

Education Panel

Provision of International School Places Submission from the International College of Hong Kong (NT)

1. The International College of Hong Kong (NT) (“ICHK”) is an international secondary school that was founded in 2008 by three international primary schools, two in the northern New Territories and one in Kowloon. It operates in a former Government school near Sha Tau Kok.
2. The Board of ICHK wishes to draw the panel’s attention to the following:
 - There is a shortage of places for students who wish to follow a non-local curriculum. This is detrimental to the interests of local families as well as to Hong Kong’s competitiveness as an international business hub.
 - The proposal to impose a lower quota for local students at new international schools will not be an effective or desirable policy response.
 - As Asia’s World City, Hong Kong should facilitate the creation of schools offering a variety of curricula and serving a mix of local and international students.
 - Policy on international schools should treat all schools offering a non-local curriculum alike. In particular, there is no longer any justification for treating the English Schools Foundation (ESF) differently from other schools offering a non-local curriculum.
 - Consideration should be given to providing the same subvention to all schools, irrespective of whether they provide a local or a non-local curriculum.
 - If there are only limited financial resources for schools offering non-local curricula, the priorities should be (a) providing means-tested bursaries so that students who cannot access the local curriculum are able to be educated irrespective of their

family's financial position, (b) supporting children with special educational needs, and (c) providing loans to enable the construction, renovation and improvement of buildings and other facilities.

- The Education Bureau should set up an International Schools Facilitation Unit, to administer financial support for international schools, to make available green field sites and unused school premises that can be used for new international schools, and to assist new and existing International Schools to deal with other Government departments.
- The Education Bureau should set up an Advisory Committee on International School Development, to advise in detail on the policy measures to be taken in respect of international schools. This should include representatives of the international schools sector, chambers of commerce and of local education experts
- Any increased regulation of international schools should be limited to requiring schools offering a non-local curriculum to obtain appropriate accreditation, such as from the International Baccalaureate Organisation of the Council of International Schools.

Shortage of places

3. ICHK enrolments in its entry year, Year 7, are now running close to capacity. As a new school, we do have places available in higher years, but the main demand for secondary school places arises in Year 7.

4. Our feeder primary schools are full in most classes and have waiting lists for their entry classes in kindergarten and Year 1.

5. The Government has quoted statistics purporting to show a high level of vacancies in the international school sector. We consider that these statistics should be treated with caution.

6. In the first place, the annual statistical returns we provide to Government report the number of students enrolled, not the number of places available or of vacancies. While the Government does have data on the number and size of classrooms, this is not a reliable basis for estimating the number of places available. For educational reasons, the maximum class size at an international school tends to be significantly

lower than the number of students that Government regulations would permit to be accommodated in each classroom. Class size could not be increased without affecting teaching and learning, and without making the school unattractive to international families.

7. In any event, when vacancies occur, they are not spread equally amongst year groups within a particular school. Schools tend to be full in the lower years, with more vacancies in later years, as a result of families leaving Hong Kong.

8. When expatriate families relocate to Hong Kong, they typically look for a school with vacancies for two or three children of different ages. If they cannot find a single school, they need at least to enrol their children in schools that serve the same catchment area. The current level of vacancies varies from year group to year group and from school to school, so it is often impossible for a family to find a way to meet all its educational needs.

Quotas for local students are undesirable

9. The proposal to limit new international schools to a maximum of 30% local students is undesirable. International parents have no wish to educate their children in an expatriate ghetto. They typically choose to come to Hong Kong because they are internationally minded, and they value the interaction that their children will have with local children. In our view, a 50/50 mix between international and local students is optimal from an international education perspective.

10. A quota is also too rigid to enable schools to adjust to fluctuations in the global economy. Schools need to be able to plan their expenditure on the basis of a target level of enrolments. If they are required to turn away local students because of a temporary downturn in international enrolments, this could threaten their financial sustainability.

