

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)2790/03-04

(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/ED

Panel on Education

**Minutes of meeting
held on Monday, 19 April 2004 at 4:30 pm
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

- Members present** : Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung, BBS (Chairman)
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum (Deputy Chairman)
Dr Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
Hon SIN Chung-kai
Hon Jasper TSANG Yok-sing, GBS, JP
Hon Emily LAU Wai-hing, JP
Hon SZETO Wah
Dr Hon LO Wing-lok, JP
Hon WONG Sing-chi
Hon Audrey EU Yuet-mee, SC, JP
Hon MA Fung-kwok, JP
- Member absent** : Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP
- Public Officers attending** : Item IV
Mr CHENG Yan-chee
Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (4)

Ms Mimi LEE
Principal Assistant Secretary for Education and
Manpower (Quality Education)

Mr SHE Mang
Principal Inspector (Regional Support) Education and
Manpower Bureau

Item V

Mr CHENG Yan-chee
Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (4)

Mr K S LEE
Principal Assistant Secretary for Education and
Manpower (School Development)

Attendance by invitation : Item V

Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union

Mr LEE Fu-sing
Executive Council Member

Hong Kong Taoist Association Tong Tang Sook Fong
Memory School

Mr WONG Kin-ming
Deputy Head

Kiu Saw Public School

Mr CHUNG Kuen-wah
Supervisor

Mr FUNG Suk-kai
Principal

Ho Fai Primary School

Mr CHAN Ying-kwan
Head Teacher

Hoi Ming School

Mr CHUNG Lap-chung
Head Master

Mr HO Kin-choi
Assistant Master

Clerk in attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Council Secretary (2)2

Staff in attendance : Mr Stanley MA
Senior Council Secretary (2)6

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I. Confirmation of minutes

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)2015/03-04 and CB(2)2016/03-04]

The minutes of the meetings held on 16 February and 15 March 2004 were confirmed.

II. Information paper(s) issued since the last meeting

2. Members noted the following papers -

LC Paper No. CB(2)1770/03-04(01) -- Paper provided by the Administration on "Bullying in schools"

LC Paper No. CB(2)2018/03-04(01) -- Questions raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong on the Administration's paper on "Bullying in schools"

LC Paper No. CB(2)2018/03-04(02) -- The Administration's response to the questions raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong on "Bullying in schools"

LC Paper No. CB(2)1994/03-04(01) -- Response from the University Grants Committee on the supply of teacher education places for the 2005 - 2008 triennium

3. Referring to the Administration's response to his questions on bullying in schools [LC Paper No.CB(2)2018/03-04(02)], Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong

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requested the Administration to provide a breakdown of the results of the survey on each item. The Chairman instructed the Clerk to follow up with the Administration on the matter.

[Post-meeting note : The Administration's further response was issued to members vide LC Paper No. CB(2)2347/03-04 on 13 May 2004.]

III. Items for discussion at the next meeting

[Appendices I and II to LC Paper No. CB(2)2013/03-04]

4. Members noted that the Administration had not proposed any items for discussion at the next meeting. Members agreed to discuss "Review on the handling of missing examination scripts by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority" at the next meeting scheduled for 17 May 2004 at 4:30 pm.

IV. Way forward on Information Technology in education

[LC Paper No. CB(2)1979/03-04(01)]

5. At the invitation of the Chairman, Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (4) (DS(EM)4) briefed members on the main points of the Administration's paper on the subject.

Financial implications

6. Mr SIN Chung-kai asked the Administration to elaborate on the financial implications of implementing the strategic measures on the development and applications of information technology (IT) in school education proposed in the Administration's paper. He pointed out that as proposed in the 2004 Appropriation Bill, the Government had allocated a recurrent budget of about \$280 million for the developments in the use of IT in education.

7. DS(EM)4 responded that the Government had allocated some \$2,080 million for the implementation of the five-year strategy in the use of IT for learning in schools during the 1998-99 to 2002-03 school years. The allocation was mainly deployed on the provision of hardware equipment and development of education software to support learning and teaching in schools, and the training of teachers to become facilitators for student learning in classrooms. He explained that the non-recurrent budget for the use of IT in education in the next three years would depend on the outcome of the current consultation with the key stakeholders and the community as a whole. Based on the outcome of the consultation, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) would proceed to bid the necessary funding support for implementing the strategic measures to achieve the finalized goals in the use of IT in education. He added that the

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Five-year Strategy had successfully built up a foundation for further development of IT in education and the non-recurrent expenditure for implementing the IT strategy in the next three years (the Next Strategy) would be lower than that of the previous five years.

8. Mr SIN Chung-kai expressed reservations about the Administration's estimate that the non-recurrent expenditure for IT in education in the next three years would be lower than that of the previous years. He pointed out that the IT trade was of the view that the average life span of computer hardware was around four years. He suggested that the Administration should set aside sufficient non-recurrent provisions for upgrading or replacing obsolete IT equipment to support the increasing learning and teaching needs in schools in order to promote the long-term competitiveness of Hong Kong in the international arena.

9. DS(EM)4 responded that the Administration acknowledged the importance of making use of the up-to-date IT equipment and systems in school education. According to a recent survey, around 30% of the computers in schools had been installed for around five years. The Administration would monitor the situation and arrange replacement of the outdated computers in implementing the Next Strategy.

The position of Hong Kong in the use of IT in education

10. Mr SIN Chung-kai referred to a white paper entitled "2003 e-learning readiness rankings" published by the Economic Intelligence Unit in cooperation with the International Business Machines. He pointed out that in terms of the application of e-learning in education, Hong Kong ranked at 19 while South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan ranked at 5, 6 and 16 respectively. He asked the Administration about the current and future positions of Hong Kong in comparison with its neighbouring jurisdictions on the use of IT in school education after implementation of the next Strategy.

[Post-meeting note : The paper entitled "2003 e-learning readiness rankings" was subsequently sent to members vide LC Paper No.CB(2)2154/03-04 on 26 April 2004.]

11. DS(EM)4 responded that Hong Kong compared favourably with its neighbouring countries in the Asian region. He pointed out that the implementation of the Five-year Strategy had laid the necessary infrastructure, provided teachers with basic training on the use of IT, and collected a rich repository of digital education resources. There was now a computer for every 4.4 and 11 students in secondary and primary schools respectively. In contrast, South Korea provided one computer for every 10, seven and five students in primary, junior and senior secondary schools respectively. At present, all schools in Hong Kong had broadband connection to the Internet, all teachers had

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completed IT training at the basic level. In particular, the Hong Kong Education City (HKEdCity) was launched in August 2000 to serve and promote quality education and IT for lifelong and life-wide learning. HkEd City was corporatized in 2002 and would aim at providing an e-learning and e-business platform for teachers, parents and students.

12. DS(EM)4 further said that the Administration had commissioned the University of Hong Kong to conduct an interim review on the effectiveness of the Five-year Strategy in 2001, the results of which had confirmed the effectiveness of hardware provisions to schools, the need for improvements in teachers enablement and in particular, the integration of IT in learning and teaching. The Administration had also commissioned the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) to review the overall progress of the Five-year Strategy. The review would examine the readiness of schools, teachers and students to use IT for enhancing the effectiveness of learning and teaching. The review would be substantially completed by mid-2004 and provide pointers to fine-tune the strategy and the implementation plan for IT education in the next three years.

13. DS(EM)4 added that an IT committee under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization had recently conducted an analysis on the use of IT in education for a total of 17 Asian countries. The analysis had found that the developed countries such as South Korea, Australia and Singapore in general had a high student-to-computer ratio and made use of advanced IT facilities and intranets in school education. Most importantly, IT was an indispensable element in the development and delivery of the school curriculum, and e-learning was gradually being adopted in learning and teaching. On the basis of these parameters, the development of IT in education in Hong Kong in the past few years did not compare unfavourably with that in the countries mentioned.

14. Mr SIN Chung-kai asked whether the Next Strategy would set out the benchmarks for assessing the IT developments in education in the next three years. He considered that the Administration should set out the standards to be achieved and compare the developments of Hong Kong with similar developments in other jurisdictions in the use of IT in education on an on-going basis.

15. DS(EM)4 responded that the report of the PolyU on the overall progress of the Five-year Strategy would provide the baseline for planning the future developments of IT in education.

16. Principal Assistant Secretary for Education and Manpower (Quality Education) (PAS(QE)) supplemented that unlike its popularity in countries with a large territory, e-learning in Hong Kong mainly played a supplementary role to mainstream classroom education in schools under the Five-year Strategy.

