

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)2818/02-03
(These minutes have been seen
by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/ED

Panel on Education

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Monday, 26 May 2003 at 4:30 pm
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

- Members Present** : Dr Hon YEUNG Sum (Chairman)
Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung, BBS (Deputy Chairman)
Dr Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon Eric LI Ka-cheung, JP
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon Jasper TSANG Yok-sing, GBS, JP
Hon Emily LAU Wai-hing, JP
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Hon SZETO Wah
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP
Hon WONG Sing-chi
Hon Audrey EU Yuet-mee, SC, JP
Hon MA Fung-kwok, JP
- Members Attending** : Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Dr Hon TANG Siu-tong, JP
- Members Absent** : Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
Dr Hon LO Wing-lok
- Public Officers Attending** : Mr CHENG Yan-chee
Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (4)

Mr Steve LEE
Principal Education Officer (New Territories)
Education and Manpower Bureau

Attendance by Invitation : The Association of Heads of Primary Schools, The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

Mr WONG Yuk-tong
Vice Chairman

Mr CHAN Chi-tuen
Vice Chairman

Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union

Mr PUN Tin-chi
Vice-President

Committee on Home-School Co-operation

Mr LAM Seung-wan
Committee Member
(also represents the Hong Kong Aided Primary School
Heads Association)

Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers

Mr LEUNG Siu-tong
Vice-President

Mr LEE See-yuen
Standing Committee Member

Subsidized Primary Schools Council

Mr FUNG Ka-ching
Vice-chairman

Mr LEE Fu-sing
Executive Council Member

Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association

Mr LEUNG Shiu-chun
Chairman

Mr LAM Seung-wan
Member
(also represents the Committee on Home-School Co-
operation)

Sheng Kung Hui Primary School Principals Conference

Mr WONG Chi-kin
Chairman

Mr TSE Chang-keung
Secretary

Alliance of Parents of Rural Schools

Mrs YEUNG KONG Chun-yuk
Convenor

Mr FUNG Suk-kai
Kiu Saw Public School
Headmaster

Sam Wo Public School

Mrs KONG Kwai-po
Officer

Mr TSOI Wai-lik
IT Officer

Hong Kong Teachers' Association

Mr LEE Siu-hok
Chairman, Subsidized Primary School Group

Mr LEE Yuk-kuen
Member, Subsidized Primary School Group

Clerk in Attendance : Miss Flora TAI
Chief Assistant Secretary (2)2

Staff in Attendance : Mr Stanley MA
Senior Assistant Secretary (2)6

Action

I. Consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools

Meeting with deputations

The Chairman welcomed representatives of the deputations to the meeting. At the invitation of the Chairman, representatives of deputations presented their concerns and suggestions as summarized in paragraphs 2 to 13.

The Association of Heads of Primary Schools, The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

2. Mr WONG Yuk-tong said that the Association of Heads of Primary Schools did not support consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools as it contradicted with the spirit of education reform and ignored the values and contributions of rural schools in the past decades. He stressed that the Association opposed to the criteria that schools with unit cost 150% or more of the territory-wide average would not be allocated primary one (P1) classes in the Primary One Admission (POA) exercise. He concluded by saying that the Association only agreed that schools who had not been able to attract sufficient students be phased out on a gradual basis.

Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2223/02-03(01)]

3. Mr PUN Tin-chi presented the views of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union as highlighted in the submission which was tabled at the meeting. He stressed that the Union opposed to the proposed criteria for consolidating high cost and under-utilized primary schools, and suggested that the Administration should take the opportunity arising from a declining school age population to implement small class teaching on a gradual basis.

Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2223/02-03(02)]

4. Mr LEUNG Siu-tong presented the views of the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers as detailed in the submission which was tabled at the meeting. He concluded by saying that the Federation anticipated that the Administration would consider the interests of students and frontline teachers in formulation and implementation of its proposals for efficiency savings.

