

For discussion on
2 November 2012

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Relief Measures to Address the Temporary Decline in Secondary One Student Population in the Coming Few Years

Purpose

This paper outlines the relief measures put forward by the Education Bureau (EDB) at the present stage to address the temporary decline in the number of Secondary One (S1) students in the coming few years. It also gives a general account of the views and concerns of the sector and parents on the issue, and elaborates the considerations of the EDB on other proposed measures. We would continue to actively consider the views raised by various stakeholders to formulate further relief measures.

Background

2. With regard to the declining S1 student population in recent years, the Government is very concerned about its impact on school development and the stability of the teaching force. There is no consolidation policy for secondary schools (some people refer it as “killing school” policy). On the contrary, the EDB has been deploying substantial resources since the 2006/07 school year to implement a number of relief measures to sustain the development of secondary schools and stabilise the teaching force. Some of the major relief measures include:

- (i) Reducing the number of students allocated to each S1 class from 38 in the 2008/09 school year to the prevailing 34;
- (ii) Setting a cap for the number of S1 students per class and reducing it from 40 in the 2007/08 school year to the prevailing 36;
- (iii) Relaxing the criterion for approving S1 classes by adjusting downwards the number of S1 students per class from 35 in the 2006/07 school year to 30 in the 2009/10 school year and then 25 in the 2012/13 school year;

- (iv) Providing schools operating less than three S1 classes with various development options¹ to facilitate their continued development. If schools do not apply for any development option or their applications are not approved, they may still operate junior secondary classes on a “per capita subvention mode”; and
- (v) Launching the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme and its enhanced measures in 2010 so that schools operating five S1 classes or more can reduce the number of classes in an orderly manner to reduce the impact of the declining student population.

3. From the 2006/07 to the current school year, the number of S1 students taking part in the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) System has reduced by about 22 000 in total. With the various relief measures in place, only eight secondary schools have been or will be closed upon their own decision for various reasons. In addition, no secondary school has to apply to the EDB for the development option due to failure in recruiting enough students to operate three S1 classes in this school year. Judging from the above, the relief measures implemented by the EDB over the years having regard to various factors have been effective and the EDB has gained experience in addressing the declining S1 student population.

Data Analysis

4. According to the 2012 Hong Kong Population Projections released by the Census and Statistics Department, the EDB anticipates a continuous decline in the annual intake of S1 students in the coming few years by about 11 000 students, which represents a drop of 17%, from 64 900 in the 2012/13 school year to 54 000 in the 2016/17 school year. However, the number of S1 students will rebound steadily and annually from the 2017/18 school year onwards, surpassing the level of this school year. Since the decline is only temporary and transitional, we think that timely and proportionate relief measures rather than long-term policy and structural changes should be adopted to avoid shaking the education system again and affecting its long-term stability when the number of students rebounds. For this reason, the Secretary for Education announced at the Legislative Council (Legco) meeting on 17 October 2012 when replying to a Member’s question, that targeted relief measures would be

¹ Development options already introduced include conditional re-participation in the Secondary School Places Allocation System; collaboration with post-secondary institutions, professional/vocational bodies; merging with other schools; collaboration with other schools; injection of additional resources by school sponsoring bodies; undergoing Special Review; applying for joining the Direct Subsidy Scheme; and turning into private schools (all options were introduced in the 2006/07 school year except the first two options, which were added in the 2009/10 school year).

implemented from the 2013/14 school year onwards to maintain the quality of education and stabilise the teaching force. Details of these measures are set out in paragraphs 7 to 13.