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Nevertheless, EMB recognised the wide applications and importance of e-learning in the promotion of lifelong and life-wide learning, and would aim at promoting e-learning as a means to break through the physical barrier of classroom learning under the Next Strategy. She added that as an initial stage of development in the use of IT in education, the Five-year Strategy had focused more on the establishment of a basic infrastructure than on the development of e-learning for school education.

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17. Ms Emily LAU said that she shared the views and concerns of Mr SIN Chung-kai on the development and use of IT in school education. She expressed disappointment that while the Administration had claimed a pioneering role in the use of IT in the delivery of public services, it had lagged behind the neighbouring countries in the use of IT in education and in particular, in the application of e-learning for teaching and learning. She asked how Hong Kong compared with the advanced countries in terms of the number of computers at the household level. Ms LAU also requested the Administration to provide relevant figures which would indicate the current situation of Hong Kong in the use of IT in education in comparison with other countries.

18. DS(EM)4 responded that although Hong Kong started a bit slower in the application of e-learning, it compared favourably with other countries in terms of the average number of computers in school, the training of teachers in the use of IT, and the provision of digital education resources to schools. According to the household survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department in the second quarter of 2003, 91.3% of household units with a child aged at 10 or above had a personal computer at home. This was a marked improvement compared with the situation a few years ago. He added that under the Five-year Strategy, a number of measures had been implemented to enhance students' access to IT facilities, including the provision of an incentive grant to over 1 000 public sector schools to extend the opening hours of computer rooms for use by students after school. PAS(QE) supplemented that according to an independent study conducted by the University of Hong Kong on the use of IT in education in different jurisdictions, some six to eight cases in Hong Kong were graded as outstanding achievements in an international context.

Support for use of IT in school education

19. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong considered that the community would not accept Hong Kong's continued ranking at the bottom among the "four dragons" in the use of IT in education. He expressed concern that the policy decision to discontinue the provision of IT Co-ordinators in schools would jeopardize further developments in the use of IT in education. He pointed out that although teachers were trained on the use of IT in teaching, they would not be able to keep pace with the on-going developments of IT and serve the role of IT Co-ordinators to identify the latest and appropriate IT developments for applications in school education. Mr CHEUNG questioned how the Administration could

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achieve the goals in its paper without the provision of IT Co-ordinators in schools and suggested that the Administration should withhold the implementation of the policy until the result of the overall review of the Five-year Strategy was known.

20. DS(EM)4 responded that the provision of IT Co-ordinators was aimed at assisting schools in the use of IT in education under the Five-year Strategy. He pointed out that all teachers had now completed basic IT training and many of them had achieved the intermediate and upper intermediate level in the use of IT in education. To provide schools with flexibility in the use of IT grants, the Administration was considering merging the various IT grants now being disbursed to schools to enable schools to employ IT Co-ordinators if they considered it necessary.

21. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong pointed out that teachers were trained to use IT in enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning, but were not professionally trained to handle procurement, management and maintenance of computers and networks, and use of IT across the curriculum. He strongly suggested that the Administration should continue the provision of IT Co-ordinators to enhance the use of IT in education to improve the ranking of Hong Kong in comparison with its competitors in the years to come. Ms Emily LAU said that she shared the views and concerns of Mr CHEUNG.

The Next Strategy and implementation measures

22. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung agreed that the Five-year Strategy had improved the use of IT in enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning in school education, such as the publication of the “Basic Education Curriculum Guide – Building on Strengths” by the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) in 2002 which provided, among others, guidance to schools on fostering an appropriate environment for interactive learning with IT, and making appropriate use of IT in teaching various subjects. He asked how EMB would reinforce curriculum and resources support for schools, and enforce the implementation measures as proposed in paragraph 15 of the Administration’s paper and monitor the on-going developments in the use of IT in schools.

23. DS(EM)4 responded that EMB would monitor the progress of IT development in schools by way of school visits and surveys. Based on the findings of the overall progress made under the Five-year Strategy, EMB would concentrate on the leadership capacities of principals and teachers in the development of holistic and strategic school plans for making effective use of IT in teaching, the ability of students to use IT in learning, and the better integration of IT into the curriculum and the learning and teaching processes. He highlighted that the competence of principals and teachers in the application of IT was most crucial in enhancing further engagement of IT in teaching and the development of a broad framework of “information literacy” in school

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education.

