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Panel on Education

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 16 April 2007**

Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme

Purpose

This paper sets out the issues of concern raised by the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme in primary and secondary schools.

Background

2. In 1997, the Finance Committee approved the provision of one Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) over and above the teacher establishment of each public sector secondary school from the 1998-1999 school year. Under the NET Scheme, schools adopting Chinese as the Medium of Instruction are allowed to fill one of the additional English teacher posts with one NET. NETs are expected to enrich the language environment in schools, act as a resource person to bring in effective teaching methods from overseas, and assist in school-based teacher development.

3. The Standing Committee on Language Education and Research commissioned the Hong Kong Institute of Education to conduct a study on the monitoring and evaluation of the NET Scheme in secondary schools from October 1998 to June 2001. Results of the study showed that all stakeholders, including NETs, local English teachers, school management, students and parents, found that NETs had achieved a positive impact in enriching the language environment in schools and bringing in a wider variety of teaching methods in the secondary schools covered by the study. The study confirmed the effectiveness of the NET Scheme in secondary schools and recommended its extension to primary schools starting from the 2002-2003 school year.

4. The NET Scheme was introduced to public sector primary schools in the 2002-2003 school year. Under the Primary NET Scheme, schools having six or more classes are eligible for the provision of NET and every pair of eligible primary schools is allocated one NET. An Advisory Teaching Team (ATT) comprising NETs and local English teachers has been established to provide centralised support to English teaching in primary schools provided with NETs, as well as to foster professional development of English teachers in primary schools with less than six classes.

5. The remuneration package for NETs comprises a basic salary equivalent to that of local graduate teachers and a range of other allowances, including a special allowance for appointees whose normal place of residence is outside Hong Kong, a baggage allowance, a medical allowance and a contract gratuity of 15% of the total basic salary over the contract period.

6. In November 2003, the Administration introduced an adjustment mechanism to the special allowance payable to NETs according to the movement of the private rental component of the Composite Consumer Price Index to replace the flat rate set in 1997. The adjustment mechanism resulted in a reduction in the special allowance from \$13,000 per month (applicable since the 1998-1999 school year) to \$10,500 per month (from the 2004-2005 school year). The rate of the special allowance was revised to \$12,950 from the 2005-2006 school year.

Deliberations of the Panel

7. The Panel discussed the NET Scheme at a number of meetings. The issues of concern raised by members are summarised in the following paragraphs.

High attrition rates of NETs

8. Members in general supported the implementation of the NET Scheme in primary and secondary schools to enhance teaching and learning of English. They, however, noted with concern the high attrition rate of NETs which had all along been well over the 20% envisaged in 1998 when the NET Scheme was first introduced. In the 2003-2004 school year, non-renewal of contracts for primary NETs was 39%, increasing to 46% in the 2004-2005 school year. As for secondary NETs, the respective figures were 44% and 53%. Members considered the high attrition rates of NETs in primary and secondary schools unacceptable. They urged the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) to identify the causes for the problem.

9. The Administration admitted that the attrition rate in the 2004-2005 school year was the highest recorded since the inception of the NET Scheme. The Administration conducted a survey among all NETs in July 2005, collating views and information on the working environment and the NETs' spending pattern to assist a review of the support given to NETs and the attractiveness of the NET remuneration. The survey results showed that for NETs who would renew contracts, job satisfaction was the primary reason underpinning the choice, followed by attractive remuneration

package and good working and support conditions in schools. For those NETs who might not renew their contracts, the primary reason was that the remuneration package was not attractive enough, followed by insufficient job satisfaction, moving to other professional opportunities and lack of support from schools. In the Administration's view, the survey results confirmed its belief that apart from a competitive remuneration package, a sense of achievement and satisfaction in the workplace were equally important for the retention of experienced NETs.

Measures to improve the recruitment and retention of NETs

10. The Administration informed members that it had held a series of meetings with the Native English-speaking Teachers' Association (NESTA) to collect feedback on possible areas of improvement to attract and retain NETs serving in Hong Kong.