Asia's world city should facilitate a diversity of curricula

11. There is unquestionably a significant demand for a variety of non-local curricula, from local as well as from expatriate families. The demand from local families should be celebrated. As an international trading hub, Hong Kong benefits from having a cadre of local students who have been exposed to a wide variety of curricula. It is a mistake to

regard the purpose of international schools as being solely to serve the expatriate community. Rather policy should be directed at ensuring a sufficient supply of international school places for all students who desire them, including both local and expatriate students.

Policy should treat all schools offering non-local curricula alike

12. Policy currently distinguishes three categories of school offering non-local curricula: international schools, ESF schools and private international schools. Policy differs in the terms on which premises, loans and subventions are made available or not. Policy also differs on what quotas, if any, there are for local and international students.

13. Parents who wish their children to follow a non-local curriculum do not categorise schools in this way. They would consider schools from all three categories, and would choose based on issues such as location, ethos, class size, nature of the school community, educational reputation, level of fees and charges and so forth.

14. There is no benefit in treating these categories of schools in different ways. Doing so distorts the allocation of resources, rather than allowing this to be driven by parents' wishes and students' needs.

15. In particular, singling out the ESF for an annual subvention is damaging to the international schools sector as a whole. It encourages some parents to switch their children to a cheaper ESF school if a place becomes available at short notice, which may not be in the child's educational interests and may have a detrimental financial effect on the non-ESF school. It may also be the case that a subvention-funded ESF is able to pay higher salaries, which not only increases ESF's own costs, it also has a knock-on effect on the costs incurred by non-ESF schools.

Consideration should be given to a common per-student subvention for all schools offering a non-local curriculum

16. If Government subvention followed the student, this would eliminate the distortions caused by favouring one provider of international education over the others. This would be the case irrespective of the level of subvention.

17. Ideally, to avoid distorting choices between schools offering local and international curricula, the same per-student subvention could be made available to all schools.

If only limited financial resources are available for schools with non-local curricula are limited, they should be better targeted

18. Schools offering non-local curricula tend to have higher fees than local schools and many of their students come from better-off families. Increasing the overall level of taxpayer-funded support for non-local schools might therefore not be regarded as a priority.

19. If it were decided to freeze support for non-local schools at the level of the current ESF subvention, this money could be much better spent to enable the development of the non-local schools sector.

20. One priority should be to support lower-income families who cannot access the local schools system or whose children have particular abilities that would benefit from an international education. This would mean that ability to pay need not be a barrier to an international education for children.

21. Another priority should be support for children with special educational needs. An ability to offer an international education to such children will enhance Hong Kong's attractiveness to international families.

22. A third priority should be to provide capital for building projects. International schools are able to cover their running costs and depreciation from fees, but it is less straightforward to raise capital to construct or renovate buildings. Some schools are well-endowed. Others raise capital through expensive debentures. But if there is to be an expansion of the international schools sector, this will be greatly facilitated by the availability of loans from the Government.

The EDB should establish an International Schools Facilitation Unit

23. Besides providing financial support, the Government will also need to make available existing school premises and/or greenfield sites for the expansion of the non-local schools sector. In addition, it would be helpful for non-local schools to have a single point of contact within the

Government that can help them meet the requirements of various departments such as the Buildings, Architectural Services, Fire Services and Immigration Departments.

24. These tasks could usefully be performed by a unit dedicated to facilitating international schools.

The Government should establish an Advisory Committee on International Schools Development

25. In settling the details of these policies, the Government will benefit from advice from experts and stakeholders. We suggest the formation of an Advisory Committee that includes representatives from various non-local schools, international and local chambers of commerce, the Institute of Education, and other local experts.

There should not be an increase in detailed regulation

26. As the policy should be to promote diversity in the non-local schools sector, it would be inappropriate for the Government to increase detailed regulation of the sector. Instead it might focus on ensuring that non-local schools achieve some sort of external quality assurance, such as accreditation from a body such as the Council for International Schools or authorisation from the International Baccalaureate Organisation. There might also be rules to assure financial rectitude and transparency.

International College Hong Kong (NT)

January 2012