5. Members of the sector have pointed out that with a drop of 5 400 S1 students in the next school year, there will be a reduction of 159 classes or 80 schools. Recently, there comes another estimation of a reduction of 133 classes at each level, affecting 120 schools. We must stress that these figures are only calculated by simple division or estimate. According to our past experience with similar situation, by no means it reflects the actual impact on schools. As the criterion for approving an S1 class is smaller than the number of students allocated to each class (in the 2012/13 school year, the criterion for approving an S1 class is 25 students while the number of students allocated to each class is 34), schools are allowed to operate three classes by admitting 51 S1 students, with an average number of 17 students per class. This results in a maximum of 17 vacant places in an S1 class [$34-17=17$ (excluding the two repeater places)]. Since in reality not every S1 class has 34 students, we cannot estimate the number of classes to be reduced and schools affected simply by dividing the estimated number of students reduced by the number of students allocated to each class [i.e. $5400 \text{ students} \div 34 \text{ per class} = 159 \text{ classes}$]. Taking the actual situation in the 2008/09 school year as an example, there was a drop in the number of S1 students by around 5 400, similar to the situation in the 2013/14 school year. By simple division, there would be a reduction of 142 classes [$5\,400 \text{ students} \div 38 \text{ per class} = 142 \text{ classes}$ (the number of students allocated to each class was 38 in that school year)]. However, according to the actual situation, there was only a reduction of 34 classes, much smaller than the result calculated by simple division. Moreover, if the prevailing criterion of 25, instead of the criterion of 33 then, was applied in that school year, we believe that the actual reduction of classes would have a significant drop, not to mention that the number of students allocated to each class has been reduced from 38 to the prevailing 34. By the same token, despite a drop of 5 400 students in the next school year, we estimate that the number of S1 classes to be reduced will be much smaller than 159 or 133 as projected by the sector.

6. Some members of the sector reckon that the number of S1 students belonging to the “top 40%” group will decrease following the decline of the student population, and worry that this will affect individual schools’ flexibility in deciding their school-based medium of instruction (MOI) arrangements from the school year 2016/17 onwards. In brief, in accordance with the fine-tuned MOI arrangements implemented from the 2010/11 school year with details promulgated in the Education Bureau Circular No. 6/2009, though the size of a S1 class is 36 students, a school allocated with 29 students belonging to the “top 40%” group has already had the discretion to determine the MOI arrangements in the class/group concerned. In fact, fine-tuning the MOI for secondary schools does not mean that schools have to adopt a uniform MOI arrangement or a simple segregation of classes into using either the Chinese medium (CMI) or English medium (EMI) within a school. Under the fine-tuned

arrangements, MOI arrangements of schools have become diversified, which include all CMI, CMI/EMI in different subjects, CMI supplemented with extended learning activities in English as well as total immersion in EMI. The objective is to enhance students' exposure to English and its use in schools.

Targeted Relief Measures to be Implemented

Relaxing the “Not Less Than Three Classes” Requirement

7. The education sector has been urging the EDB to review the requirement for secondary schools to operate at least three classes for each level. The New Senior Secondary Academic Structure (NAS) stresses the importance of providing students with a broad, balanced and diversified senior secondary curriculum. Schools can usually offer 10 to 12 electives not confined to any particular learning areas. In general, we are of the view that a secondary school should have at least 18 classes (i.e. three classes for each level), otherwise it can hardly have sufficient resources to provide a broad and diversified curriculum. Following the recent completion of the first three-year cycle under the NAS, we have reviewed the situation and learned that apart from those elective subjects taught by teachers, schools may also provide students with a broad and balanced senior secondary curriculum through different means, including arranging for students to select diversified Applied Learning subjects according to their interests, and establishing district school network programmes of elective subjects.

8. As the diversified development mentioned above has been maturing over the past few years, the EDB has decided to accept schools operating two approved classes for each level to offer diversified elective subjects through flexible deployment of resources, different means and strategies to provide students with a broad, balanced and sustainable senior secondary curriculum for the benefits of students. Such schools do not need to apply for any school development option.

9. For schools operating a single S1 class, as mentioned in paragraph 2(iv) above, they can apply for school development options. These schools can continue their operation if they can prove themselves capable of providing a broad, balanced and sustainable senior secondary curriculum. In other words, after relaxing the “not less than three classes” requirement, almost no school has to worry about whether it can continue the provision of service.

Participating in the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) System with a Cap of Three S1 Classes

10. All schools operating two S1 classes or less can still participate in the SSPA with a cap of three S1 classes. This can mitigate the labelling effect on such schools and allay their concern in this aspect, and can tide them over until the S1 student population rebounds gradually after a few years.

