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**Panel on Education**

**Background Brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat  
for the meeting on 11 June 2007**

**Prices of school textbooks**

**Purpose**

This paper summarizes the areas of concern raised by Members about the prices of school textbooks.

**Background**

2. In the spirit of free market economy, publishers can set prices of their textbooks freely, taking into account the market situation and production cost. Through issuing the Recommended Textbook List (RTL), the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) seeks to monitor the quality of textbooks and help schools select suitable textbooks. If publishers wish to have their textbooks included in RTL, they may submit their textbooks to EMB for review. Textbooks submitted are examined by the appropriate Reviewing Panels of EMB's Textbook Committee, and will be included in RTL if they have been vetted as acceptable in terms of content, learning and teaching approach, language and technical design. The price and weight of individual textbooks are also listed in RTL. Schools can make reference to RTL available on the website of EMB in selecting textbooks, but it is not a compulsory requirement.

**Areas of concern**

3. The Panel on Education considered the subject of the prices of school textbooks at its meeting on 28 July 1998. Questions relating to the subject had also been raised at Council meetings between 1998 and 2001. The issues of concern raised by Members are summarized below.

Price increase

4. Members had expressed grave concern about the rates of increase in the prices of school textbooks which had been higher than inflation. The textbook prices did not follow the movements in material and production costs. Members considered the existing measures ineffective in ensuring reasonable and affordable prices of school textbooks. Noting that publishers included donations and gifts to schools in the costs of textbooks and produced new editions frequently, members urged the Administration to set more specific guidelines against such practices.

5. The Administration explained its collaboration with the Consumer Council in conducting annual surveys on textbook prices and expenditure spent by students on textbooks. According to the findings of the Consumer Council, the main reasons given by publishers for the increase in textbook prices included -

- (a) the high cost for textbook production;
- (b) the increase in the cost of printing due to improved printing quality and rise in the price of paper;
- (c) the higher manpower cost as a result of the introduction of the Mandatory Provident Fund;
- (d) the additional investment to meet the demand of the market as a result of changes to the curriculum in the past few years and to tie in with Government's policy of promoting quality education; and
- (e) the development cost for information technology-based teaching materials and reference materials for teachers.

6. The Administration also explained the various measures in place to reduce the financial burden on parents. Except for a few subjects such as Social Studies, Economic and Public Affairs, Economics, and Government and Public Affairs which required more frequent updating, EMB would not review textbooks which had been updated within three years from the date of inclusion into RTL. Publishers were encouraged to produce leaflets or corrigenda for minor amendments and would not be allowed to change the edition of the textbooks. After the three-year period, revision would only be approved if there were sufficient reasons.

7. The Administration pointed out that EMB regularly issued the "Notes on Selection of Textbooks and Learning Materials for Use in Schools" (the Notes). Among other things, the Notes stipulated that subject textbook selection committees should be set up to select textbooks. The Notes laid down the fundamental principles and procedures for the selection exercise. The basic considerations in the selection of textbooks included, among others, the educational

needs and abilities of students, and the price of textbooks. The Notes also provided guidelines on the acceptance of donations from publishers. Schools were specifically reminded that their decisions on textbook selection should not be affected by any donations from publishers. This would help avoid publishers from shifting their cost of donations to the prices of textbooks.

#### Market manipulation

8. Members noted that publishers imposed standardized discount rates on textbooks and boycotted those booksellers who did not adopt the standard rate. They queried whether such practice amounted to market manipulation in contravention of the competition policy.

9. The Administration responded that in the absence of sufficient information, it was not in a position to conclude if publishers were acting together to manipulate the textbook market. The Administration believed that there was no question of a few publishers monopolizing the market since EMB would invite all textbook publishers (about 80 in total) to submit sample editions for review whenever there was a new or revised syllabus on a particular subject. Moreover, selection of textbooks in schools was decided by the subject textbook selection committees. Nevertheless, the Administration would call on booksellers not to set among themselves standardized discount rates and remind publishers that they should not boycott booksellers offering a higher discount. The Administration would liaise with appropriate parties, including the Consumer Council and the Competition Policy Advisory Group, to find out whether sales practices running counter to fair competition were prevailing in the textbook market and to see what measures could be adopted to safeguard consumer interests.

#### Weight of textbooks

10. Members had expressed concern about the weight of textbooks. To reduce the printing cost and the weight of schoolbags, a suggestion had been put forward to the Administration for prescribing the maximum weights for textbooks.

11. The Administration did not consider it appropriate to require publishers to keep their textbooks under certain prescribed weights. However, it had repeatedly reminded publishers to use light-weight paper for textbooks and to split the exercises/workbooks from the textbooks. The Administration would update the relevant circulars to schools to provide information on desirable schoolbag weights for different levels upon the advice of the Department of Health. It would also remind schools to request publishers to specify the weight of the textbooks.

#### Provision of textbooks by the Government

12. A suggestion had been raised for adopting the North America model to provide textbooks for all primary and secondary schools by the Government, in

order to solve the problems of affordability and weight of school textbooks. The Administration was of the view that considerable resources would be involved, but had undertaken to examine the proposal.

**Relevant papers**

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

Council Business Division 2  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
5 June 2007

**Relevant papers on prices of school textbooks**

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Paper</b>
Panel on Education	28.7.1998 (Item III)	<a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">Agenda</a>
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings (Question 15)</a>
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings (Question 17)</a>
Legislative Council	17.10.2001	<a href="#">Official Record of Proceedings Pages 7 - 12 (Question)</a>

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