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**Panel on Education**

**Special meeting on 2 November 2012**

**Measures to address issues arising from the drop in  
secondary student population**

**Purpose**

This paper summarizes the views and concerns of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") on the impact of the declining secondary student population and the measures adopted by the Administration to address the situation.

**Background**

Class structure of secondary schools under the New Senior Secondary ("NSS") academic structure

2. The three-year NSS academic structure has been implemented since the 2009-2010 school year. Under the NSS curriculum framework, there are four core subjects, 20 elective subjects and a range of Applied Learning courses. According to the Administration, students should be able to complete six years of secondary education in the same school under normal circumstances. The most desirable school size under the NSS academic structure should be 24 or 30 classes, with 18 classes (i.e. three classes for each level) being the acceptable minimum. A school with less than three Secondary one ("S1") classes may continue to operate if it can ensure the breadth and accessibility of curriculum choice for students through the development options which include injecting additional resources by the school sponsoring body, merging or collaborating with another school,

undergoing special review, joining the Direct Subsidy Scheme and turning to private operation.

Measures to address the declining secondary student population

3. In the face of a decline in the number of students progressing to S1, the Education Bureau ("EDB") has implemented a number of measures to alleviate the pressure of under-enrolment on schools. Since the 2006-2007 school year, EDB has adopted more relaxed criteria in approving secondary school classes (i.e. 35 students per class), and provided about 700 additional teaching posts over three years to render better support to academic low achievers in order to stabilize the teaching force. Further measures were introduced in 2008, which included reducing year by year the number of students allocated to each S1 class to 34, and further relaxing the criteria for approving classes from 35 to 30 students. From the 2012-2013 school year onwards, this number has been further adjusted downwards to 25 students per class. Schools can operate three S1 classes by admitting a minimum of 51 students, with an average class size of 17 students<sup>1</sup>.

4. According to the information provided by the Administration to the Panel in November 2010, the annual intake of S1 students would drop from 69 000 in the 2010-2011 school year to 53 900 in the 2016-2017 school year, representing a decrease of more than 20%. A slight rebound of student enrolment after the 2016-2017 school year was projected<sup>2</sup>. As informed by the Administration, some of the more significant relief measures to stabilize the teaching force and avoid affecting the quality of education included -

- (a) launching the Voluntary Optimization of Class Structure Scheme ("the Scheme") and its enhanced measures in March and November 2010 respectively, under which the number of S1 classes in a secondary school was to be reduced from five to four. As reported by the Administration, as at 30 March 2011, a total of 200 schools would join the Scheme in the 2011-2012 school year;

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<sup>1</sup> See the Secretary for Education's reply to the oral question raised by Hon IP Kin-yuen at the Council meeting on 17 October 2012.

<sup>2</sup> This remains the position held by the Administration. As re-stated by the Secretary for Education in his reply to an oral question at the Council meeting on 17 October 2012, the drop in the number of school-age S1 students was transitional and would rebound steadily and annually in the 2017-2018 school year and thereafter, back to and exceed the level of this school year.

- (b) encouraging sponsoring bodies to review schools under their sponsorship and consider reducing the number of schools in an orderly manner through merger or other means;
- (c) facilitating schools in collaboration with other schools or post-secondary institutions/professional bodies/vocational bodies in operating practical courses to sustain their development; and
- (d) by means of special review, allowing quality schools and schools providing effective featured programmes (such as performing arts and sports programmes) to sustain their development.

### **Deliberations of the Panel**

5. The Panel discussed issues arising from the declining secondary student population at its meetings on 12 June 2006, 10 November 2008, 8 November 2010 and 11 April 2011. The deliberations of the Panel are summarized in the following paragraphs.

#### Student population projections

6. Members considered that the Administration should have reviewed the School Building Programme ("SBP") in the light of the projected declining student population and should not have continued with the school construction projects under SBP over the past years. The planning mistake on the part of the Administration had resulted in an over-supply of school places.