Relaxing the Criterion for Approving S1 Classes

11. The EDB has relaxed the criterion for approving S1 classes in the 2012/13 school year. The basis for calculating the number of approved S1 classes has been reduced from 30 to 25 students per class. Schools can meet the requirement of operating three classes by admitting 51 S1 students. Since it will be acceptable for schools to operate two classes for each level and the basis for approving an S1 class is 25 students should they have to reduce classes due to under-enrolment in the September headcount, schools will then be able to operate two S1 classes with an intake of 26 S1 students. In other words, the number of students in a class can be very flexible in this exceptional time, and schools with smaller class sizes can provide better care for students with special needs.

12. From another perspective, the relaxation of the criterion for approving S1 classes not merely raises the teacher to student ratio of those schools facing the pressure of under-enrolment, it also indirectly increases the number of teaching posts on the basis of the same number of students. (For example, when the criterion for approving an S1 class was 30 students, if a school had 51 students, it could only operate 2 classes. Under the teacher to class ratio of 1.7:1 for junior secondary classes and with a total of 6 classes from S1 to S3 at junior secondary level, it would have an establishment of 11 teachers ($6 \times 1.7=10.2$). Following the downward adjustment of the criterion for approving S1 classes to 25 students per class, with a number of 51 S1 students and a total of 9 classes from S1 to S3 at the junior secondary level, a school will have an establishment of nearly 16 teachers ($9 \times 1.7=15.3$). That is to say, even with the same number of students, the school's teacher establishment will have 5 teachers more.)

Extending the Early Retirement Scheme for Aided Secondary School Teachers

13. To address the problem of possible surplus teachers, we plan to seek the approval of the Finance Committee of Legco in January 2013 for a supplementary provision for extending the Early Retirement Scheme for Aided Secondary School Teachers (ERS) for five years (2013/14 to 2017/18 school years). The ERS will provide 700 quotas which can allow surplus teachers, who are eligible to take part in the ERS, to take an early retirement or the vacation of teaching posts by other participating teachers for absorbing the incumbent surplus teachers. The number of vacant teaching posts is also affected by the natural wastage of teachers, which was about 5% in the past few years.

Requests of the Sector

14. We have been actively seeking the sector's opinions with a view to formulating more targeted measures to address the needs of schools and students under the principle of optimising the use of resources with clear policy priorities. In fact, the relaxation of the "not less than three classes" requirement mentioned in paragraphs 7 and 8 above is an achievement based on the proposal put forward by the sector, and EDB's professional assessment and thorough consideration of the implementation details on the premise of maintaining the quality of education.

15. On the issue of declining secondary student population from the 2013/14 school year onwards, the sector has also put forward a "3-2-1 proposal" of reducing the number of students allocated to each S1 class across-the-board. That is, the number of S1 students allocated to each class will be reduced by 3, 2 and 1 from the prevailing 34 progressively in three years, starting from the 2013/14 school year (i.e. the number of students allocated to each class will be 31, 29 and 28 in the 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16 school years respectively). The sector has also suggested the adoption of a mechanism allowing the upward and downward adjustment of the number of students allocated to each class, i.e. to increase the number of students allocated to each class suitably when there is a rebound in S1 student population. There is no specific proposal on how the "upward" adjustment should work.

16. Since the "3-2-1 proposal" involves the interests of the schools, parents and students in the territory, changes to the SSPA mechanism and substantial financial commitment, we must carefully examine its feasibility and implications on various stakeholders. In this connection, apart from liaising with representatives of school councils and school heads, we have met with the Committee on Home-School Cooperation (CHSC) and Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations (FPTAs) of various districts to listen to their views on the targeted relief measures newly introduced, the "3-2-1 proposal" put forward by the sector and other possible measures.

Views and Concerns of Parents

17. Overall speaking, representatives of the CHSC and the FPTAs of various districts share the view that Hong Kong needs different types of schools to cater for students varying in academic ability, aptitude and needs. They opine that the Government should strive to retain existing secondary schools during the transition before the student population rebounds and should hold in high regard schools' experience in service delivery and teachers' valuable experience. In short, they support EDB's targeted measures to assist less-advantaged schools.