24. PAS(QE) supplemented that the development of a framework of “information literacy” was crucial for facilitating better integration of IT into the curriculum as well as the learning and teaching processes. She pointed out that CDC had published the “Information Technology Learning Targets” in 2000 to pave the way for the integration of IT into the curriculum, and the “Learning to learn – the way forward in curriculum development” in 2001 to reinforce the role of IT as a tool to support the education reform measures. She added that effectiveness in the application of IT to enhance students’ learning was more significant than the relative position of Hong Kong in the use of IT in the international ranking.

25. PAS(QE) highlighted that the goals to be achieved through the Next Strategy would, apart from enhancing the leadership capacity of principals, aim at strengthening teachers’ capability to use IT for curriculum and pedagogical innovations and students’ abilities to use IT in lifelong learning and creative problem solving in the information age. Specifically, a broad framework of “information literacy” for students would be developed to provide teachers and students with a clearer picture on the learning targets of using IT in education. She stressed that such development did not mean the addition of a new subject in the school curriculum or a set of benchmarks for assessment purposes. To facilitate implementation, EMB would provide schools with a set of tools that would incorporate useful references for teachers to follow. In addition, principals would be required to submit their plans for the implementation of the proposed measures to promote the use of IT in their schools. EMB would provide professional advice and support to schools and principals by way of the existing quality assurance mechanism.

26. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung asked how EMB would monitor the use of IT by teachers in teaching and the practices of IT by students in learning. He suggested that EMB should introduce appropriate measures to ensure the provision of sufficient opportunities for students to learn the necessary skills, knowledge and the correct attitudes in the use of IT in learning. He also asked how EMB would monitor the progress of Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools in the use of IT in teaching and learning.

27. PAS(QE) responded that appropriate guidelines and sufficient practices on the use of IT were essential for enhancing effective integration of IT into the curriculum and the teaching and learning processes. She agreed that the Administration should review the school curriculum with a view to reinforcing the practical aspects of using IT in students’ learning activities. She added that the Administration would review the 25% standard for the use of IT in school education under the Five-year Strategy and provide more flexibility for principals and teachers to design their programmes of applications of IT in teaching and learning activities under the Next Strategy. DS(EM)4 added that

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EMB would monitor the progress of DSS schools in the use of IT in teaching and learning in accordance with the terms and conditions of the service agreement between the Government and the schools.

28. Dr David CHU said that he shared the concern of Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong and LEUNG Yiu-chung on the use of IT in school education. He pointed out that e-learning was widely adopted in education in the United States of America where submission and correction of assignments, as well as communication between students and teachers outside the classrooms, were all made through electronic means. He considered that school education in Hong Kong should make use of e-learning and go beyond the limits of classrooms.

29. PAS(QE) responded that the Five-year Strategy had successfully provided the necessary infrastructure for IT in education to take off. The Next Strategy would include the promotion of e-learning to break through the physical barriers of classroom learning at set times. She assured members that it would not be long before students could submit their assignments and receive their teachers' comments through electronic means.

30. In concluding the discussion, the Chairman invited members to consider the proposals in the consultation document and make suggestions, if any, to EMB before the deadline of 15 May 2004.

V. Consolidation of high cost and under-utilized primary schools
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2013/03-04(01)]

31. The Chairman welcomed representatives of the five deputations and the Administration to the meeting.

Meeting with deputations and the Administration

Oral representation of deputations

32. At the invitation of the Chairman, representatives of deputations presented their views as summarized in paragraphs 33 to 37 below.

Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union
[LC Paper No. CB(2)2082/03-04(01)]

33. Mr LEE Fu-sing presented the views of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union as detailed in its submission which was tabled at the meeting. The Union held the view that schools had the right to recruit students and the rights of students to continue study in a school should be respected. The Union considered that small schools had their merits and contributions in the provision of primary education, and in particular, rural schools had their role and functions

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in the provision of education for students residing in rural areas. The Union suggested that the Government should take advantage of the declining student population to implement small class teaching in schools to promote the quality of education. The Union opposed the need to conduct a special review on the quality of education services provided by a school which failed to recruit sufficient students in the 2004-05 school year before it could be allowed to take part in the Primary One Admission (POA) 2005.