Committee on Home-School Co-operation

5. Mr LAM Seung-wan said that the Committee on Home-School Co-operation considered that the comments made by the Director of Audit in respect of reducing the surplus school places in primary schools with high operating costs was not based on a comprehensive understanding of the

Action

operation of primary school sector. The Committee appreciated that the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) had invited two independent persons to participate in the assessment of parental choice index of schools in the "central allocation" stage of POA exercise. The Committee suggested that these two independent persons should be nominated from those who were familiar with the role and contributions of individual schools in the development of the districts concerned.

*Subsidized Primary Schools Council
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2141/02-03(01)]*

6. Mr LEE Fu-sing presented the views of the Subsidized Primary Schools Council (SPSC) as detailed in the submission. Mr FUNG Ka-ching supplemented that SPSC had expressed that it did not object to increasing the minimum enrolment for allocation of P1 classes from 16 to 23 students (two-thirds of a standard class as recommended by the Director of Audit) on the condition that the discretionary places should also be increased from 16 to 23. Mr FUNG also pointed out that setting a unit cost of 150% or more of the territory-wide average as a threshold for not allocating P1 class was dangerous as it might drive schools to compete for operating at a lower cost which would eventually jeopardize the quality of education in the long run.

7. Mr FUNG further said that in response to the recommendation of the Director of Audit to reduce surplus school places and the Administration's plan to close schools that had high operating costs such as rural schools, SPSC had held a press conference to express objection to the recommendation and the plan, and to point out that the provision of education should not be determined solely by the costs incurred. Mr FUNG concluded by saying that EMB should respect the value and contributions of schools in education, particularly rural schools who had been providing education for years to pupils residing in remote areas where the Government had not been able to provide a standard school in the vicinity.

*Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2204/02-03(01)]*

8. Mr LEUNG Shiu-chun presented the views of Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association as detailed in the submission which was tabled at the meeting. Mr LAM Seung-wan supplemented that schools providing integrated education to students with special needs would be provided with additional resources and the cost incurred should be excluded from the calculation of the unit cost.

Action

Sheng Kung Hui Primary School Principals Conference
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2191/02-03(01)]

9. Mr WONG Chi-kin presented the views of the Sheung Kung Hui Primary School Principals Conference as detailed in the submission. He concluded by saying that the Conference considered that if the proposed consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools was intended to achieve savings in school education, EMB should work out a comprehensive cost-saving programme which should cover both primary and secondary schools.

"Alliance of Parents of Rural Schools" (村校家長大聯盟)
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2223/02-03(03)]

10. Mrs YEUNG KONG Chun-yuk and Mr FUNG Suk-kai presented the views of the Alliance of Parents of Rural Schools as detailed in the submission which was tabled at the meeting. They highlighted that the descriptions in respect of the high cost and under-utilized primary schools in the Administration's paper would mislead the public that rural schools were not cost-effective and were providing inferior quality of education to students. Mrs YEUNG stressed that parents did not agree that the quality of students and teachers in rural schools was in general less satisfactory than their counterparts in other schools. They concluded by urging the Government to freeze the implementation of the proposals for consolidating high cost and under-utilized primary schools and let rural schools operate P1 classes in the 2003-04 school year. They also suggested that EMB should conduct extensive consultation for formulation of a long term policy on the future development of rural schools.

11. Mrs YEUNG KONG Chun-yuk said that some parents of students attending rural schools had complained that staff of the School Places Allocation Section (SPAS) had been too aggressive in persuading parents to accept a transfer of school for their children. She alleged that some staff of SPAS had adopted a threatening tone in proposing the transfer of school to parents, and some had called parents 10 times a day which had caused much nuisance to the parents concerned.