18. However, parent representatives have divided views and preferences about the proposal of reducing across-the-board the number of S1 students allocated to each class (“3-2-1 proposal”), having regard to their own situations (whether their children are studying in primary, secondary or university level). For those who support the proposed reduction or find the direction passable, they primarily think that reducing the number of students in each class in secondary schools can enable students to receive better support in learning and pastoral care and is conducive to the retention of teachers. Besides, some parents expect that, with a drop in student population, their children will have a better chance of entering the schools of their choice.

19. For parents against the “3-2-1 proposal”, they respond strongly. They are mainly worried that the reduction of the number of students allocated to each class might result in a smaller chance for their children to enter their favourite schools, particularly when the EDB has already reduced the number of students allocated to each class gradually as from the 2008/09 school year and there has been quite a number of S1 classes reduced through the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme implemented as from the 2010/11 school year. They reflect that as far as securing an S1 place is concerned, both parents and students are facing immense pressure (in preparing for admission to their favourite schools), to such an extent that the normal family life is upset. A further reduction in the number of school places will exacerbate the situation and provoke strong resistance.

20. Parent representatives who have experienced the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme remind the EDB of the need to address properly any proposal to reduce the number of classes or the number of students per class. According to their assessment, parents of primary schools will find it difficult to accept the further reduction of S1 places.

21. Some parents are aware of the significant reduction of S1 places among quite a number of secondary schools in recent years. Take a school with five S1 classes that has joined the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme as an example. It had 190 S1 places for allocation under the SSPA System in the 2008/09 school year (38 students x 5 classes = 190 places). In the 2010/11 school year, with the reduction in the number of students allocated to each class from 38 to 34, the number of S1 places has reduced to 170 (34 students x 5 classes = 170 places). Since joining the Scheme in the 2011/12 school year, the school only has 136 S1 places (34 students x 4 classes = 136 places), which represents a reduction of 28% of places. Under the “3-2-1 proposal”, S1 places in the 2015/16 school year will be further reduced to 112 (28 students x 4 classes = 112 places), which means a drop of 78 places or 41% of places when compared with the places in the 2008/09 school year. We therefore fully appreciate and attach great importance to the concerns of parents.

22. While some parent representatives oppose the “3-2-1 proposal” out of personal experience, some pinpoint the inadequacies of the proposal from an objective perspective. For instance, with varying circumstances, different districts may have different needs in terms of S1 places allocation and hence an across-the-board reduction in S1 places fails to cater for their specific needs. Here is an illustration. For districts without enrolment problems or with a few schools admitting students from Band I chiefly, an across-the-board reduction in the number of students allocated to each class will result in an excessive demand over supply. As such, the districts may have to “borrow” a considerable number of school places from neighbouring districts. The consequence of this is a greater number of cross-district students; or the possibility for students of Band I not being able to enter their favourite schools within the same district.

23. To conclude, having regard to parents’ concerns and strong responses, we need to be cautious when considering the “3-2-1 proposal” put forward by the sector. We will draw on the experience in rolling out the Voluntary Optimisation of Class Structure Scheme with a view to striking a right balance between promoting the stable development of schools and addressing the parents’ concerns.

Other Views

24. There are views in the sector that in the light of the decline in population of secondary school students, small class teaching (SCT) should be implemented in secondary schools. The effectiveness of SCT in secondary schools is in fact inconclusive from international studies. Besides, SCT is a method of teaching. Based on international studies, it is the most effective when students are small and its effectiveness tends to wane as students age. Celebrated educators have commented that the cost of SCT is high while its effectiveness is uncertain. In considering whether to implement SCT in secondary schools, we must take into account the existing conditions of secondary schools, the teaching and learning environment as well as provision of support to secondary schools, overseas experience and resource allocation. We should also learn from the experience of SCT in primary schools and analyse whether secondary schools should, as in primary schools, reduce the class size across-the-board so as to make SCT practicable and sustainable in secondary schools, especially when the school age population for secondary education is projected to rebound in the 2017/18 school year. Further, with the adoption of subject grouping at senior secondary levels, the actual number of students in each teaching class/group is rather small. We cannot commit ourselves to implementing SCT in secondary schools simply for the sake of meeting the demand for SCT, or for releasing the pressure arising from student population decline, without a thorough consideration of different aspects from the education perspective.

