meta-cognitive learning will be organized to tie in with the continuous professional development plan of teachers where appropriate.

(c) Peer Support and Dissemination of Exemplar Practices

A range of different modes of support such as networking of teachers to disseminate good practices, intra- and inter-school teacher mentoring system, on-site seminars/workshops on specific topics, etc. will also be considered. The SERC will further step up its functions in providing a platform for experience-sharing.

11. The ED will continue to produce relevant resource materials to facilitate teachers' early identification of students with SEN and support services to schools as follows:

(a) Early assessment and support for students with SEN

To enable teachers to identify students having learning difficulties, whether or not with SEN, soon after they enter school so that timely intervention could be given, ED would explore the possibility of developing a tool in the form of a teacher's checklist with suggestions on possible follow-up actions.

(b) Support to school

With the promulgation of the Code of Practice in Education under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance and the promotion of the whole-school approach to integration, more parents of students with SEN would likely opt for placement in mainstream schools instead of special schools. In this respect, it is anticipated that special schools would have certain spare capacity to assume a greater role in sharing their experience and expertise, in providing peer support and advisory/consultancy service to their mainstream counterparts, and in serving as resource centres as well.

12. While there is no doubt that parents' cooperation and involvement are vital to their children's success in school, it is equally important to promote public awareness in creating an accepting environment for students with SEN. Thus, the ED will take measures to step up the following:

(a) Parent education

It is important to educate all parents on the developmental and learning needs of their children at various stages. Relevant parents associations will also be encouraged to bid funds under the Parent Education Initiative to organize such activities. Furthermore, reminders to parents to take their children for regular health check and to liaise closely with schools should their children have SEN would ensure that appropriate treatment and support are given in time.

(b) Social awareness

Public education will be launched to promote community awareness and an accepting attitude to individual differences as well as civic mindedness to make the necessary adjustment to accommodate and include them in society.

Conclusion

13. Over the years, ED has spared no effort in identifying resources to enhance the provision and support to meet the needs of students with SEN in mainstream schools. We will review the situation constantly to ensure that the support and services are adequate and that the provisions are effectively used.