Improving job satisfaction and support

11. According to the survey in July 2005, the overall perception of NETs on the working condition and adequacy of support in schools was positive. NETs did not see problems working in local schools with local teachers, and teaching local students, and generally NETs could work well with local teachers, English panels and school heads. Nevertheless, NETs were less positive about their own professional development and had some discontent regarding matters of school administration. The examples quoted included: salary payment was not always on time; the summer break was not sufficiently long; leave arrangement was not agreeable; the conduct of staff meetings or professional development day in Chinese; and the requirement to stay behind at schools even though there was no duty to deliver. Noting the survey results, members urged EMB to adopt effective measures to increase job satisfaction of NETs in the workplace. EMB should collaborate with schools to improve communication with NETs and allow schools to exercise flexibility in arranging leave for NETs without compromising the principle of fairness.

12. The Administration pointed out that the school culture in Hong Kong was very different from those in the home countries of NETs, such as the supervising practices in schools, workload and other school duties assigned to teachers, expectation on teachers to work outside school hours, etc. The cultural clash in some incidents was amplified when schools applied fair treatment mechanically and inflexibly to all teachers including NETs. The Administration agreed on the need to strengthen support and improve job satisfaction of NETs, including professional development, collaboration between local teachers and NETs, school management practices, and provision of support to NETs having problems working in schools. The Administration had promulgated new sets of guidelines to schools on the administration of the NET Scheme and deployment of NETs. NETs and local English teachers in primary schools were supported by the extensive network of ATT which had conducted regular meetings, workshops and seminars for them. The Administration planned to provide similar support to NETs in secondary schools in the 2005-2006 school year.

Improving remuneration package

13. When presenting their views on the NET Scheme to the Panel, the representatives of NESTA highlighted the fact that the NET remuneration package was becoming less attractive in the light of various factors, including salary adjustments in line with the civil service, rising living costs in Hong Kong, changing currency relativities and competitive offers for professional native-speaking English teachers in other places. As unattractiveness of the remuneration package had been the primary reason stated by NETs for not renewing contracts, members called on the Administration to review the competitiveness of the remuneration package for NETs in the light of the changing circumstances.

14. The Administration explained that the two civil service pay cuts in 2004 and 2005, the depression of the US dollar against the currency of the NETs' home countries, more restriction on outflow of teachers in these countries, as well as restricted working opportunities for the spouse of NETs in Hong Kong were the major factors affecting the attractiveness of the remuneration package for NETs in recent years. Analysis of the attrition rate of secondary NETs in the 2004-2005 school year showed that the attrition rates of NETs with service of less than two years, between two to four years, between four to six years, and over six years in Hong Kong were 55%, 48%, 53% and 71% respectively. This revealed that NETs with less than two years of service and NETs with over six years of service had higher attrition rates.

15. To improve the attractiveness of the NET remuneration package, the Administration proposed to introduce a retention incentive for NETs with two or more years of continuous service with effect from the 2005-2006 school year. The rates of the retention incentive for NETs with two to four and five to six years of service were respectively 5% and 10% of their basic salaries. Eligibility for the retention incentive was subject to the school management's satisfaction with the NET's performance and its willingness to retain his or her service. The Administration also proposed to adjust the special allowance for NETs from \$10,500 to \$12,950 in accordance with the prevailing fresh-letting rental prices. The Administration proposed to apply the new rate of special allowance for NETs already serving in the 2005-2006 school year, in order to have the earliest retention effect. Taking into account the NETs' overwhelming preference for more certainty about the special allowance, the Administration further proposed that the special allowance would only be adjusted when significant change had been accumulated instead of an annual adjustment.

16. Members had requested the Administration to assess the effect of the proposed retention incentive and the increase of the special allowance on retaining serving NETs. The Administration responded that since NETs might leave the service on personal reasons, it would be difficult to quantify the effect of the retention incentive and the adjustment of the special allowance on retaining NETs. The Administration would review the situation one year after implementation of the retention incentive and the introduction of the new rate of the special allowance.

17. Members pointed out that if the retention incentive was provided for NETs with satisfactory performance only, NETs without the retention incentive might feel frustrated and quit the job. Members considered it necessary to make available the criteria for assessing the eligibility of serving NETs for the retention incentive.