25. Conceptually speaking, SCT is in fact a kind of teaching setting or grouping driven by

teaching considerations. The size of grouping should not be fixed across-the-board, but adjusted according to the learning objectives and students' needs. Actually, quite a number of schools have arranged their 3 classes of students into 4 or 5 groups according to students' ability, and there can be different number of groups at different levels. That is to say, the allocation class size is an administrative measure. It should not and need not be taken as equivalent to the teaching setting or grouping. Moreover, unlike in primary schools, there are grouping arrangements for elective subjects at senior secondary levels. An across-the-board reduction in allocation class size will surely increase the pressure on the demand for school sites when the S1 population rebounds. Like other educationally advanced regions, Hong Kong supports secondary school students, in particular those academically low achievers, through "a whole-school approach and targeted guidance" to ensure students' learning effectiveness. The student-to-teacher ratio in public sector secondary schools has improved significantly in the past few years from 18.0:1 in the 2005/06 school year to 15.3:1 in the 2011/12 school year. In addition, the average class size of secondary schools in Hong Kong is generally similar to those of other developed economies in Asia².

Way Forward

26. To tie in with the timetable of the SSPA 2011/2013, should there be measures that will affect the number of S1 places in secondary schools for the next school year (including the "3-2-1 proposal" as put forward by the sector), we have to announce them before parents of primary schools start considering secondary schools for their children in December. We will actively seek the views of the sector and various stakeholders and explore other relief measures.

<u>Country / Region</u>	<u>Average class size of secondary schools</u>
Hong Kong	33.4
Taiwan	32.7
Singapore	36.6
South Korea	35.3
Japan	32.9

Sources of information

- Taiwan: "2011 Educational Statistical Indicators" issued by Ministry of Education, Republic of China (Taiwan) (The figure reflects the position of junior secondary schools in Taiwan in 2010)
- Singapore: Ministry of Education Singapore – Education Statistics Digest 2011 (The figure reflects the position of secondary schools in Singapore in 2010)
- South Korea: Education at a glance 2011, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Indicators (The figure reflects the position of junior secondary schools in South Korea in 2009)
- Japan: Education at a glance 2011, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Indicators (The figure reflects the position of junior secondary schools in Japan in 2009)

Restricting each school to admit not more than 34 S1 students in each class

27. Under the prevailing practice, 34 students can be allocated to each S1 class and on top of that two quotas per class are reserved for repeaters, thus the class size is capped at 36. In case there are unfilled repeater places, the school concerned has discretion to admit S1 students who have been allocated places in other schools. Schools much sought after by parents often use their repeater quotas to admit such students. In order to minimise student transfer after the announcement of SSPA results and not to pose a greater threat to schools already suffering from under-enrolment, we strongly recommend secondary schools to use the repeater places for their original purpose, not for admitting S1 students allocated to other schools. This will minimise the number of classes that needs to be reduced and maintain a stable teaching force.

28. Nevertheless, before considering formalizing this relief measure, we will listen carefully to the views of stakeholders, including school sponsoring bodies, schools and parents.

Other Measures to Stabilise the Teaching Force

29. We fully understand the importance of a stable teaching force. Apart from seeking Legco's support in extending the ERS, we are actively exploring other relief measures targeted at teachers to mitigate the impact of a declining student population on the teaching force. In the process of our study, we will, as usual, work closely with the sector with an aim of finalising feasible and effective relief measures as soon as possible.

Conclusion

30. We aim at resolving this time-limited and transitional problem of declining student population with a package of targeted measures. Members' views are sought on the corresponding measures adopted by the EDB and the way forward.

Education Bureau
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