7. The Administration explained that secondary school places had all along been planned and provided on a territory-wide basis, and with reference to the population projection published by the Census and Statistics Department ("CSD"). In planning SBP, the Administration sought to balance the supply and demand of school places at the district level as far as possible. Apart from school councils and teachers associations, the Administration had to take into account the views of parents and students on the provision of school places, in particular the class size in popular schools.

8. Members maintained the view that the Administration should not resort to school closure to resolve its planning mistake, at the

expense of the interests of students and teachers. They were concerned whether class restructuring was meant to save resources for the implementation of the new academic structure. As advised by the Administration, the purpose of class restructuring was not to save resources, although the resultant savings would be used to support the implementation of the NSS academic structure.

9. On a longer-term issue, the Panel enquired on how the Administration would assess the number of children born to Mainland women in Hong Kong who would pursue secondary education locally. Members were informed by the Administration that CSD would conduct a population census in 2012. In order to make a better projection on the number of children born to Mainland women in Hong Kong and who would return to Hong Kong to study, CSD would conduct regular surveys on the intention of these parents. Since there was a six-year cycle for Primary one ("P1") students to progress to S1, the Administration would monitor the trend in the number of P1 students in the next few years so as to have a more accurate projection on the secondary student population after the 2016-2017 school year.

#### Voluntary Optimization of Class Structure Scheme

10. At the Panel meetings on 8 November 2010 and 11 April 2011, members were briefed on the progress of the Scheme and the series of enhancement measures under the Scheme to provide participating schools with additional teaching resources to address the decrease in student intake while enhancing the quality of education.

11. According to the Administration, encouraging schools to reduce the number of classes voluntarily was an effective means to stabilize the secondary school sector in the coming one to two years. It could maintain a good mix of different types of schools in each district to cater for students with different learning needs, and maintain the stability of the teaching force to ensure teaching quality. Under the NSS curriculum framework, a broad and balanced curriculum was offered and students were provided with the accessibility to combinations of elective subjects of their preference. Schools could make use of the classrooms freed up by reduction in classes to improve the teaching and learning environment under the NSS structure.

12. Some members considered it acceptable to reduce the number of classes as long as the teaching quality could be maintained. Some other members were of the view that the measures could only

defer, but not resolve the problem in the long term. These members were concerned that owing to the decline in secondary student population in the coming six years or so, some schools with insufficient student intake would have to be closed and some teachers would need to leave the teaching force. However, when the secondary student population started to rise in 2017, the demand for teachers would increase again. It was therefore necessary for the Administration to have a comprehensive and holistic plan to avoid disruptive changes to the education sector.

13. On the possibility of "excessive reduction" of S1 places which might occur when some 200 secondary schools reduced classes in the 2011-2012 school year under the Scheme, the Panel noted that the Administration would follow the established practice of making netting arrangements<sup>3</sup> at the Central Allocation stage under the Secondary School Places Allocation ("SSPA") System in ensuring a stable supply of school places in each district and providing parents with more choices of schools. Members were nevertheless concerned about the balance of supply and demand of S1 places in different districts and the choices available to parents. In response, EDB advised that while it would continue to follow the general pattern of the present netting arrangements, in consultation with the SSPA Committee comprising representatives from primary and secondary schools as well as school councils and associations, the Working Group on Review of School Nets<sup>4</sup> set up in 2006 to review the existing school nets would continue its work taking into account the demand and supply of school places as well as the planning and development of transportation facilities of the 18 districts.

14. The Panel also sought clarification on whether participation in the Scheme was mandatory for government schools. According to the Administration, individual schools should solicit the views of their school management committees ("SMCs") and other stakeholders including school principals, teachers, students and parents, in making a decision best suited to their circumstances. However, the SMCs of government schools did not have the remit to decide on class reduction. As explained by the Administration at the meeting on 11 April 2011, pursuant to the constitution of their SMCs, government schools should adopt the Government's education aims and play a proactive role in implementing policies advocated by EDB. Some members were gravely

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<sup>3</sup> Under the netting arrangements, if there was a shortage of S1 places in a district, the deficit would be met by netting S1 places from nearby districts.

<sup>4</sup> The WG comprises representatives of major school councils, parent representatives, representatives of the Committee on Home-School Co-operation and lay members. It has been set up by EDB to review the existing demarcation of the 18 school nets with a view to recommending feasible options to EDB.

concerned that while the Scheme was "voluntary" in name, it was not the case for government schools in fact.

15. Some members questioned the appropriateness of requiring reputable and popular government schools to reduce their classes, as this arrangement would diminish the chance of students being admitted to them. Given the decline in the overall secondary student population, the Administration considered that students would generally face less competition in school admission and the reduction in S1 school places would not have a great impact on the chance of students being admitted to the schools of their choice. On whether flexibility could be applied so that certain popular schools could be exempted from the requirement of reducing classes, the Administration stressed the importance of putting in place holistic and integrated education policies instead of piecemeal measures.

#### Implementation of small class teaching in secondary schools

16. The Panel had exchanged views extensively with the Administration on the feasibility of implementing small class teaching ("SCT") in secondary schools as a longer-term measure in the face of the decline in secondary student population. Some members considered that in view of the proven effectiveness of SCT, the decline in secondary student population provided a good opportunity for implementing SCT in secondary schools. Some members pointed out that reducing class size might help teachers to keep their jobs but this should not be the only solution. Schools should take into account the overall teacher-student ratio and the qualification of teachers when considering the implementation of SCT.

17. Some members were of the view that since SCT had commenced in P1 in the 2009-2010 school year, these P1 students would progress to S1 in the 2015-2016 school year. They would find it difficult to adapt to their secondary education if SCT was not put in place by then. The Administration was urged to consider reducing the class size of S1 in a gradual and orderly manner so that by the 2015-2016 school year, SCT could be fully implemented in S1. Some members opined that consideration might be first given to implementing SCT for language and arts subjects which required more interactions between teachers and students.

18. According to the Administration, the education sector was concerned about the impact on students and teachers resulting from the

closure of under-enrolled schools which would mainly be those admitting a large number of low-academic achievers. As such, the Administration had focused its effort on formulating measures to stabilize the secondary school sector and to maintain a diverse school system to suit the needs of students. The Administration further advised that the implementation of SCT in secondary schools was not a government policy at the present stage. The implementation of SCT would also have profound implications on public expenditure. The Administration had nevertheless stated that it would explore other medium or long-term measures, including SCT and improving the teacher-to-students ratio for more group learning, to enhance the quality of education. It also took note of the concerns of Panel members about the importance of quality education.

### **Latest development**

19. In his reply to the oral question raised by Hon IP Kin-yuen at the Council meeting on 17 October 2012, the Secretary for Education informed Members of the latest measures proposed by the Administration to stabilize the secondary school sector, which include -

- (a) starting from the 2013-2014 school year, schools with two approved classes for each secondary level will be allowed 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. Such schools do not need to apply for any school development option;
- (b) schools that are only able to operate one S1 class can apply for the school development option;
- (c) all schools operating two S1 classes or less can still participate in the SSPA System with a cap of three S1 classes; and
- (d) the Administration will actively explore to extend the Early Retirement Scheme for Aided Secondary School Teachers.

20. The Panel has scheduled a special meeting on 2 November 2012 to receive deputations and exchange views with the Administration on measures to address issues arising from the drop in secondary student population.

**Relevant papers**

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

Council Business Division 4  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
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## List of relevant papers

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	12.6.2006 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">CB(2)2276/05-06(01)</a>
Panel on Education	10.11.2008 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">CB(2)205/08-09(01)</a>
Panel on Education	8.11.2010 (Item V)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">CB(2)182/10-11(03)</a> <a href="#">CB(2)212/10-11(01)</a>
Panel on Education	11.4.2011 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a> <a href="#">CB(2)1444/10-11(01)</a>
Panel on Education	21.10.2011	<a href="#">Minutes</a> (P.7-8)
Legislative Council	17.10.2012	<a href="#">Question asked by Hon IP Kin-yuen</a> <a href="#">Administration's reply</a>