

Information Paper for Circulation

**Legislative Council Panel on Education**  
**Services for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)**

**Purpose**

This paper summarizes the services provided by the Education Department (ED) for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD), with special attention to special examination arrangements (SEA) for this group of students.

**Overview of SpLD in the School Context**

2. Students may manifest one or more types of SpLD, the most common type being SpLD in reading and writing (dyslexia). These students have serious and persistent difficulties in learning to read and spell/ write, despite having had normal instructions and learning opportunities. In general, the accompanying weaknesses may be identified in memory and slower speed in information processing, phonological processing, visual and auditory skills, concentration, telling left from right, sequencing skills and organization. Nonetheless, it is independent of socio-economic status or language background.

3. In the past few years, ED has gradually built up a full range of support to this group of students, including the development of local screening and assessment tools for students aged 6-12, school-based and territory-wide training for teachers, publication of guidelines to schools on how to accommodate the needs of these students, development of resource packages and computer software to support remedial interventions, leaflets and publicity materials to enhance public awareness, and learning support workshops for parents. An updated list of educational services for students with SpLD is in Appendix 1.

4. Similar to the practice of most countries, students with SpLD are accommodated in mainstream schools in Hong Kong. Those requiring intensive remedial service receive it either at school or at off-site remedial centers operated by ED. Commencing this academic year, schools are encouraged to implement a whole school approach to supporting these students so that not only the remedial teacher but all the teachers should be involved. Schools should develop a whole school policy specifying early identification and intervention of learning difficulties, monitoring of progress, assessment adaptation, curriculum differentiation, in-service training of teachers and parental involvement. With these whole school practices, the more severe cases of SpLD could be monitored and the

rates of progress in response to intervention would be discussed at school meetings. Schools requiring additional support can contact ED for advice. In the past years, a total of 116 schools were provided with school-based training and follow-up-support on the implementation of the whole school approach to catering for students with special education needs. In the 2002/03 school year, ED is providing on-site support to another 40 primary schools on the implementation of the whole school approach.

### **Special Examination Arrangements (SEA)**

5. SpLD is one kind of learning difficulties that may give rise to a need for special examination arrangements. This is because students with SpLD are likely to have experienced difficulties in several areas, in particular, in reading accuracy, reading speed, spelling/dictation, handwriting speed and legibility and so forth. In order that the candidate with SpLD will be given a fair chance to show his/ her knowledge on the subject to be examined, special examination arrangements (SEA) in the form of allowance for special conditions under which the examinations are taken should be provided.

### **Internal Assessments**

6. Depending on the needs of the students, special arrangements for internal tests and examinations may include (i) extra time allowance (ii) special arrangement in the presentation / layout of the question paper, e.g. a larger print version, more space for answers, avoid using separate answer sheets for younger students etc. (iii) reading of questions to students where there is a considerable discrepancy between reading ability and reasoning ability, and (iv) for students demonstrating extreme writing difficulties, allow underlining or encircling the correct answers in the passage instead of copying from the passage, or allow for the use of a word processor.

7. The learning support plans for students with SpLD should include both the teaching adaptations required as well as any special assessment arrangements, as the two are closely linked together. Schools should develop these learning support plans in consultation with the parents concerned. If the curriculum has been tailored to meet a student's special needs, the content as well as the method of assessment should also be adjusted accordingly.

8. Schools have been reminded to critically review their assessment methods to ensure that they serve the purpose of the assessment. They should also avoid over-reliance on factual recall to demonstrate mastery of the subject content, or over-reliance on reading or writing as a method of assessment. Alternative methods such as portfolio assessment, oral

tests/ examinations, the use of drawings/ graphs instead of written answers etc. can be considered. Project learning which is one of the focuses of the curriculum reform enhances the shift of attention from summative assessments to more flexible formative assessments.

9. The overall shift of attention and requirements in assessments can be found in our education blueprint for the 21st Century – “Learning for Life Learning through Life” (2000). More specifically, schools have been informed of the above principles of assessment in ED publications - “Teachers’ Guide on Understanding and Helping Students with SEN”(2001) and the “Guide to Internal Assessment” for primary schools (June 2002).

### **Special Examination Arrangements (SEA) in Public Examinations**

10. As opposed to internal assessment at school, SEA for high-stake public examinations are strictly governed by a set of regulations and procedures. The application submitted by the school for SEA for individual candidates should generally include:

- relevant and updated diagnostic assessment reports by the medical practitioners or specialists;
- evidence of the extent to which the candidate is disadvantaged because of his/ her SpLD;
- documentation regarding what special arrangements have been made to enable the candidate to overcome his or her disability in school work and in school assessment; and
- the school should make recommendations on the kind of special arrangements needed, based on evidence of practice at the school. Parents would be consulted.