Sam Wo Public School
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2223/02-03(04)]

12. Mrs KONG Kwai-po presented the views of the Sam Wo Public School as detailed in the submission which was tabled at the meeting. She highlighted the role and contributions of San Wo Public School in the provision of primary school education to cross-border students from the Mainland whose fathers were permanent residents of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. She pointed out that compared to the two other rural schools in Ta Kwu Ling, San Wo was located at a more convenient location for access and should be

Action

retained. Mrs KONG urged the Administration to let Sam Wo Public School operate a P1 class in the 2003-04 school year and review the provision of P1 places in the district for the 2004-05 school year, having regard to its unique circumstances.

Hong Kong Teachers' Association

13. Mr LEE Siu-hok said that Hong Kong Teachers' Association objected to the proposals on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools which would in effect force primary schools with insufficient enrolment or high operating cost to close down. He stressed that the provision of primary school education should not be determined solely by a school's unit cost and the Government should plan the provision of primary and secondary school education on an equal basis. He urged the Administration to allocate a P1 class to primary schools which had an enrolment of less than 23 students for the 2003-04 school year, be it a rural school or an urban school. He also suggested that the Administration should decide whether these schools should be allocated a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year after a review of their performance and the demand of P1 places in the school net. Mr LEE concluded by requesting the Panel to urge the Administration to withdraw the proposals on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools.

Administration's response to the concerns of deputations

14. At the Chairman's invitation, Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (4) (DS(EM)4) made the following response –

- (a) The Administration had consulted the school sponsoring bodies, school councils, teacher unions and education bodies, and would continue to listen to the views of stakeholders and the Panel on the criteria for consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools;
- (b) The criteria were not intended to target at small or rural schools, and would be fine-tuned in the light of the feedback collected from the current round of consultation;
- (c) The plan in respect of the consolidation of high cost and under-utilized schools was put forward in the light of the current stringent financial conditions and the fact that the total projected school age population aged 6-11 was estimated to decrease from 493 200 in 2002 to 410 600 in 2010, representing a 17% drop of 82 600 over eight years;
- (d) In setting the criteria for consolidation of high cost and under-utilized schools, the over-arching consideration was that there

Action

must be an adequate supply of school places in the school net in which the school concerned was located; and

- (e) An estimate of 77 schools would be affected and an annual recurrent saving of \$372.5 million would be achieved and be re-deployed for use in other education areas if all 77 schools were phased out by 2006-07.

15. DS(EM)4 further said that when there was adequate supply of P1 places in the school net concerned, the Administration considered it necessary and appropriate that schools which failed to attract enough students in the POA exercise should not be allocated with P1 classes in the following school year. He pointed out that combined class which required pupils of two or more levels to learn in the same classroom was not beneficial to the personal development of pupils and would create difficulties in curriculum planning. He also pointed out that schools with insufficient enrolment would not be allocated with P1 classes was the existing practice under the POA exercise. DS(EM)4 stressed that the criteria that schools with an intake of less than 23 students would not be allocated a P1 class was implemented in the 2003 POA exercise after consultation with relevant school council. He added that the Administration considered it reasonable to set the standard for high cost school at 150% or more of the territory-wide average. He also clarified that costs incurred under School Improvement Programme would not be included in the calculation of a school's unit cost.

16. With reference to the allegations made by Mrs YEUNG KONG Chun-yuk in paragraph 11, DS(EM)4 agreed that the Administration would follow up the alleged cases with Mrs YEUNG after the meeting.

Meeting with the Administration

Members' views and suggestions

17. Dr TANG Siu-tong expressed regret over the proposal on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools, saying that it would victimize the small and rural schools in the name of enhancing cost-effective use of education resources. He stressed the values and contributions of rural schools in the provision of primary education to students residing in remote areas. Dr TANG pointed out that many rural schools were able to recruit sufficient students if they were given more discretionary P1 places. Dr TANG suggested that the Administration should provide a transitional period of one year for rural schools to plan their future developments such as merging into new schools or relocated to central schools. He also suggested that schools with insufficient intake should be allowed to operate small classes to improve quality of education.

