

**Information requested by the
Public Accounts Committee**

1. Clerk's letter of 11 December 2003

- (a) Packing under-enrolled classes is a regular exercise conducted by the EMB to maximise the utilisation of school places. In implementing this measure, we would take into account educational and administrative factors to minimise disruption to both the schools and the students. For example, it will be most disruptive to schools' time-tabling and planned activities to pack classes right at the beginning of a school year immediately after the headcount. A more practicable way is to pack classes by approving fewer classes at the next higher levels before finalising the class structure for the following school year, having regard to the existing enrolment situation. The number of classes reduced through this exercise in the last three years is as follows —

2001/02 School Year	2002/03 School Year	2003/04 School Year
2 classes	14 classes	49 classes*

* This is the actual number of classes packed. The Audit Report has referred to the estimated number of 50.

The notional savings are estimated to be about \$2.6 million in the 2001/02 school year, \$18.6 million in the 2002/03 school year and \$64 million in the 2003/04 school year.

- (b) The Audit visits were carried out in September 2003 independently without our knowledge. As far as Schools A to D referred to in paragraphs 2.5 to 2.16 of Audit Report No.41 are concerned, they have actually made use of their vacant classrooms for educational purposes. Some of the rooms with expensive equipment are locked up when they are not in use for security reasons. The details are as follows —

School A : The five vacant classrooms have been used as multi-media learning centre, self-access learning

rooms and religious room pending the gradual phasing in of the ultimate class structure. They have been frequently used by students, especially during recess and lunchtime.

School B : All five vacant classrooms have been actively in use. Two classrooms have been used as multi-media learning centre and computer room. The other three have been used for remedial/split class teaching.

School C : The five vacant classrooms have been used for split class teaching.

School D : Three vacant classrooms have been used for remedial/split class teaching. Another three have been used as student guidance room, teaching resource room, and language laboratory/ETV room. They were actively used throughout the year. The remaining one was held for reserve purposes. (Separately, classrooms for S5 and S7 were locked up during the HKCEE and HKAL examination periods when students had already left school.)

2. Clerk's letter of 18 December 2003

- (a) In the Audit Report, the number of “vacant classrooms” refers to the numerical difference between the number of classrooms as registered with this Bureau and the number of approved classes. The term “vacant classrooms” does not carry its intuitive meaning that the classrooms are left vacant. Although no formal surveys on classroom utilisation are conducted, we maintain a good understanding of the use of space in school premises for teaching and support purposes through regular school visits, as well as schools’ formal notification of or application for change of designated use of rooms. As Members may know, compared to the Year 2000 school design, many existing schools are accommodated in sub-standard premises. It is indeed common that many secondary schools with “vacant classroom” have expressed difficulties in finding enough space for various educational activities. In response to the Audit Report, we have specifically checked out the situation of the 50 schools identified and confirmed that the “vacant classrooms” are put to beneficial

use for students. We will continue to keep a vigilant eye on classroom utilisation to optimise the use of resources.

- (b) The overall “vacant classroom” rate, according to the Audit definition, since the 1993/94 school year is provided in the Annex. Members may wish to note that over the years more schools have rationalised their class structures transforming from asymmetrical (e.g. 6-6-6-4-4-2-2-) to symmetrical ones (e.g. 5-5-5-5-5-2-2). It is educationally undesirable to use up every registered classroom to operate additional classes if such an arrangement would result in an asymmetrical class structure. As explained above, “vacant classrooms” have generally been put to good use for the benefits of students. Furthermore, a few reserve classrooms can be used as a small buffer for operating additional classes to meet sudden, transient changes in demand.
- (c) The Government has been buying places from Caput Schools since the 1970s’ and administered the scheme through the Caput Grant Rules. While there is no contractual or legal obligation for the Government to continue buying the places at all levels. Caput schools may expect the Government to continue to allow them to retain their caput status, to process their class structure in a way similar to their counterparts in the aided sector, and to provide parents with choice of school places. There are some caput schools with full enrolment even though they are in districts with declining demand for school places. From an educational point of view, the Government should reward good performance and not withdraw subvention from popular schools. We will consider phasing out subvention for Caput schools which are weak in performance and are grossly under-enrolled.
- (d) The 34 new schools referred to in the Audit Report were taken from the School Building Programme as at March 2003 and they were required to meet new demand. Of these 34 schools, 14 have come into operation in the 2003-04 school year. The School Building Programme was updated in the last quarter of 2003, taking into account the latest forecast in supply and demand of school places. With a forecast shortfall of 423 classes, we plan to complete 19 new secondary schools between 2004 and 2007, in order to meet the Government’s pledge of providing nine-year free and universal basic education for all eligible children and subsidised senior secondary places for form three students who have the ability and wish to continue their study. In addition, our

current Programme has included seven new secondary school projects which are planned for reprovisioning or redeveloping existing schools. Upon reprovisioning, it is our general policy to require the school sponsoring bodies concerned to surrender the vacated premises to the Government for alternative use, including for other educational purposes, such as re-allocation to other school sponsors after appropriate conversion or redevelopment.

- (e) Reprovisioning and redevelopment of schools accommodated in sub-standard premises is a long-term target and the number of schools to be included is subject to availability of funds and land. We aim to take forward a rolling programme, covering a few schools each year at the initial stage. Although numerous existing schools are still accommodated in substandard premises, many of them have been provided with reasonable improvements in facilities and premises under the School Improvement Programme.

Annex

“Vacant Classroom” Rates in Public Sector Secondary Schools (Since 1993/94 School Year)

School Year	“Vacant Classroom” Rate
2003/04	1.4%
2002/03	1.4%
2001/02	1.3%
2000/01	1.3%
1999/00	1.1%
1998/99	0.8%
1997/98	0.7%
1996/97	0.7%
1995/96	0.6%
1994/95	0.5%
1993/94	0.5%

Note : The number of “vacant classrooms” refers to the numerical difference between the number of registered classrooms and the number of operating classes.