11. SEA in public examinations do not allow for changes in the examination contents so that the SpLD candidates will not have an unfair advantage over other candidates in the same examination. No special arrangements will be allowed if they interfere with the assessment objective, e.g. no spell check is allowed in the English examination.

12. The resource and costs implications of SEA for public examinations must be considered and a funding model must be developed.

13. To give due consideration of all the factors in this complex issue, a task group has recently been set up under the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority (HKEAA)’s Committee on Processing of Applications from Candidates with Disabilities. The task group will plan and formulate guidelines on the processing of applications for

special examination arrangements from candidates with SpLD. The composition of the task group include educational psychologists from ED and secondary schools, a representative from the Child Assessment Centres of the Department of Health as well as two secondary school principals and HKEAA staff. The first meeting of the task group will take place on 13 December this year. In the United Kingdom, the common practice is to give a 25% additional time allowance. While the situation in the United States of America is more diverse, ranging from 20% to 100%. ED would propose to follow overseas practices and recommend a simpler and the least restrictive form of concession, i.e., giving 25% additional time allowance for proven SpLD cases at external examinations. This proposal has yet to be discussed at the meetings of the task group.

14. The number of applications for SEA in public examinations in the coming two years is anticipated to be small. For cases known to ED up to September 2002, there were thirteen cases in S3, eight in S4 and one in S5. The need of these cases for SEA was individually reviewed in the summer of 2002. The parents and/or students were interviewed on the present accommodations provided by the schools and their needs at examinations. On the basis of the findings, ED will alert schools concerned to apply for SEA in public examinations for those senior secondary students with SpLD accordingly.

15. ED had held meetings with advocacy groups such as the Hong Kong Society of Child Neurology and Developmental Paediatrics and the Support Group on Integrated Education to listen to their concerns about SEA in public examinations. These meetings have proved to be fruitful and liaison with these groups to exchange views will be maintained. A meeting with another group, the HK Association of Specific Learning Difficulties has also been scheduled for late December 2002.

### **Implications on Teachers' Training**

16. The whole school approach to catering for students with special education needs mentioned above at paragraph 4 involves all teachers and carry messages for teachers about how they should provide for students' learning. ED will arrange a 30-hour teacher training programme to at least one teacher in each primary and secondary school. There will also be a one-day training for all principals on the concept and implementation of the whole school approach.

### **Concluding Remarks**

17. ED will continue to enhance the support services for students with SpLD to develop

their full potentials. Support is rendered through:

- (i) developing specific resources such as teaching programmes on the web for teachers and parents;
- (ii) reviewing the existing funding and resource provisions with a view to maximizing their cost-effectiveness;
- (iii) developing a system of self-evaluation and self-improvement in schools to cater for the diverse needs of their students; and
- (iv) providing guidance to schools on reviewing their assessment practice, as well as supporting HKEAA in developing a set of guidelines for candidates with SpLD sitting the public examinations.

Education Department

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## **Summary of resources provided by the Education Department for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) (as on 1. 12.02)**

### **1. Identification and Assessment Tools**

- The Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Behaviour Checklist for Primary School pupils (for use by teachers) (First published in 2000, Revised in 2002)
- The Hong Kong Test of Specific Learning Difficulties in Reading and Writing (HKT-SpLD) (for use by professional psychologists) (2000)

### **2. Resources for Teachers**

- 認識讀寫障礙 – a leaflet published by the Joint Research Team of the University of Hong Kong, Chinese University of Hong Kong and ED (2000)
- 教學建議：幫助有特殊學習困難的學童 “Helping children with SpLD : Teaching Suggestions” (booklet on teaching suggestions accompanying the Behaviour Checklist for teachers) (2000)
- 寫樂讀 “Fun with Reading and Writing” – a resource pack consisting of one CD ROM, one electronic book on CD and 4 books on teaching strategies, teaching demonstrations and worksheets for use by primary school teachers (Published in September 2002)
- 學得生動、教得輕鬆：如何幫助有讀寫困難的學童 – Multi-media CD-ROM with pdf files for SGO/SGP to conduct school-based training for teachers at school to promote awareness, early identification and teaching strategies (2001)
- 認識及幫助有特殊教育需要的學生：教學指引 “Understanding and Helping Students with Special Educational Needs” (Section 5.9 Helping students with SpLD) (2001)
- 為普通學校有特殊教育需要學生提供的支援服務資料冊 “Information Guide to Support Services for Students with Special Educational Needs in Ordinary Schools” – It provides school personnel with easy reference on educational support services and community-based resources in catering for the diverse needs of students (2002)
- 消除殘疾歧視：家校合作及調解機制- a pamphlet on the “Code of Practice on Education” under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance have been published to enhance public awareness to ensure equal opportunity in Education Department (2002)

- Regular articles on SpLD in “Teachers’ Digest (教師文摘)” and in the media to enhance public awareness
- The website of the Special Education Resource Centre (SERC) provides useful information and resources on SpLD and links to other relevant websites (<http://serc.ed.gov.hk>)

In the process of development, to be published in the 2002/2003 school year:

- A CD ROM of computer games for students to develop Chinese word recognition skills, based on the cognitive deficits identified on the HKT-SpLD (Expected date of completion: February 2003)
- “Colour Phonics” - A CD ROM of computer games for students with SpLD to develop phonics skills in English (Expected date of completion: August 2003)
- “The Indicators For Inclusion” for self-evaluation of inclusive practices by schools (Ready for try out in schools in the 2002/03 school year)

### **3. Resources for Parents**

- 家長錦囊：孩子有讀寫困難怎麼辦 – multi-media CD-ROM with an accompanying leaflet for SGO/SGP to conduct training for parents to enhance awareness, early identification and management of SpLD (Published in November 2002)
- 關懷子女、輔導成長 – leaflet to help parents identify the learning difficulties of their children, including SpLD (2002)
- The computer software being developed by ED will also be made available to parents. In addition, all parents can utilize the resources available from the website of the Special Education Resource Centre.
- The Parent Education Section of ED has approved the funding application of the Hong Kong Association of Specific Learning Disabilities, a parents’ organization, to hire the service of a social worker to provide more intensive psycho-social support to the parents and children of the Association.

### **4. Teacher Training**

- In the past few years, over 7000 teachers of 200 schools were provided with school-based training on Specific Learning Difficulties by ED. Similar training will be provided to about 60 schools in the current school year. Territory-wide and regional seminars, workshops and experience-sharing sessions for teachers are being regularly organized. Overseas experts have been invited to conduct training.

- SpLD is incorporated in the induction course for school guidance personnel.
- ED will continue to convey to the teacher training institutes the need to strengthen the pre-service, in-service and refresher teacher training programmes to better equip teachers to help pupils with SpLD and address individual differences in learning.
- In order to enhance the implementation of the “Whole School Approach”, ED will fund a large scale training programme to enable at least one teacher from each primary and secondary school in Hong Kong to attend a 30-hour training course on understanding and supporting students with special educational needs, including specific learning difficulties. A separate course for all school principals will be organized. This training programme is anticipated to take place in the latter half of the 2002/03 school year.
- Training is also given to non-government agencies (such as Boys’ and Girls’ Club and children’s homes) to enhance social workers and related professionals’ understanding of SpLD.

#### **5. Direct Services to support individual students with SpLD after assessment**

- The following services are provided for individual students and their parents following assessment: (a) learning support Workshops for parents to acquire the principles and strategies to enhance their children’s learning; (b) parents’ counseling groups for psycho-social support at the Special Education Services Centres (\* (a) and (b) will gradually become more school-based) (c) Case conferences and consultation at schools to communicate assessment findings to teachers and to develop an education plan on learning and psycho-social support at school; and (d) Intensive remedial services, either school-based or provided at the Resource Teaching Centres, for students who are considerably behind in their literacy and academic attainment.

#### **6. Measures to strengthen support to primary schools under the Education Reform and the Curriculum Reform**

Schools can utilize the following additional resources flexibly to cater for the needs of students with SpLD:

- Starting from the 2002/03 school year, \$120 millions will be earmarked to improve the Student Guidance Service in primary schools.
- By the 2004/05 school year, each primary school will be provided with an additional graduate teacher for a period of five years to lead curriculum development and support other teachers and specialist staff to improve learning and teaching strategies and adapt the curriculum, including for students with SpLD.



- From the 2002/03 school year to the 2007/08 school year, the Education Department will provide the school-based “Educational Psychological Services” progressively for 200 primary schools to assist schools in preventing and tackling the learning and developmental difficulties of students.
- The government has set aside \$50 millions to support activities relating to home-school co-operation and parent education.

## **7. Ongoing Research in Specific Learning Difficulties**

- A joint research team comprising participation from the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and ED has been established, which has led to the development of the screening and assessment tools (see Item 1). The team will continue to develop remedial programmes and to further research into the psychological and educational aspects of SpLD.
- A project aimed at the early identification of children with poor phonological awareness in English and who may be at risk of reading failure is being conducted in nine primary schools in the 2002/03 school year, in collaboration with Prof. L. Siegel of University of British Columbia in Canada. Teachers are trained to conduct the assessment for early identification and to carry out early intervention with the aim of providing early support to children with potential reading difficulties.

## **8. Resources for the Public**

- 消除殘疾歧視:家校合作及調解機制- a pamphlet on the “Code of Practice on Education” under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance have been published to enhance public awareness of equal opportunity in education (2002).
- Regular articles on SpLD in “Teachers’ Digest (教師文摘)” and in the media to enhance public awareness.
- The website of the Special Education Resource Centre (SERC) provides useful information and resources on SpLD and links to other relevant websites (<http://serc.ed.gov.hk>).