Action

18. In response, DS(EM)4 explained that the operation of the existing mechanism for allocation of P1 places under POA system allowed schools to enrol up to 50% of the places in a standard primary class. The remaining 50% of P1 places would be allocated through the central allocation which would largely be determined by parental choice. He considered it unlikely that a school with insufficient intake in the current school year would be able to attract 23 students or more in the ensuing school year.

19. Principal Education Officer (New Territories) (PEO(NT)) stressed that it was the decline in student population rather than the criteria that P1 classes would be allocated for schools with an enrolment of 23 students or more in the 2003 POA exercise that had led to an overall reduction of P1 classes within a school net. The Administration would have to allocate additional resources for provision of P1 education if schools with insufficient enrolment were allowed to operate P1 classes.

20. Dr TANG Siu-tong remarked that schools should be given 23 or more discretionary P1 places so that they could enrol sufficient students for the operation of a P1 class. He also considered that EMB should not encourage parents to change their choices of schools or arrange the transfer of their children from a school with a lower intake to a school with a higher intake.

21. PEO(NT) reiterated that the 50% discretionary place quota was part of the existing POA system and was implemented since 2002/03 after wide consultation.

22. Mr WONG Sing-chi queried why the Administration had informed schools of the implementation of the proposed criteria that schools failed to attract 23 or more students would not be allocated P1 classes whilst the consultation was in progress. He also queried whether there was any need to further consult the primary education sector given that all deputations attending the meeting had unanimously expressed opposition to the proposed criteria for consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools.

23. DS(EM)4 reiterated that the Administration had consulted relevant school councils before adopting the criteria that schools which failed to attract 23 or more students would not be allocated P1 classes in the 2003 POA exercise. He acknowledged that there were divided views on the criteria of an enrolment of less than 23 students and the 150% territory wide average unit cost for consolidation. He, however, pointed out that the primary school sector had in general accepted the criteria that schools with combined classes should be closed down as soon as possible. He added that the Administration would continue to listen to the views of stakeholders in fine-tuning the criteria.

24. Mr TAM Yiu-chung stressed that rural schools should be respected for their historical values and contributions in the provision of primary education

Action

to the community, and if necessary, should be phased out in a decent and gradual manner. He considered that EMB had introduced the criteria for consolidation of primary schools too hastily and pointed out that both the Secretary for Education and Manpower (SEM) and the Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower had already indicated that rural schools would not be allocated with P1 classes if they failed to attract 23 students or more in the 2003 POA exercise. Mr TAM also said that rural schools were well aware that the trend of declining student population had already led to reduction of classes in schools in many districts. However, many rural schools had just undergone major improvement programmes which equipped them with advanced learning and teaching facilities such as a multi-media computer room. He considered that these rural schools should be allowed to continue operation from the perspective of cost-effective use of resources. Mr TAM suggested that the Administration should allow sufficient time for rural schools within the same district to explore the feasibility of merging or relocating to a central school.

25. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that according to the Administration's paper, a school which was not allocated any P1 class in the 2003-04 school year would close in three years' time. Even though the policy on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized schools was subsequently amended, the schools concerned would still close in five years' time because a school which was not allocated with a P1 class under the current POA exercise would not be included in subsequent POA exercises. Mr CHEUNG said that he anticipated that the 77 schools which would be caught by the proposed criteria were mostly rural schools. He pointed out that rural schools had all along followed EMB's instruction to recruit only 16 students during the "discretionary place admission" stage and given the time constraint, were now unable to meet the new requirement of 23 students for allocation of P1 classes in the 2003 POA exercise. Even worse, the Administration proposed another stringent criterion under which schools with unit cost of 150% or more of the territory-wide average would also not be allocated with P1 classes. Mr CHEUNG considered it shameful that the Administration had ignored the past contributions of rural schools in primary education and proposed the criteria which would in effect force them to close in three years' time or less.

26. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong further said that SPAS should not be acting too aggressive in persuading parents to change their choice of schools for their children, particularly when such change involved a rural school. He pointed out that parents could be easily convinced or misled to accept EMB's proposal to change their choice of schools for fear that the school of their choice would not be allocated P1 classes in the coming school year. Mr CHEUNG suggested that the Administration should listen to the views of the deputations and withdraw its paper in order to convince the Panel and deputations that EMB was still consulting the primary school sector on its proposal to consolidate high cost and under-utilized primary schools.

Action

27. PEO(NT) explained that the overall number of P1 classes in a school net was based on the actual demand for P1 places within the net. The number of P1 classes which a primary school might operate depended on a number of factors including the number of classrooms available, the class structure and parental choices. Based on the number of children already admitted by the school during the "discretionary places admission" stage and the result of a computer analysis of the actual choices made by parents during the "Central Allocation" stage, EMB would work out the number of children to be allocated to each primary school. Normally, if the number of children allocated to a P1 class of a school was less than 23 students, and if there were surplus P1 school places in other schools of the same school net, the school might not be allowed to operate that class. He stressed that the Administration had the responsibility to resolve the issues arising from a sharp decrease in the demand for primary school places and to ensure best utilization of school places. The consolidation of schools would enhance cost effectiveness in the use of public funding so that surplus resources could be re-deployed to other educational areas where additional resources were most needed.

28. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong remarked that the Administration should let rural schools with insufficient student intake operate a small P1 class. He pointed out that unlike student recruitment in urban schools which was largely a one-off exercise, rural schools would take on students throughout the school year. He considered it unfair to ignore the pattern of student recruitment in rural schools when deciding the criteria for consolidating high cost and under-utilized primary schools.

29. Ms Emily LAU informed the meeting that she was a member of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and she was in support of small class teaching. She acknowledged that in its report published in February 2003, PAC had called for actions to reduce surplus school places, in particular those in the high cost and under-utilized primary schools. In addition, PAC also expressed concern about the inferior facilities and the small number of students in rural schools. It had urged the Administration to draw up action plans to transfer students attending rural schools to nearby standard schools as far as possible, so as to ensure that the students could learn in a suitable environment with better facilities.

30. Ms Emily LAU further said that PAC had a membership comprising representatives from different political parties and in the course of deliberating the Director of Audit's report on the planning and provision of primary school places, no member had voiced out any objection to the Director's recommendation to reduce surplus primary school places. She said that organizations concerned should reflect their views to PAC directly if they considered the findings or recommendations in an audit report had not taken into account or did not reflect the views of the affected parties. Ms LAU suggested that in the circumstances, the Administration should further consult

Action

the primary school sector on the proposed criteria for consolidating high cost and under-utilized primary schools before implementation.

31. The Chairman pointed out that members who were not familiar with the operation of rural schools and the significance of increasing the threshold for allocation of P1 classes from 16 to 23 students under the POS exercise could hardly reject the Director of Audit's recommendation to reduce surplus school places in the light of a fiscal deficit. He considered that in the face of a declining student population, the Administration should not increase the threshold from 16 to 23 without giving adequate notice to the schools.

32. Miss CHOY So-yuk said that the Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong strongly objected to the change in the number of student intake for allocation of P1 classes in the 2003 POA exercise without a thorough consultation. She considered that given the unanimous objection expressed by members and deputations, the Administration should withdraw its proposal on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools and refrain from persuading parents to change their choice of school for their children. She suggested that EMB should consult the stakeholders on the proposal and be more cautious in implementing a major policy change. She further suggested that EMB should consider adopting a progressive increase in student enrolment for allocation of P1 classes, say from 16 to 18 in the first year and from 18 to 20 in the second year, etc. She considered that the need to allocate a P1 class to certain schools should not be decided solely from the perspective of cost-effectiveness.

