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Panel on Education

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 13 December 2010**

Provision of school places in the Islands District

Purpose

This paper sets out the concerns of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") about the provision of school places in the Islands District.

Background

2. According to the Administration, it is the policy of the Government to ensure sufficient public sector primary and secondary schools to provide free and universal education for all eligible school-age children. The current Primary One Admission ("POA") System adopts the principle of vicinity as the basis for the allocation of Primary ("P") 1 places and the whole territory is divided into 36 school nets. Under the Secondary School Places Allocation ("SSPA") system, the territory is divided into 18 school nets in line with the district administration boundaries. Under the POA System and the SSPA System, parents may choose schools without restriction of school nets both at the Discretionary Places Admission stage and under Part A for Unrestricted School Choices at the Central Allocation ("CA") stage. The allocation of school places is based on school nets under Part B for Restricted School Choices at the CA stage.

3. There are currently four POA school nets in the Islands District, namely, Net 96 (Lamma Island), Net 97 (Cheung Chau), Net 98 (Lantau Island and Tung Chung) and Net 99 (Peng Chau and Discovery Bay). The Islands school net (NT9) under the SSPA System covers the Lamma Island, Po Toi Island, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau, Mui Wo, Pui O, Tai O and Tung

Chung. To provide parents with more school choices, apart from the secondary schools located in their respective districts, each school net will include a number of schools in other districts as well.

4. The Education Bureau ("EDB") has set up a Working Group on Review of School Nets, comprising representatives of major school councils, parent representatives, representatives of Committee on Home-School Co-operation and lay members to review the existing demarcation of the school nets and deliberate on the long-term arrangements, taking into account factors such as changes in the student population, demand and supply of school places, distribution of schools and transportation network in each district.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. The Panel had discussed the provision of school places in the Islands District per se and in the context of considering the proposal for the relocation of two drug treatment and rehabilitation centres ("DTRCs") of the Christian Zheng Sheng Association ("CZSA") in Ha Keng. Deputations were invited to attend the meeting on 11 July 2009 to give views on the subject. The concerns of members are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Adequacy of school places

6. Having regard to the remoteness of the Islands, members were concerned about the adequacy of public sector primary and secondary school places in the vicinity for selection by the local children. They noted that many students residing in the Islands District had to spend considerable time and money to travel to schools in other districts, such as the Central and Western District. Some members were worried that these students would be discouraged from participating in after-school activities because of the long travel time.

7. According to the Administration, there were sufficient school places in each of the school nets to meet the demand in the same net. Currently, students residing on the Islands could choose among five secondary schools in Tung Chung, two in Cheung Chau and more than 10 on Hong Kong Island. Some 1 300 P6 students in the Islands District took part in the SSPA system each year. For the Islands District school nets, there were still several dozen vacant classrooms in the public sector primary schools which could be used to meet any growth in the demand for primary places in the district. In

order to meet the possible demand for public sector school places, the Administration had also reserved sites in Tung Chung for school building purpose. According to the Government's projections of population distribution, the student population of the Islands District would remain stable in the coming few years.

8. The Administration advised that it normally took about 45 minutes to travel say from Mui Wo to the Central and Western District by fast ferry, and from Tung Chung to the urban areas by bus. Students from low-income families were provided with travelling subsidies. The annual travelling subsidies for primary students going to schools in the urban areas ranged from \$2,800 to \$3,700, and those for secondary students ranged from \$6,300 to \$17,000. The annual travelling subsidies for primary students going to schools within the Islands Districts ranged from \$700 to \$1,100, and \$6,000 to \$6,900 for secondary students.

9. Members considered that the Administration had under-estimated the travelling time taken by Islands students to go to schools. Members pointed out that students residing on the Islands could take as long as two to three hours to go to schools in the Central and Western District as not only the ferry trip but the whole journey time between home and school should be counted.

Use of the former New Territories Heung Yee Kuk Southern District Secondary School ("ex-SDSS") in Mui Wo

10. Members were concerned in particular about the supply of public sector primary and secondary school places for students residing in South Lantau. According to information provided by deputations, South Lantau had a population of about 17,700 and over 3,500 were full-time students. Of these, 655 were primary students including non-Chinese speaking ("NCS") students. The number of NCS students constituted about one-third of the school-age population in the area and had been increasing steadily. Most NCS students did not participate in the SSPA System as they were not proficient in Chinese language and would not be allocated to their preferred schools based on past experience. They generally preferred the Direct Subsidy Scheme secondary schools which adopted English as the medium of instruction ("MOI"). As there was no secondary school in the vicinity, the South Lantau residents requested the allocation of the ex-SDSS site for building a secondary school for local children. The deputations were of the view that 655 primary students would be sufficient for operating an 18-class secondary school with two classes using Chinese as the MOI and one class using English at each level. Some members considered that the lack of a secondary school in Mui Wo was one of the reasons for the local residents

opposing the proposal for the relocation of the CZSA's DTRCs in Ha Keng to the ex-SDSS.

