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Panel on Education

Meeting on 9 July 2013

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

Purpose

This paper provides an updated account of 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.

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 concerned¹. 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.

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

5. 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

¹ 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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 as recommended by a Working Group set up under the Education Commission in October 2009 to review the implementation of PEVS, an advisory body should be set up to look into longer-term issues such as a reference salary scale for KG teachers and principals².

9. On professional upgrading, members noted that 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 possessed a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education or relevant qualifications and 6 411 teachers possessed the Certificate in Early Childhood Education.

Provision of free KG education

10. In his 2013 Policy Address in January 2013, the Chief Executive ("CE") announced that EDB would set up a committee to examine the feasibility of free KG education and recommend specific proposals to enable all children to have access to quality KG education. To follow up

² 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>.

the matter, the Panel held two special meetings on 19 and 26 March 2013 and received views from a total of 132 deputations. Members noted the broad consensus among the deputations that 15-year free education should be implemented without further delay.

11. Some members questioned whether the setting up of a committee was merely a tactic to delay or even shelve the implementation of free KG education. The Administration assured members of its stance that providing practicable 15-year free education and better quality KG education was one of the priorities of the current-term Government. However, owing to the huge diversity among KGs and the different views and expectations of the stakeholders, the Administration considered it prudent to set up a committee to examine the matter to ensure that the related measures would not affect the flexibility of the KG sector and its provision of diversified services for parents.

12. Many Panel members expressed concern about the work plan of the aforesaid committee, and considered that it should expedite its review in order to bring about early improvements. According to the Administration, it was hoped that the committee would complete its tasks in two years. The committee would be underpinned by about five subcommittees each tasked to examine specific issues such as funding, governance and professional development for teachers. Where certain initiatives were found worth-pursuing, consideration might be given to implementing them on a pilot basis. Members and deputations also opined that the membership of the committee should be balanced and inclusive of representatives from different stakeholders.

13. In the course deliberation, the Administration was asked to note the views and concerns raised by members and deputations, notably the following, for further consideration:

- (a) The current PEVS should be replaced by subsidized KG education. However, PI KGs should be allowed to continue their operation in order to provide choices to parents.
- (b) A salary scale for KG teachers should be put in place in order to stabilize the KG teaching force and give due recognition to experience and qualifications.
- (c) Different levels of subsidy for attendance at half-day KGs and whole-day KGs should be provided.

- (d) To ensure quality education, the teacher-to-student ratio at KGs should be 1:10 for the age group of two to four years; and 1:15 for the age group of four to six years.
- (e) Teaching and administrative support should be strengthened so that KG teachers could be relieved of their administrative duties and focus on their professional role.
- (f) More local researches should be conducted on early childhood education and the development of the appropriate teaching and learning resources should be strengthened.
- (g) A proper quality assurance mechanism should be put in place with a view to developing the self-assessment capability of KGs.
- (h) In the interim, consideration should be given to raising the value of the vouchers under PEVS so as to alleviate the financial burden on parents.

Recent developments

14. On 8 April 2013, EDB announced the establishment of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education which comprises 20 members and is headed by Dr Moses CHENG. The relevant press release issued by EDB is at **Appendix I**. It was subsequently announced that five subcommittees have been set up under the Committee to study specific issues such as funding modes, operation and governance and teacher professionalism.

15. The Audit Commission conducted a review of PEVS and its observations and recommendations are set out in Chapter 3 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 60 tabled at the Council meeting on 17 April 2013. The relevant chapter is under examination by the Public Accounts Committee.

16. At the meeting on 10 June 2013, the Panel was consulted on the Administration's proposal to provide KGs under PEVS with an additional one-off grant in an amount ranging from \$150,000 to \$250,000 to improve school premises, facilities and learning resources etc. with a view to helping them improve their teaching and learning environment and effectiveness. The grant could be spent by individual KGs over a

period of three years up to the 2015-2016 school year³. The Administration's clarification had been sought on the operation of the proposed one-off grant and the measures, if any, to monitor the use of the grant by individual KGs. Members were keen to ensure that the proposed grant would not operate as a stop-gap measure for not taking forward the implementation of free KG education expeditiously in the next three years or so.