33. Mr SZETO Wah said that in view of the unanimous objection expressed by members and deputations in attendance, the Administration should freeze the implementation of the proposal on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools with immediate effect. He suggested the Administration to reconsider the adoption of small class teaching in schools with insufficient enrolment due to a declining student population. He also queried that the Administration had hitherto ignored the sub-standard learning environment in rural schools and should not make use of the proposed criteria to force them to close. He considered that the Administration should work out a long-term strategy for resolving the problems arising from a declining student population.

34. Mr Tommy CHEUNG declared interest as a member of PAC and expressed support for the reduction of surplus school places in primary schools. He stressed that the Liberal Party supported the policy direction to consolidate high cost and under-utilized primary schools. He said that it was reasonable for the Administration to make cost-effective use of limited resources, and it was unreasonable for a school with a very high unit cost to remain subsidized by public funds. Nevertheless, in view of the concerns of deputations, Mr CHEUNG suggested that the Administration should further consult the primary

Action

school sector on the minimum enrolment for allocation of P1 classes under the POA exercise.

35. Ms Cyd HO stressed that EMB should implement a new policy after extensive consultation with the affected parties. She questioned the rationale for the staff of SPAS to persuade parents to change their choice of schools, given that consultation on the proposal on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools was still in progress.

Adm

36. PEO(NT) responded that under the POA exercise, it was an established practice for staff members of SPAS to contact parents to assist them to find alternate school places for their children who were allocated discretionary school places in schools not allowed to operate P1 classes in the coming school year. Responding to Ms Cyd HO's request, he undertook to provide relevant statistics on the number of students who had been transferred to other schools through such arrangements.

37. The Chairman urged the Administration to consider the strong views of members and deputations on the requirement that schools would not be allocated a P1 class if it failed to attract 23 students or more in the 2003 POA exercise. He also suggested that the Administration should take the opportunity brought about by a declining population in the 6-11 age group to reduce class size by adopting small class teaching to improve the quality of basic education since it would enhance teaching and learning interactions between teachers and students in a classroom setting.

38. In response, DS(EM)4 said that the Administration would continue to listen to the views of the primary school sector on the criteria for consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools. He however pointed out that the criteria for allocating P1 classes under the POA exercise was a separate issue and was revised from a minimum enrolment of 16 to 23 students to enhance resources management and minimize under-enrolled classes in response to the Director of Audit and PAC's recommendation. He stressed that the revised standard for allocation of P1 classes was adopted after consultation.

39. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong expressed disagreement with the Administration's explanation. He remarked that the two issues were closely related since schools not allocated with a P1 class in 2003 would be excluded from the 2004 POA exercise. Under the proposed criteria for high cost and under-utilized primary schools, these schools would have to close after three years. Miss CHOY So-yuk shared the view of Mr CHEUNG and urged the Administration to freeze the implementation of the proposed criteria for consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools.

Action

Follow-up

40. In view of the serious consequence of increasing the threshold from 16 to 23 students for allocation of P1 classes, Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong moved and Miss CHOY So-yuk, Ms Audrey EU and Mr SZETO Wah seconded the following motion -

"That the Panel on Education calls for the Education and Manpower Bureau to withdraw its discussion paper entitled 'Consolidation of High Cost and Under-utilized Primary Schools', freeze immediately the implementation of the measures which include closing schools and arranging Primary One admission according to the criteria for such consolidation, discuss with the relevant bodies and reconsider the consolidation criterion that schools which fail to attract 23 or more students in the 2003 school year will not be allowed to operate Primary One classes."

As no member had raised objection, the motion was carried.

41. At Miss CHOY So-yuk's suggestion, members agreed that the Panel should schedule a special meeting to follow up discussion with SEM on the proposed criteria for consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools.

[*Post-meeting note* : The special meeting was scheduled for Monday, 23 June 2003 at 4:30 pm]

II. Any other business

42. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 7:20 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
23 July 2003