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Panel on Education

**Updated background brief
prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 11 April 2011**

Measures to address the declining secondary student population

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") about the measures adopted to address the declining secondary school student population.

Background

Class structure of secondary schools under the New Senior Secondary ("NSS") academic structure

2. The three-year NSS academic structure has been implemented since the 2009-2010 school year. Under the NSS curriculum framework, there are four core subjects, 20 elective subjects and a range of Applied Learning courses. According to the Administration, under normal circumstances, students should be able to complete six years of secondary education in the same school. A secondary school should be of considerable size for providing students with a broad, balanced and in-depth curriculum to cater for the diverse needs of students. In the Administration's view, the most desirable school size under the NSS academic structure should be 24 or 30 classes, with 18 classes (i.e. three classes for each level) being the acceptable minimum. A school with less than three secondary one ("S1") classes may continue to operate if it can assure the breadth and accessibility of curriculum choice for students

through the development options which include injecting additional resources by the school sponsoring body, merging or collaborating with another school, undergoing special review, joining the Direct Subsidy Scheme and turning to private operation.

Measures to address declining secondary student population

3. In the face of the continuous decrease in the number of students progressing to S1, the Education Bureau ("EDB") has implemented a number of measures in recent years to alleviate the pressure of student enrolment in schools. Since the 2006-2007 school year, EDB has adopted more relaxed criteria in approving secondary school classes (i.e. 35 students per class), and provided about 700 additional teaching posts over three years to render better support to academic low achievers in order to stabilise the teaching force. Further measures were introduced in 2008, which included reducing year by year the number of students allocated to each S1 class to 34, and further relaxing the criteria for approving classes from 35 to 30 students (i.e. schools can operate three classes with a minimum of 61 students, giving rise to an average class size of about 21).

4. According to the latest projection of the Hong Kong population released by the Census and Statistics Department, it is projected that the annual intake of S1 students would drop from 69 000 in the 2010-2011 school year to 53 900 in the 2016-2017 school year, representing a decrease of more than 20%. According to the current projection, a slight rebound of student enrolment may appear only after the 2016-2017 school year. In early 2010, the Administration has further put forward the following measures to alleviate the impact of the declining secondary student population on secondary schools -

- (a) encouraging schools to participate in the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme under which the number of S1 classes in a secondary school was to be reduced from five to four;
- (b) encouraging sponsoring bodies to review schools under their sponsorship and consider reducing the number of schools in an orderly manner through merger or other means;
- (c) facilitating schools in collaboration with other schools or post-secondary institutions/professional bodies/vocational

bodies in operating practical courses to sustain their development; and

- (d) by means of special review, allowing quality schools and schools providing effective featured programmes (such as performing arts and sports programmes) to sustain their development.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. The Panel discussed issues relating to the closure of secondary schools as a result of class restructuring under the NSS academic structure and measures to address the declining secondary student population at its meetings on 12 June 2006, 10 November 2008 and 8 November 2010. The deliberations of the Panel are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Reasons for class restructuring

6. Members pointed out that according to the projection of the Administration, the number of S1 students would decrease from 84 800 in 2006-2007 to 68 900 in 2010-2011, resulting in a surplus of 968 secondary classes. Members considered that the Administration should have reviewed the School Building Programme ("SBP") in the light of the projected declining student population and should not have continued with the school construction projects under SBP over the past years. The planning mistake on the part of the Administration had resulted in an over-supply of school places.

7. The Administration explained that secondary school places had all along been planned and provided on a territory-wide basis. School projects under SBP were planned on the basis of the population projection published by the Census and Statistics Department. In planning SBP, the Administration sought to balance the supply and demand of school places at the district level as far as possible. Owing to a limited supply of suitable sites for building schools, the supply of school places in certain districts inevitably exceeded the local demand. Apart from school councils and teachers associations, the Administration had to take into account the views of parents and students on the provision of school places, in particular the class size in popular schools. The Administration also had to consider the manpower needs of the

community, the availability of resources to support the various initiatives and their competing priorities in education.

8. Members maintained the view that the Administration should not resort to school closure to resolve its planning mistake. The measures introduced to stabilize school development were indeed destabilization measures without regard to the interests of students and teachers. Members opined that the quality of education was crucial to the success of Hong Kong, and resources should not be the sole consideration. Members were concerned whether class restructuring was the means to save resources for the implementation of the new academic structure.

9. The Administration clarified that the purpose of class restructuring was not to save resources, although the savings arising therefrom would be used to support the implementation of the NSS academic structure.

Options for under-enrolled schools

10. Members were worried that the declining student population would result in the closure of schools with a large enrolment of Band 3 students. Given the student diversity, members considered that there was a genuine need for such schools to exist. As one of the development options, schools with insufficient enrolment to operate three S1 classes might continue to operate junior secondary classes under the "per capita subvention mode", and upon their completion of S3, students would be offered S4 places in other subsidized secondary schools through a central placement mechanism. Members noted from the Administration that some 9 000 secondary school students dropped out annually. In members' view, schools adopting the "per capita subvention mode" would be ready to admit these students should they wish to continue their studies. Members requested the Administration to consider extending the "per capita subvention mode" to senior secondary classes to enable the students to complete secondary education in the same schools. Members also sought information on how the Administration would assist these schools to sustain operation.