11. The Administration advised that about 1 000 children applied for P1 places under the POA System each year. According to the 2009 POA allocation results, the two primary schools in Mui Wo, i.e. Mui Wo School and Bui O Public School, could offer a total of 50 places, but only 41 P1 applicants were allocated to the two schools. This showed that these two primary schools could provide sufficient school places for P1 applicants residing in Mui Wo. The closure of the ex-SDSS was due to the low intake of students. It was at the request of local residents that the Administration had expanded the school nets in the Islands District to allow Mui Wo students to choose schools in other districts.

12. Some members considered that the low intake of students in the ex-SDSS was because of the high turnover rate of its principals. Should there be a quality secondary school in the area, local students might choose to study there instead of selecting schools in other districts such as Cheung Chau and Tung Chung. Having regard to the remoteness of Mui Wo and the long travelling time, members stressed the need for the Administration to relax its policy and build a secondary school in the area.

13. The Administration clarified that the ex-SDSS was a government school, and its teaching quality was on par with that of other public sector schools. It had only one S1 class in the last few years before closure, and the number of its S1 students decreased from 18 in the 2002-2003 school year to 13 in the 2003-2004 school year, while the overall student population in Mui Wo in the corresponding period was not declining. This reflected that many Mui Wo parents preferred sending their children to schools outside the area. Nevertheless, the Administration was willing to consider any proposal for a new school put forward for the residents of Mui Wo as well as South Lantau provided that the proposed school could attract a sufficient number of students for sustainable operation.

Formulation of school policy for the Islands District

14. Given the large size of the Islands District and its special transport conditions, the Association of School Heads of Islands District requested the exercise of more flexibility in school place allocation for the Islands District. Members shared its view and considered it necessary for the Administration to formulate school policies unique to remote districts. Members called on the Administration to broaden its vision and formulate an appropriate policy for the operation of different types of secondary schools, such as those with

boarding facilities to attract students from local and other districts, or those with direct subsidies using English as MOI for NCS students. Members suggested that at least one primary school and one secondary school should be provided in each Island of the Islands District should the student population reach a reasonable level.

15. Some members expressed opposition to the policy of closing down rural schools as this had resulted in the need of students living on the Islands to travel long distance to go to schools. In their view, rural schools had their unique environment and special features, and diversity in schools and pedagogies should be allowed to cater for the different needs of students. Some parents preferred rural schools because they adopted small class teaching and offered a more stable learning environment.

16. The Administration advised that the number of P1 classes that a school might operate had all along been determined by a set of fair and transparent criteria. In deciding whether it was necessary for a school to operate a P1 class under the existing criteria, the Administration would consider special factors, such as whether a school was located in a remote area without appropriate alternative schools providing the school places needed, in addition to the number of students allocated to the school. The Administration had and would continue to exercise flexibility with regard to the requirement of student enrolment for public sector primary schools in the Islands District. The Administration stressed that in order to provide a broad and balanced curriculum under the New Senior Secondary academic structure, the most desirable school size was 24 to 30 classes, with 18 classes, i.e. three classes for each level, being the acceptable minimum. Two factors had been taken into account in formulating the policy of the three-class requirement for each level. First, there should be sufficient teaching manpower and expertise for deployment; second, there should be a critical mass of students, say around 700, to facilitate effective peer and collaborative learning as interaction among students was important in the process of learning.

17. Members were of view that as the Administration had already exercised flexibility in the class size in respect of primary schools in the Islands District, similar flexibility should be provided to secondary schools. The Administration should provide adequate teaching staff to secondary schools in the Islands District irrespective of whether the parents selected the local schools. Members pointed out that if the class size could be reduced to say 15 to 20 students, a secondary school with a small number of students could provide a broad and balanced curriculum. Members urged the Administration to consider the unique circumstances of the Islands District

and implement policies tailored to the educational needs of the Islands residents.

Relevant papers

18. 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 provision of school places in the Islands District

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	17.6.2009 (Item II)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	11.7.2009 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	18.3.2010 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	30.4.2010 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	12.7.2010 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	17.3.2010	Question asked by Hon Cyd HO on "Demand and Supply of School Places for Primary and Secondary Schools" Hansard (English) (page 69)