18. The Administration responded that there would be NETs who had not performed well and were not recommended for renewal of contracts by the school management. In order to ensure the standard of serving NETs, the Administration would make clear that eligibility for the retention incentive was subject to the school management's satisfaction with the NET's performance and its willingness to retain the service of the NET concerned. The Administration pointed out that all local teachers were also subject to performance appraisal on an annual basis.

19. The Administration's proposals were approved by the Finance Committee on 15 November 2005 and implemented with retrospective effect from the 2005-2006 school year. The Finance Committee also delegated the authority to the Secretary for Education and Manpower to approve future revisions to the special allowance, where necessary, taking into account the rental expenditure pattern, the type and location of accommodation of typical NETs, average fresh-letting rental prices, the attrition rates and the affordability of the Government.

Provision of one NET for each primary school

20. Members noted that in the 2005-2006 school year, there were 376 NETs in primary schools. 180 of them were serving one school and 196 were serving two schools. Given that funds had been set aside for the provision of one NET for each primary school, members urged EMB to provide one NET for each primary school as soon as practicable.

21. The Administration explained that the policy was to provide each primary school with one NET as soon as practicable. Although EMB had managed to recruit a steady flow of new NETs to Hong Kong, due to the high attrition rates of NETs, achievement of the policy target was delayed.

Evaluation

22. Members had all along been concerned about the effectiveness of the NET Scheme in improving the proficiency of local students in English and upgrading the professionalism of local English teachers. They requested the Administration to review the implementation and evaluate the effectiveness of the NET Scheme in upgrading the English proficiency of students as well as the quality and pedagogies of local English teachers.

23. According to the Administration, the NET Scheme in secondary schools had by and large been running smoothly and brought about positive impact, although some problems had been identified. For example, some NETs were assigned to teach oral classes only, making it difficult for them to know the students well enough to cater for

their learning needs; there was little professional exchange/collaboration in schools; and NETs were often forced to adopt traditional teaching methods.

24. As regards the NET Scheme in primary schools, the Administration had commissioned the Melbourne University in partnership with the Hong Kong Institute of Education to evaluate its implementation from October 2003. An in-depth longitudinal and cross-section evaluation study was being conducted at territory-wide level, with about 100 participating primary schools. The study would take three years to complete. In the meantime, primary schools with NETs were required to conduct self-evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the NET Scheme. ATT had conducted workshops to provide schools with guidance and support for self-evaluation. According to the feedback from principals and teachers, NETs in primary schools had helped create an authentic and print-rich English learning environment, and more English was being used in school activities and extra-curricular activities.

Relevant papers

25. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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Relevant papers on the Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Finance Committee	21.11.1997	FCR(97-98)63
Legislative Council	23.9.1998	Official Record of Proceedings, Question 16 (Question)
Legislative Council	21.10.1998	Official Record of Proceedings, Question 17 (Question)
Panel on Education	16.11.1998 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	2.12.1998	Official Record of Proceedings, Question 14 (Question)
Legislative Council	21.4.1999	Official Record of Proceedings, Question 7 (Question)
Legislative Council	28.4.1999	Official Record of Proceedings, Question 4 (Question)
Legislative Council	7.7.1999	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 65 - 70 (Question)
Legislative Council	15.3.2000	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 13 - 20 (Question)
Legislative Council	13.12.2000	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 50 - 52 (Question)
Panel on Education	19.11.2001 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	21.1.2002 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	9.10.2002	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 63 - 64 (Question)
Panel on Education	16.12.2002 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	17.11.2003 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	10.12.2003	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 71 - 73 (Question)
Panel on Education	10.1.2005 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	11.7.2005 (Item III)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	24.10.2005 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	18.11.2005	Minutes FCR(2005-06)31
Panel on Education	12.12.2005 (Item IV and V)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	13.1.2006	Minutes FCR(2005-06)39
Finance Committee	14.3.2006	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions
Panel on Education	19.10.2006 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	1.11.2006	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 63 - 66 (Question)
Finance Committee	20.3.2007	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions