

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(4)486/12-13(02)

Ref : CB4/PL/ED

Panel on Education

Special meeting on 19 March 2013

**Background brief on
Issues related to the provision of 15-year free education**

Purpose

This paper summarizes the deliberations and concerns of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") on issues related to the provision of 15-year free education in Hong Kong.

Background

Overview

2. At present, 12-year free primary and secondary education is provided in Hong Kong. Pre-primary education is provided by privately run kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres (collectively referred to as "KGs") which are registered with the Education Bureau ("EDB"). At present, most KGs operate on a half-day basis and offer upper kindergarten, lower kindergarten and nursery classes. Some kindergartens offer whole-day classes as well. According to EDB, the aim of kindergarten education in Hong Kong is to nurture children to attain all-round development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics; to develop good habits so as to prepare them for life, and to stimulate children's interest in learning and cultivate in them positive learning attitudes, in order to lay the foundation for their future learning¹.

¹ See <http://www.edb.gov.hk>.

3. All KGs in Hong Kong are privately run and can be categorized as non-profit-making ("NPM") KGs and private independent ("PI") KGs depending on their sponsoring organizations which can be voluntary agencies or private enterprises. According to the information provided by EDB in reply to a written question raised by Dr Hon Kenneth CHAN at the Council meeting of 6 February 2013, there were over 950 NPM KGs and PI KGs in Hong Kong as at October 2012. For the 2011-2012 school year, the average school fees charged by PI KGs and NPM KGs operating half-day classes were \$44,338 and \$21,177 respectively.

Financial assistance

Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ("PEVS")

4. The PEVS, which is non-means-tested, has been implemented since the 2007-2008 school year to ease the financial burden of parents and raise the quality of KG education. Under PEVS, every child above two years and eight months of age and attending a NPM KG charging a school fee not exceeding \$24,000 per student per annum ("pspa") for a half-day place or not exceeding \$48,000 pspa for a whole-day place is eligible for a voucher, to be redeemed by the KG concerned². Under PEVS, the school fee to be paid by parents is the difference between the school fee approved to be charged by the KG and the fee subsidy under PEVS in that school year. The value of the voucher was first set at \$13,000 pspa in the 2007-2008 school year, and was progressively increased to \$16,800 pspa in the 2012-2013 school year. The voucher value for the 2013-2014 school year has been raised to \$17,510 pspa, with reference to the year-on-year rate of change in Composite Consumer Price Index.

5. According to the information provided by EDB in June 2011³, in the 2010-2011 school year, about 80% of KGs had joined PEVS. Since the introduction of PEVS, an average of some 85% of KG children have benefited from the voucher subsidy annually, compared to some 50% of KG children benefiting from the financial assistance under the former Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Subsidy Scheme.

² A transitional period of three years until the end of the 2009-2010 school year was provided for PI KGs satisfying all prescribed requirements of eligible NPM KGs, save for the NPM status, to redeem the vouchers from parents whose children were enrolled at various study levels in such PI KGs in the 2007-2008 school year throughout these children's education in the same PI KGs.

³ See LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(01).

Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme ("KCFRS")

6. Parents who are financially in need may apply for additional financial assistance under KCFRS when their children are enrolled in a KG eligible for PEVS. If the fee subsidy from PEVS is inadequate to cover the tuition fees charged by the KG, parents may apply for additional assistance under KCFRS. Those who pass the means test will be provided with fee remission with reference to the level of assistance they are assessed to be eligible for.

Deliberations on relevant issues

Salary scale and professional upgrading of KG teachers and principals

7. Members noted with concern that upon the introduction of PEVS, the Administration abolished the Recommended Normative Salary Scale and allowed all KGs full discretion to determine the salaries for their teachers. Members held the view that the continued existence of a normative salary scale for KG teachers was essential for maintaining a stable and quality pre-primary education workforce, as well as enhancing the quality of pre-primary education. They urged the Administration to formulate a salary framework for KG principals and teachers in line with the requirement to raise their qualifications by phases.