11. The Administration clarified that the 9 000 students were not all school-drops and the figure included students who changed schools for various reasons. Whether students could complete secondary education in the same schools would depend on the wish of the schools concerned to continue operation, subject to the fulfilment of certain requirements. Schools without three S1 classes for the first time might apply for operating practical courses, such as Maritime Studies, Physical Fitness

and Network Management, in collaboration with post-secondary institutions or professional or vocational bodies. Conversion into schools with featured programmes was another option for these schools. However, it should not be a mainstream option as the number of such schools would be limited and they would need to operate under prescribed conditions.

12. Members pointed out that some of these schools had already undergone transformation and had begun to admit ethnic minority students in order to survive. However it would not be viable for each and every school to turn into schools with featured programmes. Furthermore, some parents might not be willing to send their children to schools which admitted a large number of students with behavioural problems.

13. Members enquired whether the Administration would assist under-enrolled schools with a large number of students with special educational needs ("SEN") to become special schools. In the Administration's view, the provision of integrated education for students with SEN to learn and interact with other students in ordinary schools was implemented after extensive consultation. Any change to the policy to revert to the provision of education for students with SEN in special schools had to be thoroughly discussed.

Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme

14. At the Panel meeting on 8 November 2010, members were briefed on the Administration's latest measures to reduce the impact of declining secondary student population. Members noted that to encourage more schools to participate in the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme, the Administration had put forward a series of enhancement measures to provide additional teaching resources for participating schools to address the issue of declining student population while enhancing the quality of education.

15. Some members considered it acceptable to reduce the number of classes as long as the teaching quality could be maintained. Some other members were of the view that the measures could only defer, but not resolve the problem in the long term. These members pointed out that owing to the decline in secondary student population in the coming six years, some schools would have to be closed and some teachers would need to leave the teaching force if measures were not implemented to reduce the impact. However, when the secondary student population

started to rise in 2017, the demand for teachers would increase. It was therefore necessary for the Administration to have a comprehensive and holistic plan to avoid disruptive changes to the education sector.

16. According to the Administration, encouraging schools to reduce the number of classes voluntarily was the most effective means at the current stage to alleviate the impact of a sharp decline in student population. It could stabilize the overall situation in schools in the upcoming one to two years and maintain a good mix of different types of schools in each district to cater for students with different learning needs. It could also maintain the stability of the teaching force to ensure teaching quality. Under the NSS curriculum framework, a broad and balanced curriculum was offered and students were provided with the accessibility to combinations of elective subjects of their preference. As such, more classrooms were required for split-class teaching and for providing students with more choices of elective subjects. Owing to space constraint, many schools had to implement floating classes which was undesirable. Schools could make use of the classrooms freed up by reduction in classes to improve the teaching and learning environment under the NSS structure.

Implementation of small class teaching in secondary schools

17. Members held different views on whether small class teaching ("SCT") should be implemented in secondary schools in the light of the declining secondary student population. Some members pointed out that SCT had been implemented at junior secondary levels at many schools in Nanjing and Dalian in the Mainland. Given the proven effectiveness of SCT, the decline of the secondary student population provided a good opportunity for its implementation in secondary schools. Other members, however, held the view that reducing class size might help teachers to keep their jobs but this should not be the only solution. Schools should take into account the overall teacher-student ratio and the qualification of teachers when considering the implementation of SCT.

18. Some members expressed the view that class reduction was not the way to enhance the quality of secondary education and reiterated their call for the implementation of SCT to resolve the problem in the long run. They suggested that SCT could be launched at secondary schools with lesser intake of students for selected subjects such as language and arts subjects which required more interactions between teachers and students. As the Hong Kong Institute of Education had adopted SCT in its training programmes, the teachers had already acquired certain skills in SCT.

Hence, the training of teachers and the implementation of SCT could be carried out in parallel. They called on the Administration to seriously consider implementing SCT after the situation in schools had been stabilised.

19. According to the Administration, the education sector was concerned about the implications on students and teachers resulting from the closure of under-enrolled schools which would mainly be those admitting a large number of low-academic achievers. As such, the most important thing for the time being was to stabilise the overall situation in schools and to maintain a diverse school system to suit the needs of the students. There was a consensus in the education sector that the measures proposed by the Administration were effective in tackling the problem. The implementation of SCT in secondary schools was not a policy at the present stage. The Administration had to be prudent in handling the matter as there would be recurrent financial implications. The Administration would explore other measures, including the feasibility of implementing SCT, to enhance the education quality at a later stage.

Latest development

20. As at September 2010, 23 secondary schools had reduced the number of S1 classes from five to four. The Administration announced on 18 November 2010 the enhanced provisions for the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme to encourage more schools' participation. A total of 202 schools had applied for the Scheme and 200 of which would join the Scheme in the 2011-2012 school year.

Relevant papers

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

**Relevant papers on measures to address the declining
secondary student population**

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Panel on Education	12.6.2006 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	10.7.2006 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)2680/05-06(01) CB(2)2680/05-06(02) CB(2)2680/05-06(03) CB(2)2792/05-06(01)
--	8.8.2006	Education Bureau circular memorandum No. 146/2006
--	2.5.2008	Education Bureau Circular No. 5/2008
Panel on Education	10.11.2008 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	27.1.2010	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 25 - 33 (Question)
Legislative Council	17.3.2010	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 69 - 73 (Question)
Panel on Education	8.11.2010 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes