香港互聯網協會 Internet Society Hong Kong Chapter (ISOC.HK)

Internet Access for School Attending Child Recipients
of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme

Submission to Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Subcommittee on Poverty Alleviation

1. Over the years, Internet Society Hong Kong (ISOC.HK) has consistently advocated for the inclusion of broadband Internet access charges for recipient families of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme with school attending children. In late 2008, ISOC.HK, along with The Professional Commons and IT Voice, made a list of budget proposals to the Financial Secretary, under the "Ten Information Infrastructure Projects," where we also reiterated our call for this broadband subsidy.

2. We are disappointed with the paper submitted to this Subcommittee, as it has not provided any reasons for the Administration's refusal to adopt this broadband subsidy. Referring to other programs that 'facilitates ICT access for students' does not explain the Government position at all.

3. The paper implies that Internet access is not considered to be one of the 'basic needs of children,' and broadband Internet access is not among children's 'educational needs.' ISOC.HK strongly opposes this viewpoint. Broadband Internet access *is* a basic educational, development and livelihood need for, especially, children.

4. As the cost of hardware (mainly, the personal computer) goes down all the time, the recurrent charges of broadband Internet access is making up an increasing portion of the expenses for people and families using the Internet. In fact, today, it is not unusual for the broadband service charges to amount to be higher than the system purchase price, within the short time frame of only 12-18 months.

5. In today's digital environment, access to the Internet is basic and critical to the education and development of children, and it is important for children to be able to use computers connected to the Internet both inside and outside of schools. While most people relate intuitively this need to the computer and the Internet as 'tools for doing homework,' in fact, it is much more than that. If children of lower-income families are unable to use the Internet at home, this digital divide will cause them to lag behind other children in not only the skills but the culture of the new media. This will be a vicious cycle that is greatly damaging to the development, future opportunities and upward mobility of these children from lower-income families.

6. On the other hand, Internet service providers (ISPs) have demonstrated themselves in the past to be willing to be helpful in facilitating access to needy students. ISPs have expressed that they will continue to be flexible and socially responsible on this matter. The IT industry as well as IT professionals have also been generally supportive of digital inclusion initiatives. But it is unfair and not sustainable for society to rely solely on their generosity and good will.

7. We call for the Administration to explain the rationale, if any, of their position against the provision of such broadband subsidy, and as such, face the problem rather than dodging the question. Ultimately, of course, we call on the Administration to change its stance on this matter and agree to provide Internet access for school attending child recipients of the CSSA Scheme. In that event, the IT and Internet industries and communities will do their best to coordinate and support.

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