8. The Administration considered that as it had made substantial financial commitment to pre-primary education and injected new resources through PEVS, KGs should have adequate capacity in formulating remuneration packages which best suited their needs and enable them to attract and retain staff. The Administration's stance was that since pre-primary education was privately run, the salaries of KG teachers should be determined by the KG sector.

9. Members did not subscribe to the Administration's view, and urged the Administration to formulate a salary scale for KG teachers. The Panel further noted that a Working Group had been set up under the Education Commission in October 2009 to review the implementation of PEVS ("the Working Group"). While concluding that PEVS was an appropriate mechanism for funding pre-primary education, the Working Group recommended that an advisory body should be set up to look into longer-term issues such as a reference salary scale for KG teachers and

principals⁴.

10. At the Panel meeting held on 13 June 2011, members were informed by the Administration that there had been increases in KG teachers' salaries since the introduction of PEVS, with some KG teachers receiving salaries which exceeded the ceiling of the former normative salary scale. Members nevertheless requested the Administration to conduct regular surveys on the salaries of teachers of half-day and whole-day KGs, and to provide such information to the Panel. According to the Administration, data on the salary of KG teachers is collected by means of an anonymous survey in mid-September each year. For the 2011-2012 school year, the average monthly salary of KG teachers ranged from \$18,300 to \$8,200, depending on the type of classes operated by the KGs and the working hours of the teachers⁵.

11. On professional upgrading, members noted that with effect from the 2009-2010 school year, all newly appointed KG principals are required to possess a Bachelor degree in Education (Early Childhood Education), and to complete the Certification Course for KG principals. All teachers are expected to complete the Certificate in Early Childhood Education by the 2011-2012 school year. In reply to a written question of Dr Hon Kenneth CHAN at the Council meeting on 6 February 2013, the Administration provided the provisional figures for the 2012-2013 school year that 3 471 KG teachers possess a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education or relevant qualifications and 6 411 teachers possess the Certificate in Early Childhood Education.

Kindergartens operating whole-day classes

12. In submitting views to the Panel, many deputations deplored the existing arrangement under which the subsidy for KGs under PEVS is based on the number of students enrolled, regardless of whether the KGs operate on a whole-day or half-day basis. Some members shared the view that setting the same subsidy rate for half-day and whole-day KGs was unfair to whole-day KGs which operated longer hours than half-day KGs. Given the smaller number of students enrolled in whole-day KGs, the amount of subsidy received by whole-day KGs was substantially less

⁴ The report of the Working Group was submitted to the Administration in December 2010, and is available on Education Commission's website at <http://www.e-c.edu.hk>.

⁵ The average, median, highest and lowest salary of KG teachers in PEVS KGs for the 2011-2012 school year are set out in LC Paper No. CB(2)2513/11-12(01) issued to the Panel on 3 July 2012.

than that received by half-day KGs. Members were concerned about the high turnover rate of teachers in whole-day KGs because of long working hours and lesser subsidy. Considering that whole-day KGs were necessary to cater for the need of working families, members urged the Administration to rectify the inequitable arrangement early.

13. The Administration explained that as the objective of PEVS was to provide direct subsidy to parents for their children attending KGs, the same rate of subsidy should apply to all children, irrespective of whether they were attending half-day KGs or whole-day KGs. Needy children attending whole-day KGs may apply for fee remission under KCFRS in addition to the fee subsidy under PEVS. The operational needs of whole-day KGs were already reflected in their level of school fees which was higher than that of half-day KGs. At the Panel meeting on 13 June 2011, the Administration advised that the overall turnover rates of KG teachers were 6.8% and 6.9% in the 2009-2010 and the 2010-2011 school years respectively. The Administration considered that as KGs were privately run, they had the flexibility to adjust their remuneration packages and working conditions to attract and retain teachers. In response to the Panel's request for information on the turnover rates of KG teachers in half-day and whole-day KGs on a regular basis, the Administration informed members the turnover rate of KG teachers serving in half-day KGs was 7.1% in the 2011-2012 school year while the corresponding rate for teachers serving in whole-day KGs was 6.7%⁶.