Hong Kong Taoist Association Tong Tang Sook Fong Memory School

34. Mr WONG Kin-ming said that the Administration should provide a mechanism for a primary school to appeal against the decision of EMB to discontinue the allocation of a Primary One (P1) class on the ground of insufficient student intake in the 2004-05 school year. He considered it unfair for a small primary school to compete with a large school with a Year 2000 premises in enrolment of students. He suggested that EMB should take the initiative to advise schools of the serious consequences of failure to meet the minimum threshold of 23 students, and to adopt appropriate strategies to improve enrolment by way of the existing quality assurance mechanism.

Kiu Saw Public School

[LC Paper No. CB(2)2082/03-04(02)]

35. Mr CHUNG Kuen-wah presented the views of the Kiu Saw Public School as detailed in its submission which was tabled at the meeting. The School considered the policy decision to increase the minimum threshold of student intake from 16 to 23 students for allocation of a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year without prior consultation with small and rural schools unfair. The School strongly opposed the policy on the high cost and under-utilized primary schools, and requested EMB to comply with Article 40 of the Basic Law which specified that the lawful traditional rights and interests of the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories shall be protected. Mr CHUNG also requested that the Administration should implement the education reforms in the light of its policy commitment in education as highlighted in the Chief Executive's Policy Address 2000.

Ho Fai Primary School

36. Mr CHAN Ying-kwan said that the Administration had not provided convincing justifications for discontinuing the allocation of a P1 class to a primary school which had recruited less than 23 P1 students in the 2004-05 school year. He pointed out that it was reasonable for parents to expect their children to complete primary education in a school of their choice, and the Government had the obligation to help parents realize their expectation. He expressed reservations about the formulae for the calculation of the operating costs of a small or rural school. He cited examples to illustrate the merits of

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small and rural schools in the provision of quality and diversified education to students, in particular their flexibility in deployment of physical resources to provide better quality of education. He requested the Administration not to implement the new threshold for allocation of P1 class in the 2004-05 school year, and let the affected students complete primary education in their present schools.

Hoi Ming School

37. Mr HO Kin-choi expressed reservations about the fairness of the mechanism for allocation of P1 students to primary schools during the Central Allocation stage. He said that the Hoi Ming School had an enrolment of 25 P1 students as at 17 January 2004, but was not allocated a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year on the ground that it had enrolled only seven P1 students during the Discretionary Places Admission stage. He pointed out that while 18 parents had selected the School as their first priority during the Central Allocation stage, only three P1 students had been allocated to the School through the Central Allocation. He questioned how parental choice was taken into account in the Central Allocation. He considered the current mechanism for allocation of P1 students and classes to primary schools unfair and inflexible, and requested the Administration to review the operation of the mechanism.

The Administration's response to deputations' representations

38. At the Chairman's invitation to respond to the views and concerns of deputations, DS(EM)4 briefed the meeting on the following points -

- (a) As a result of a sharp decline in birth rate and decrease in newly arrived children from the Mainland, there was a surplus supply of school places and hence a need to consolidate under-utilized primary schools in order to ensure cost-effective utilization of primary school places;
- (b) In scrutinizing the Report of the Audit Commission in October 2002 on the planning and provision of primary school places, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) noted that some 50% primary schools had surplus places and recommended that the Administration should take action to reduce surplus places in primary schools, in particular the under-utilized primary schools. After consultation with the Subsidized Primary School Council and the Primary One Admission Committee, the Administration considered it appropriate to increase the minimum threshold for allocation of P1 class from 16 to 23 students in the 2004-05 school year;

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- (c) Given the fiscal deficits, the Administration had the responsibility to ensure cost-effective use of public funds. In view of the surplus school places, the Administration considered it inappropriate to continue funding the operation of a P1 class in primary schools which had enrolled less than 23 P1 students;
- (d) EMB had maintained frequent contacts with the 31 primary schools which were informed in February 2004 that no P1 class would be allocated in the 2004-05 school year. In response to the request of the representatives of the 23 schools (not including the seven bi-sessional schools and one school which would merge with another school) attending the meetings on 27 and 29 March 2004, EMB had proposed follow-up measures for them to consider. These measures included, among others, the conduct of a special review by EMB at the request of a school on its quality of education services. Depending on the review results, the school might then be allowed to take part in the POA 2005;
- (e) The minimum threshold for allocation of a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year was implemented to enhance cost-effective use of public resources. EMB had not deprived the right of primary schools to continue operation as primary schools could operate P1 classes in the 2004-05 school year on a self-financing basis;
- (f) The 31 primary schools which were not allocated a P1 class comprised large and small schools, each of which had not been able to recruit 23 P1 students mainly as a result of surplus P1 places as well as the collective parental choices in their respective districts;
- (g) EMB would make reference to the number of classes remaining in individual schools and decide on the year of ceasing the grants to each school with flexibility. However, it would not be practical for a school to continue operation, for instance, with only one class and 1.4 teachers;
- (h) Most of the 31 schools had low parental choice indices in POA 2004 as compared to the other primary schools in the same school net; and
- (i) The unit cost of a school was the quotient of dividing the total funding allocations by the total enrolment in the school year.

39. Principal Assistant Secretary for Education and Manpower (School Development) (PAS(SD)) supplemented that the minimum threshold for allocation of P1 class in the 2002-03 school year was 16 students. Primary

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schools which had recruited only 16 students during the Discretionary Places Admission stage and the trial-run of the central allocation stage would be allocated another 16 students through the Central Allocation. However, under this arrangement the dropout rate of these schools was relatively high. As a result, these schools in general had more surplus P1 places after the commencement of the school year. In view of this, the Administration had decided to adopt a higher threshold of 23 students for allocation of P1 class in the 2003-04 school year, in the hope that schools with higher parental choice indices should be able to retain more students after the commencement of the school year. He added that no schools had expressed objection to the new threshold before the results of the Central Allocation were published. PAS(SD) added that the Discretionary Places Admission stage for the 2003-04 school year started in September and ended in November 2002, and any enrolment of P1 students in schools after the period should be made through the Central Allocation process.

Discussion

Surplus primary school places and follow-up measures

40. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that there had not been any disputes or controversy arising from schools which had not been allocated a P1 class in the past decades. He considered that the current controversial and contradictory policies on primary school administration had given rise to the discontent of the primary school sector, such as stressing the provision of quality education but refusing to implement small class teaching when there were surplus school places, and constructing new schools to create more school places on the one hand and closing existing schools to reduce the surplus on the other.

41. DS(EM)4 responded that the new schools coming into operation in the next few years were mainly whole-day primary schools. EMB would continue to adjust the School Building Programme in the light of the forecast supply and demand of primary school places in each district, which would be based on the projected student population provided by the Census and Statistics Department on a yearly basis. EMB would also advise bi-sessional schools in districts with a surplus supply of school places to phase out one session for conversion to whole-day operation.

42. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong and Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung considered it a waste of public resources to close existing schools which had recently been renovated through the School Improvement Programme (SIP). DS(EM)4 responded that SEM had previously explained to members that SIP would not give rise to a waste of public resources.

43. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong considered that the Administration had underestimated the reaction of parents and the school sector in deciding to increase the threshold from 16 to 23 students for allocation of P1 classes in the 2004-05

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school year. He pointed out that the Administration had only put forward the follow-up measures after the recent demonstration of the school sector in March 2004. He questioned the justifications for implementing the new threshold of 23 students in the 2004-05 school year, and suggested that allocation of a P1 class to a school should only be discontinued if the school had failed to recruit 23 students in two consecutive school years. He added that under the Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme, the Administration would not discontinue the provision of rent subsidy to a kindergarten which had failed to recruit the minimum number of pupils in a school year.

44. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong suggested that the Administration should assist primary schools in their final year of operation by coordinating the deployment of the teaching resources in a district to ensure the teaching of different subjects in a school with only one or a few classes. Given the declining trend of student population in the next decade, Mr CHEUNG urged the Administration to work out long-term measures to resolve the problem of surplus places and help schools with insufficient enrolment.

45. DS(EM)4 responded that apart from conducting a special review of the quality of education provided by a school on request, EMB would provide assistance to primary schools contemplating a merger with another school. In fact, seven of the 31 bi-sessional schools would phase out one session for whole-day conversion, and most of the other 24 primary schools were pursuing merger with other primary schools in the same district. Given an estimated decrease of 82 600 students aged 6 – 11 in eight years, it was unlikely that schools with insufficient student enrolment in the 2004-05 school year could recruit 23 students in the 2005-06 school year.

46. As the problem arising from insufficient enrolment in primary schools would become more acute in the coming years in the light of a declining student population, Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that the Administration should formulate a long-term policy to resolve the problem. He considered that the provision of small class teaching in primary schools should be the way forward.

47. Ms Emily LAU said that although members of the PAC might hold different views on the implementation of small class teaching in public sector schools, PAC members in general considered that the Administration had the responsibility to enhance cost-effective utilization of school resources. She asked the Administration to provide information on the number of classes and students in the 31 primary schools, and urged the Administration to assist them to merge with other schools.

48. DS(EM)4 responded that eight of the 31 schools which would not be allocated a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year operated 6-8 classes and 12 of them operated 9-12 classes. He considered that for these schools, merger with other schools was the best way forward. He added that given a declining birth

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rate, many primary schools which were allocated only one P1 class in the 2004-05 school year were also exploring the feasibility of merger with other schools in the same district in anticipation of the difficulty in recruiting sufficient students in the future.

49. Dr YEUNG Sum cited the 30% decline in the utilization rate of Maternal and Child Health Centres of the Department of Health in recent years to illustrate that the problem of surplus school places would continue in the years to come. In other words, more schools would have difficulty in meeting the minimum threshold of 23 students for allocation of P1 class in the future. Dr YEUNG asked what the Administration had learnt from the past experience to resolve the problem of surplus school places.

50. DS(EM)4 responded that advance and better communication with the primary schools concerned was most important. He reiterated that EMB would continue to maintain contact with individual schools which had difficulty in recruitment of sufficient students for allocation of a P1 class, and to assist these schools to explore feasible alternatives, including merger with another school. He expressed understanding of the feeling and desire of school sponsoring bodies (SSBs) to realize their educational vision and ideals in the schools they had been operating for years, and the affection of teachers and students towards the schools they had been teaching and learning together. He pointed out that there had been successful merger initiated by schools, and anticipated that there would be more successful mergers in the future.

51. Dr YEUNG Sum expressed appreciation that the Administration shared the concerns and feelings of SSBs, teachers and students in a school which would be closed. He suggested that apart from the proposed follow-up measures, EMB should establish a task group to assist primary schools which had difficulty in recruitment of P1 students in a proactive manner. The group should provide a range of support services to the schools and the teachers, parents and students in need of help.

52. DS(EM)4 responded that EMB recognized the importance of maintaining close contact with primary schools in need of assistance before the problem of insufficient student intake emerged. He pointed out that the collective decision of parents in the selection of primary schools for their children in a school year could only be known after the completion of the Central Allocation stage. He stressed that the Administration had all along shared the concern of the teachers, parents and students who were affected by the closing of schools, and would take the initiative to discuss with schools on feasible alternatives to resolve the problem of under-enrolment.

53. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung expressed reservations about the effectiveness of EMB's communication efforts with primary schools. He considered it unfair for the primary schools to bear the consequence of inaccurate planning and

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provision of school places in districts. He considered that the problem of surplus school places should be attributed to the construction of new schools. He pointed out that rural schools had their unique role and features in the provision of primary education to students residing in remote areas. He suggested that EMB should exercise discretion and provide flexibility for schools with under-enrolment to continue operation.

54. DS(EM)4 responded that merger with another school was a feasible option for primary schools with under-enrolment to continue operation. He cited a recent merger of two primary schools as an example to illustrate the two primary schools could agree on the name of the new school, the composition of its School Management Committee, the vision and mission of the new school, etc, after the merger. He added that by 14 April 2004, EMB had received responses from 20 schools on the proposed follow-up measures and many of them were considering possible merger with another school.

55. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung remarked that EMB should provide other alternatives such as reducing the threshold for allocating a P1 class or relaxing the criteria for no allocation of a P1 class to under-enrolment in two consecutive school years. He also considered that schools with insufficient enrolment should be allowed to continue the recruitment of P1 students after the Discretionary Place Admission stage.

