

**Extract from the minutes of meeting of
the Panel on Education on 18 November 2002**

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IV. Briefing by the Secretary for Education and Manpower
[LC Paper No. CB(2)155/02-03(01)]

"Teaching in small classes"

9. Referring to paragraph 18 of the Administration's paper, Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong expressed dissatisfaction that although the Administration was aware of the strong calls for a reduction in class size in primary education in the community, it still proposed to conduct a longitudinal study on the impact of "teaching in small classes" from the 2003-04 school year in order to find out the necessary pre-conditions and teaching strategies which would maximise the benefit of "teaching in small classes".

10. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong further said that an officer of ED had publicly announced that a longitudinal study on the impact of small class size would be conducted in 30 to 40 public sector primary schools with effect from the 2003-04 school year. Participating schools would try out the class size of about 20 students at the junior primary levels. Classes under the longitudinal study would be characterised by four categories, namely; classes of small size taught by teachers with professional training, classes of small size taught by teachers without professional training, classes of regular size taught by teachers with professional training, and classes of regular size taught by teachers without professional training. ED would evaluate the academic performance of participating students in Chinese, English and Mathematics, and observe the teaching activities to assess the impact of "teaching in small classes" on the process of teaching and learning. If justified, the longitudinal study would be extended to senior primary classes for another three years. In other words, a total of six years might be required for completing the longitudinal study. Mr CHEUNG questioned whether the Administration was using the longitudinal study as a delaying tactic. Mr CHEUNG also asked the Administration to clarify whether it had already taken a position on "teaching in small classes".

11. In response, SEM explained that although he personally was in favour of "teaching in small class", the impact of "teaching in small classes" on quality of education was a highly controversial issue among experts and there was so far no conclusive evidence on its effectiveness in teaching and learning. In fact, some experts had argued that the quality of teachers and teaching strategies

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were more important than class size on quality of education. Given the substantial resources required for implementing "teaching in small classes" in all public sector primary schools, the Administration would have to justify the benefits of "teaching in small classes" by way of conducting a longitudinal study in primary schools. The research design of the study was underway and one of the alternatives under consideration was that research method described by Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong. SEM highlighted that the objectives of the longitudinal study were to find out the relationship between "teaching in small classes" and its effectiveness on teaching and learning. The outcome of the longitudinal study would provide useful references for relevant policy consideration, including how the expertise and teaching strategies of teachers would affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning in classes of small and regular sizes. The Administration would formulate a long-term policy objective based on the findings of the empirical study.

12. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong stressed that provision of professional training for teachers and "teaching in small classes" were both essential to improve the quality of education, and the two should not be considered as mutually exclusive. He was concerned that the Administration sought to determine which one should be adopted for improving the quality of education by way of conducting the longitudinal study. Mr CHEUNG was also of the view that huge additional resources was not necessarily required to implement "teaching in small classes". Citing the experience in Shanghai, he urged the Administration to take the advantage of a decreasing birth rate and implement "teaching in small classes" in a gradual manner.

13. SEM responded that the Administration also attached great importance to professional training for teachers. He explained that the longitudinal study would assess the impact of professional training of "teaching in small classes" because whether suitable teaching strategies were adopted or not would affect the benefits of small class size. He added that the Administration was still considering different alternatives for conducting the longitudinal study, including its duration.

14. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung pointed out that reduction of the average number of students in primary classes by five and in secondary classes by two was a previous policy commitment but its implementation was deferred due to implementation of whole-day primary schooling and resources constraints. He expressed disappointment that the Administration had now changed its position and proposed to carry out a longitudinal study on "teaching in small classes" as an excuse to further defer the implementation. Mr LEUNG stressed that all teachers would support the implementation of "teaching in small classes" as it would definitely facilitate class management and improve student-teacher interactions in the classrooms. He considered the longitudinal study on the impact of small class size a waste of time and public resources.

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15. SEM responded that reducing the size of primary classes from 37 to 32 and secondary classes from 37 to 35 would not bring about substantial benefits to the teaching and learning activities in schools. He stressed that the longitudinal study would test the effectiveness of reducing class size to 20 on the quality of primary education, and the Administration did not seek to change its previous policy commitment. PSEM added that the primary objective of reducing class size was to improve student learning and not to reduce the workload of teachers. The latter could be achieved by other means, e.g. reducing the teaching load per week and unnecessary administrative work.

16. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung asked why the Administration did not fulfil its policy commitment to reduce primary school class size by five students. He also asked whether the Administration had worked out a comprehensive plan to implement "teaching in small classes" in all primary schools if the longitudinal study concluded that class size had a great impact on the quality of education. He doubted whether the Administration had the necessary resources to implement "teaching in small classes" in all primary schools at the same time.

17. SEM responded that the Administration considered that reducing the size of primary school classes by five students was not necessarily cost-effective having regard to the substantial costs incurred. The Administration was now aiming to ascertain the cost-effectiveness of reducing primary class size to 20. He stressed that the government had a great commitment to improve the quality of education as evidenced by a 47% increase of education allocation since 1997.

18. PSEM said that given the budgetary constraints and under the accountability system, the Administration was obliged to use the limited education resources on areas which would produce the maximum impact and which were in the best interest of students. Experience showed that marginal decrease in class size would not improve the effectiveness of learning. Taking reference from overseas experience, the proposed longitudinal study was designed to establish the cost-effectiveness of primary school classes with 20 students and the necessary supporting conditions. She added that despite a significant increase in education expenditure in recent years, there were criticisms that the overall quality of education had not shown a corresponding level of improvement. It was necessary for the Administration to conduct empirical researches to ascertain the most effective ways to improve quality of education.