Provision of 15-year free education

14. The provision of free pre-primary education in addition to the existing 12-year free primary and secondary education had been an issue of ongoing concern to the Panel. Many members pointed out that the provision of adequate education opportunities was important to enable upward mobility in the community, and that pre-primary education was an essential and integral part of basic education and should not be excluded from the free education framework. Noting one of the recommendations of the Working Group that a further review of early childhood education in response to developments in the macro environment should be conducted at an opportune time, some members considered that the macro environment already existed for the provision of 15-year free education, as the Administration had recorded huge fiscal surpluses in successive years.

⁶ See LC Paper No. CB(2)2513/11-12(01) issued to the Panel on 3 July 2012.

15. The policy stance of the previous term of Government was to provide 12-year free primary and secondary education, but not free KG education. The Administration nevertheless stated that it was committed to supporting the development of pre-primary education through initiatives such as PEVS.

16. Since the commencement of the Fifth Legislative Council, Members have followed up the subject of 15-year free education on account of the election manifesto of the incumbent Chief Executive. In its reply to a written question by Hon Frederick FUNG at the Council meeting on 28 November 2012 and in response to members' concerns at the Panel meeting held on 25 January 2013, the Administration advised as follows:

- (a) Providing practicable 15-year free education and better quality KG education is one of the priorities of the current-term Government.
- (b) Since July 2012, the Secretary for Education has held over 20 meetings with the KG sector, including sharing sessions with stakeholders and visits to KGs of different operating modes and scales, in order to better understand their needs and operation.
- (c) Given the different views and expectations of stakeholders on further enhancement of KG education and the huge diversity among KGs in various aspects, the Administration would need to be prudent when considering how to further improve KG education in order not to adversely affect the flexibility of the KG sector and its provision of diversified services for parents.

17. At the Panel meeting held on 25 January 2013, members sought explanation on the establishment of a committee to examine the feasibility of free KG education in Hong Kong as announced in the 2013 Policy Address. Some members queried whether this was in fact a move to delay or even shelve any plans to introduce free KG education in Hong Kong. There was also grave concern about the work plan and operation of the committee, and whether it would take forward its study speedily to enable the early implementation of free KG education.

18. According to the Administration, the committee would be set up in mid-2013. About five to six working groups were expected to be

established under the committee to look into key issues such as the funding model and professional development and salary scales of KG teachers. However, arising from the review, if certain initiatives were considered worth-pursuing, the Administration might consider implementing them on a pilot basis before the committee concluded its study. The Administration also assured members that stakeholders would be engaged in the process of the review.

19. On measures to support the development of the KG sector pending the outcome of the committee's review, members noted that the Administration would continue to implement PEVS. In addition, EDB will provide KGs who had joined PEVS with an additional one-off grant to carry out minor improvement works and procure furniture, teaching materials and other learning resources etc. with a view to helping them to improve their teaching and learning environment and effectiveness.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
13 March 2013

**Relevant papers on
Issues related to the provision of 15-year free education**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	20.3.2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)1151/08-09(01)
Panel on Education	22.6.2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	17.12.2010 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes Report on Review of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme
Panel on Education	13.6.2011 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)2513/11-12(01)
Finance Committee	8.7.2011 (Item No.5)	FCR(2011-12)38 Minutes
Legislative Council	16.11.2011	Official record of Proceedings Pages 96 – 97 (Question 20)
Legislative Council	28.11.2012	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 91 – 93 (Question 18)
Panel on Education	25.1.2013	Agenda CB(4)318/12-13(01)
Legislative Council	6.2.2013	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 92 – 97 (Question 13)