56. DS(EM)4 pointed out that the Administration had proposed four follow-up measures to help schools which were not allocated a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year. He reiterated that in the face of a declining student population, it was unlikely a school with insufficient enrolment in the 2004-05 school year could recruit 23 P1 students in the ensuing school year. PAS(SD) supplemented that allowing a school to enrol students after the Discretionary Places Admissions stage while the Central Allocation stage was in progress might result in double registration of a student in two primary schools and hence a waste of public resources.

57. Mr SZETO Wah asked whether EMB had considered the proposed follow-up measures such as conducting a special review of the quality of education services of a school which was not allocated a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year, before thousands of teachers, parents and students joined the demonstration in March 2004. He pointed out that most of the 31 schools would not request a special review for fear that they would be labelled as not providing quality education services if the result of the review was negative.

58. Mr SZETO Wah and Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung said that they did not oppose the conduct of a special review on the education services provided by a primary school which was not allocated a P1 class. They, however, did not consider that there was a need to conduct such a review, as the performance of the schools should have been assessed by EMB under the existing Quality Assurance

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mechanism.

59. DS(EM)4 responded that the merger of two primary schools had been adopted since the implementation of whole-day primary schooling, and the conduct of a special review on quality of education of services provided by a school was proposed in response to the request of the schools concerned. He added that two schools had already requested EMB to conduct such review and another two were considering making such a request.

60. Mr SZETO Wah said that some of the 31 schools considered that EMB had prepared a list of the primary schools which would be closed down after the increase of the threshold for allocation of P1 classes. He also asked whether EMB had allocated two P1 classes to a school which had enrolled less than 10 students during the Discretionary Places Allocation stage, and did not allocate a P1 class to a school which had enrolled 20-21 students.

61. DS(EM)4 responded that EMB would allocate P1 students to primary schools in accordance with the established rules and procedures, and would investigate any suspected malpractices which were reported on the allocation of P1 students to primary schools. He invited members to provide the details of any suspected case of malpractices to EMB for follow-up investigations.

62. PAS(SD) explained that EMB would work out the number of children to be allocated to each primary school based on the number of children admitted by a school during the Discretionary Places Admission stage and the result of computer analysis of parental choices during the Central Allocation stage. To minimize the situation of under-enrolled classes in primary schools, if the total number of P1 pupils allocated to the residual P1 class in a school was less than 23 and there were still unfilled P1 places in other schools of the same school net, the school might not be allocated that class. On the other hand, if the total number of P1 classes on applying the 23 threshold was insufficient to meet the demand in a school net, some schools might still be allocated the residual P1 class even though the number of children allocated to it was below 23. In such cases, consideration would first be given to special factors such as whether the school was located in a remote area where there were no appropriate alternative schools.

Deputations' views on merger with other schools

63. Ms Emily LAU asked whether those schools which were not allocated a P1 class in the 2004-05 school year considered merger with another school a feasible alternative to resolve their problems.

64. Mr LEE Fu-sing, Executing Council Member of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, responded that the primary schools with insufficient student intake but wished to continue their operation would normally

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have to merge with a large school. He considered that the Government should allow those schools which did not wish to merge with another school to continue operation until the last class of primary six students completed their studies.

65. Mr FUNG Suk-kai, principal of Kin Saw Public School, said that merger with another school would in effect mean the closing of a rural school and that EMB should observe Article 40 of the Basic Law which stipulated that the rights of New Territories residents should be protected. Mr CHAN Ying-kwan, Head Teacher of Ho Fai Primary School, said that he did not consider merger with another school a feasible alternative as different schools had different visions and missions in education.

Way forward

66. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong considered that the Administration should work out the principles and policies for implementing measures on consolidation of high cost and under-utilized schools, in particular the measures for small and rural schools to continue operation. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung stressed that EMB should propose feasible options to help small and rural schools with under-enrolment to continue operation in the 2004-05 school year, having regard to their individual circumstances.

67. In view of members' concerns, the Chairman requested the Administration to provide an information paper on its long-term policy and follow-up measures to resolve the problems arising from consolidation of under-utilized primary schools. Mr SZETO Wah also requested the Administration to provide an estimate of the number of primary schools which would be affected by the policy in the future.

68. DS(EM)4 agreed that based on the experience from the implementation of the proposed follow-up measures, EMB would provide an information paper on the principles and policy on consolidation of under-utilized schools in the long run.

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VI. Any other business

69. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 7:05 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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