

For Discussion
on 18 March 2014

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 briefs Members on the outcomes of the basket of targeted relief measures taken forward by the Education Bureau (EDB) to address the temporary decline in Secondary One (S1) student population in the first year of implementation and EDB's analysis on the way forward.

Background

2. To address the decline in S1 student population in the coming few years, the EDB has implemented a basket of targeted relief measures aiming at preserving the stability and strengths of the schools as well as the teaching force since the 2013/14 school year.

3. In gist, the targeted relief measures include a progressive reduction of the number of students allocated per S1 class by "2-1-1" / "1-1-1" under a district-/school-based approach in three school years; relaxing the "not less than three S1 classes" requirement in which only schools operating one S1 class are required to apply for development options in order to continue their operation; allowing schools with S1 classes reduced to one or two to participate in the next Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) exercise with a cap of three S1 classes; and extending the retention period for surplus teachers arising from packing of S1 classes to three years.

4. Subsequent to the introduction of the targeted relief measures in the 2013/14 school year, only 12 out of the 388 public sector secondary schools participating in the SSPA exercise had one S1 class packed each (i.e. reduction of a total of 12 classes), which is far less than the over 100 classes projected by some stakeholders in the sector. In addition, upon the relaxation of the "not less than three S1 classes" requirement, in the 2013/14 school year, no new schools were required to apply for development options for continual operation. Schools operating two classes or more for each level of study can continue with their existing mode of operation and curriculum arrangement, thus assuring the S1 students of a broad and balanced curriculum when they progress to senior secondary levels.

5. Under the targeted relief measures, the retention period for surplus teachers of these 12 schools has been extended to three years. Schools may make gainful deployment of the surplus teachers to facilitate their long-term planning for quality improvement, thereby bringing about positive impact on the school system and teaching quality.

Considerations Concerning Reduction of Allocation Class Size

6. The relief measures, including the progressive reduction of the number of students allocated per S1 class, have taken into account the situation of the continuous declining S1 student population trend in the next few years. Despite the relaxation of the “not less than three S1 classes” requirement and the extension of the retention period for surplus teachers to three years, some stakeholders arrive at the view that a fairly large number of S1 classes would be reduced simply by dividing the overall decrease in the number of S1 students and/or the number of surplus places by the number of students to be allocated to each class, and call for further reduction of allocation class size of S1. We have sought to point out repeatedly that the above method of computation is definitely not advisable, given the fact that not every S1 class would enroll students up to the full class size. In fact, the current criterion for approving S1 classes (i.e. 25 students) is lower than the allocation class size and schools can operate two S1 classes with a minimum intake of 26 students. As a result, after the release of the SSPA results, some schools will operate the same number of classes even with a smaller intake of S1 students per class than that in last school year.

7. Moreover, based on past experiences, some students may apply for S1 admission to individual schools for various reasons during the summer holiday. Taking last year as an example, upon release of the SSPA results in July, it was found that 30 public sector S1 classes would be affected. However, the admission figures for a number of schools had gone up by the time of mid-September student headcount and eventually only 12 S1 classes were packed. This shows that the actual number of classes in a school to be operated ultimately is subject to multiple factors and is beyond estimation through simple arithmetic.

8. When drawing up the targeted relief measures including the progressive reduction of the number of students allocated per S1 class, we have taken into consideration the estimated number of S1 students to be reduced during the transient period between 2013 and 2015. Therefore, in the absence of new justifications, we will continue the progressive reduction of allocation class size by years on the basis of the consensus we have reached with the sector. In other words, the number of students allocated per S1 class will be reduced by one in the schools concerned in the 2014/15 school year.

Way Forward

9. We must reiterate that there is no so-called “school closure” policy for secondary schools. Even schools running only one S1 class can continue their operation through application for development options. As the number of S1 students is expected to rebound steadily on a year-on-year basis from the 2017/18 school year onwards, the issue confronting us is transitional. The targeted relief measures are interim measures designed to preserve the stability and strengths of the schools as well as the teaching force.

10. The sector in general understands that the number of S1 classes in individual public sector schools would inevitably be reduced following the decline in S1 student population. The key to address the problem lies in our ability to mitigate the impact of class reduction on the schools concerned. The extension of retention period for surplus teachers to three years, as one of the targeted relief measures, is able to serve this purpose and through this the stability of the teaching force is maintained. As for schools which have their S1 classes reduced to less than three, they can still participate in the next SSPA exercise with a cap of three S1 classes. In other words, if these schools (including those that have to apply for development options) manage to admit sufficient number of students, they may have an increase of class(es). In sum, the targeted relief measures are introduced to enable schools to have a smooth transition until S1 student population rebound steadily.

11. We appreciate the concerns and worries of the sector over the decline in the number of S1 students and about the possibility that some districts may have a relatively large number of surplus places in the next school year. It is necessary, however, for us to give careful consideration to any proposals to introduce further relief measures in order to strike the right balance between the steady development of schools and the needs of various stakeholders. For example, some secondary school principals have proposed that the EDB should require schools to reserve two quotas in each S1 class solely for their own repeaters rather than admitting students who have been allocated S1 places in other schools. The EDB has consulted stakeholders, including school sponsoring bodies, schools and parents, about this proposal through various means. It has come to our attention that stakeholders’ views are quite diverse. In particular, parents who are concerned about their children’s chance of admission to schools of their choice being dampened have strong reservation about the proposal.

Conclusion

12. Government resources are not unlimited, thus we have to make good use of them. We will continue to be pragmatic and put in place the announced relief measures and allow schools to retain surplus teachers for three years, while assuring that there will be no so-called

“school closure” policy for secondary schools. Within districts, the EDB’s School Development Sections will closely liaise with schools and provide necessary coordination for a smooth implementation of the relief measures.

Education Bureau

March 2014