19. Mr TSANG Yok-sing considered that the Administration should ascertain whether it had the resources to implement "teaching in small classes" in all schools before conducting the longitudinal study. He also expressed doubt about the usefulness of empirical research on formulation of education policies because there would be too many variables which could not be controlled in reality. Mr TSANG pointed out that most education researches

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had failed to provide conclusive evidence for policy formulation purpose. He said that it was natural that classes which were of a smaller size and taught by trained teachers would achieve the best result in terms of quality of education. Mr TSANG held the view that a slight reduction of class size in primary school classes would definitely help reduce teachers' workload and improve communications between teachers and students in a classroom setting. He asked whether the Government would consider allowing class sizes in schools to reduce as a result of the decreasing number of children of school age.

20. SEM responded that the Administration did not consider it appropriate to make a decision on whether "teaching in small classes" should be implemented and budget funds for it before the findings of the longitudinal study on the impact of small class size were available. He agreed that a slight reduction in class size might help improve the quality of education, but the actual benefits would have to be assessed by way of empirical research. SEM stressed that the longitudinal study would help determine the optimal class size for primary education and identify the role and functions of teachers in the teaching and learning in both small and regular classes. The Administration would formulate its policies and implementation strategies for cost-effective use of education resources after a careful examination of the results of the longitudinal study. PSEM supplemented that the longitudinal study on the impact of small class size was still at its planning stage. The Administration would consider members' views on the research design.

21. Mr SZETO Wah also questioned the usefulness of conducting the longitudinal study on the impact of small class size. He queried whether the results of "teaching in small classes" could be assessed if only one class in each pilot school was under study. He added that the benefits of "teaching in small classes" to teachers and students were apparent.

22. The Chairman, Mr TSANG Yok-sing and Mr SZETO Wah suggested that the Administration should consider maintaining the education allocation to primary schools at the current level and allow primary schools to operate smaller classes in case their student intake decreased as a result of a declining birth rate.

23. SEM responded that to ensure cost-effective use of the said funds, the Administration would have to carefully assess the cost-effectiveness of "teaching in small classes" before allowing schools to operate smaller classes. PSEM supplemented that many existing primary school classes had less than 25 students, e.g. remedial classes only have 12 to 15 students. However, the effectiveness was dubious. She agreed that the declining birth rate provided an opportunity to reduce the class size in primary schools, but pointed out that the population projection showed an upward trend in the longer term. PSEM stressed that to establish a long-term policy on reduction of class size would require corresponding changes to the pedagogy, should be based on solid

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evidence of positive learning outcome, and would be subject to the availability of resources.

24. Mr SZETO Wah remarked that implementation of "teaching in small classes" should be complemented by appropriate established policies, teachers' training and changes in school administration. He said that the Administration should have listened to the views of frontline teachers on the merits of "teaching in small classes" rather than relying on the results of a longitudinal study. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung expressed the same view. He pointed out that the merits of a smaller class size could well be reflected by the results of remedial classes in secondary school.

25. SEM reiterated that given the tight government finance caused by the financial crisis situation, the Government must assess the cost-effectiveness of different policy options in a very prudent manner. Since overseas empirical results had not come up with any conclusive results on the impact of small class size, the Administration considered it necessary to conduct a local longitudinal study before formulating its policy on the matter. PSEM supplemented that the results of remedial classes in primary schools were not quite encouraging

26. Citing his experience in teaching in remedial classes at primary schools, Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong pointed out that "teaching in small classes" in primary education would be of great help to academically low achievers at their early ages.

27. Mr Tommy CHEUNG expressed concerns about the financial implications of implementing the education reform on teaching and learning. He asked whether the Administration had set a long-term target percentage of education allocation to gross domestic product or public expenditure. Mr CHEUNG pointed out that while "teaching in small classes" and quality of teachers were important in provision of quality education, the costs incurred should be considered first. He pointed out that reducing the student-teacher ratio could also improve quality of education in the long run. Mr CHEUNG requested the Administration to provide estimates on the financial, space and manpower resources required for implementing "teaching in small classes". He also asked whether the student-teacher ratio in local schools was comparable to those of their western counterparts and whether whole-day primary schooling would be fully implemented in 2007.

28. SEM responded that the current student-teacher ratio of 20.8:1 was comparable to those of the western countries. Subject to economic development, the Administration anticipated that the target of extending whole-day schooling to all primary schools would be achieved by the 2007-08 school year. He explained that the financial, space and manpower resources required for implementing "teaching in small classes" would depend on the scope of

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implementation in primary schools, which would in turn depend on the outcome of the longitudinal study on the impact of small class size. Nevertheless, SEM undertook to provide some relevant figures in his speech to be made during the motion debate on "Teaching in small classes" at the Council meeting on 27 November 2002.

29. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong remarked that although the student-teacher ratio of 20.8:1 was not unsatisfactory, it should be noted that local teachers was required to conduct some 30 to 34 lectures a week. Compared to around 20 lectures conducted by their counterpart in the Mainland, the workload of local teachers was much heavier. Mr CHEUNG also considered that the birth rate in Hong Kong was unlikely to have an upward trend. He acknowledged that it would be impossible to implement "teaching in small classes" in all schools at the same time in view of the huge costs required. He stressed that the current decrease in number of students in some old districts provided a golden opportunity for progressive implementation of "teaching in small classes" in certain schools. The Administration should monitor and evaluate the progress of these smaller classes on a continuous basis and allow discrepancies in their results since the curriculum, teachers and students in these schools and classes were different. Mr SZETO Wah echoed that an incremental implementation of "teaching in small classes" was a more practical approach.

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Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
12 December 2002