17. The Panel will be briefed on the progress of work of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education at the meeting to be held on 9 July 2013.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
3 July 2013

³ See LC Paper No. CB(4)756/12-13(01) for details of the proposal.

Press Releases

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Appointments to Committee on Free Kindergarten Education announced

The Education Bureau (EDB) today (April 8) announced the setting up of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education and appointed Dr Moses Cheng Mo-chi as its Chair. Also appointed to the Committee were 19 members comprising representatives of the kindergarten sector, school sponsoring bodies, a teacher education institution, the Education Commission, a teacher and parents as well as lay members and an EDB representative. The appointments take effect from today for a period of two years.

The Secretary for Education, Mr Eddie Ng Hak-kim, said, "The introduction of 15-year free education is one of the top priorities of the current-term Government. With the participation of various stakeholders of kindergarten education and other professionals, the Committee can look into the needs of all parties from multiple perspectives to strike a balance, and make concrete and practicable recommendations to the EDB.

"I am very pleased that Dr Cheng accepts our invitation to serve as the Committee Chair. Dr Cheng has all along been concerned about the local education sector and our children. He has a strong passion for education and is very experienced and familiar with education development in Hong Kong.

"Under the leadership of Dr Cheng, the Committee will start working immediately with a view to making at the earliest possible date practicable recommendations on how to take forward free kindergarten education to the EDB," said Mr Ng.

In view of the intricacies of the issues involved, Mr Ng hoped that the Committee could complete its tasks in two years and make concrete recommendations to the EDB. During the period, the Committee will also proactively explore short- and medium-term measures to render assistance to the kindergarten sector in face of the challenges ahead. The Government will strive to put in place these measures accordingly.

The Committee will make concrete recommendations to the EDB on the practicable implementation of free kindergarten education in the context of 15-year free education. Specifically, it will:

- * gauge the views of stakeholders on current practices and the future policy of free kindergarten education;

- * identify, examine and assess, with reference to the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, options for free kindergarten

education, issues for possible improvements to kindergarten education and any related measures;

* advise on the setting up of and provide steer for the sub-committees to study certain specific issues in detail; and

* consider options, implications and implementation strategies developed by the sub-committees and conduct consultation with major stakeholders.

The membership list of the Committee is as follows:

Chair: Dr Moses Cheng Mo-chi

Members:

Ms Liu Fung-heung	(Kindergarten Principal)
Ms Ho Lan-sang	(Kindergarten Principal)
Dr Maggie Koong May-kay	(Kindergarten Principal)
Ms Shek Lai-yee	(Kindergarten Teacher)
Dr Sanly Kam Shau-wan	(School Sponsoring Body)
Ms Lam Lai-ping	(School Sponsoring Body)
Ms Ng Yin-kam	(School Sponsoring Body)
Mr Sin Kim-wai	(Primary School Principal)
Professor Nirmala Rao	(Teacher Education Institution)
Dr Gordon Tsui Luen-on	(Parent)
Mr Wong Chun-kit	(Parent)
Ms Chiu Nga-sze	(Parent)
Mr Walter Chan Kar-lok	(Education Commission Member)
Mr Tim Lui Tim-leung	(Education Commission Member)
Ms Dilys Chau Suet-fung	(Education Commission Member)
Ms Chitty Cheung Fung-ting	(Lay Member)
Ms Susanna Hui	(Lay Member)
Mr Addy Wong Wai-hung	(Lay Member)
EDB Representative	

The Committee will deliberate as soon as possible on the setting up of a number of sub-committees to follow up on details in specific areas including the vision and mission of kindergarten education, subvention modes, the different needs of whole-day and half-day kindergartens, teacher qualification and salary framework, teacher-to-student ratio, monitoring and governance framework, home-school co-operation and other matters. The sub-committees will engage in thorough discussions and analyses in their designated areas and report their findings to the Committee for further consideration.

Ends/Monday, April 8, 2013

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**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)
Panel on Education	19.3.2013	Agenda CB(4)486/12-13(01)
Panel on Education	26.3.2013	Agenda

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	17.4.2013	Chapter 3 of Report No.60 of the Director of Audit
Legislative Council	17.4.2013	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 11 – 13 (Question 1)
Panel on Education	10.6.2013 (Item IV)	Agenda CB(4)756/12-13(01)

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