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Panel on Education

Meeting on 18 March 2014

Updated background brief on 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, 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 secondary level) being the acceptable minimum.

Measures to address the declining secondary student population

3. According to the Administration, the number of Secondary one ("S1") students taking part in the Secondary School Places Allocation ("SSPA") System had reduced by about 22 000 in total from the 2006-2007 school year to 2012-2013 school year. In the face of a decline in the number of students progressing to S1, the Education Bureau ("EDB") has implemented a number of measures over the years to

alleviate the pressure of under-enrolment on schools. Some of the major relief measures include –

- (a) reducing year by year the number of students allocated to each S1 class from 38 in the 2008-2009 school year to the prevailing 34 students;
- (b) relaxing the requirement on secondary schools to operate not less than three classes for each level so that secondary schools operating less than three S1 classes can continue operation;
- (c) on the basis of the relaxation of the criterion for approving S1 classes to 25 students per class starting from the 2012-2013 school year, secondary schools are allowed to operate two S1 classes with a minimum intake of 26 students, i.e. 13 students per class on average;
- (d) allowing schools operating only one S1 class to continue operation through various school development options¹;
- (e) allowing schools operating two S1 classes or less to participate in the following SSPA cycle with a cap of three S1 classes;
- (f) extending the retention period for surplus teachers arising from any packing of S1 classes from one year to three years; and
- (g) adopting a district-/schools-based approach to reduce progressively the number of students to be allocated to each S1 class from the 2013-2014 school year to the 2015-2016 school year.

4. In addition, the Administration had also launched the Voluntary Optimization of Class Structure Scheme and its enhanced measures in March and November 2010 respectively. Under the Scheme, larger public-sector schools were encouraged to downsize to 24 classes progressively (i.e. from five classes to four classes for each secondary level). To encourage participation, the Administration had provided participating schools with additional teaching resources.

¹ These development options included conditional re-participation in SSPA 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.

5. According to the information provided by the Administration to the Panel in early November 2012, over the years, only eight secondary schools had been or would be closed upon their own decision for various reasons. In the 2012-2013 school year, no secondary school had to apply to the EDB for the development option due to failure in recruiting enough students to operate three S1 classes.

Deliberations of the Panel

6. Issues related to the decline in secondary student population and measures to address the situation have received ongoing attention by the Panel in the current and past terms of Legislative Council ("LegCo"). Shortly after the commencement of the Fifth LegCo, the Panel had held two special meetings on 2 and 3 November 2012 with over 110 deputations and the Administration. The Panel further discussed relevant issues with the Administration at its meetings on 12 November 2012, 17 April 2013 and 9 July 2013.

7. At the meetings held on 12 November 2012 and 17 April 2013, Panel members deliberated and voted on two motions on issues related to the drop in secondary student population. The wordings of the two motions passed by the Panel are at **Appendix I** and **Appendix II** respectively.

Allocation of S1 places

8. The Panel noted that the vast majority of deputations giving views to the Panel urged for the progressive reduction of S1 class size by three, two, one places in each of the three school years starting from 2013-2014 ("the 3-2-1 proposal") across-the-board. Many Panel members supported the proposal and shared the concern that if S1 classes were not downsized as proposed, the large number of untaken S1 places in secondary schools would eventually lead to "Band 3" students being allocated under the SSPA System to "Band 2" or "Band 1" schools, thereby resulting in a mismatch between the level of attainment of some students and the prevailing requirements of certain schools. This competency gap easily led to adjustment problems to the detriment of both the students and the schools.

9. Some members were of the view that since the decline of S1 population was a short-term problem, the Administration should adopt a flexible mechanism which would allow the upward and downward

adjustment to the number of students allocated to each S1 class to cater for future changes in S1 student population.

10. The Administration highlighted that the "3-2-1 proposal" involved the interests of the schools, parents and students, changes to the SSPA mechanism and substantial financial commitment. It was mindful that on one hand, schools were concerned about the possible reduction of S1 classes and its consequential impact on school operation; on the other hand, parents were concerned about a lower chance for their children to gain admission to schools of their choice upon reduction of places per S1 class. There was also reservation that an across-the-board reduction in S1 places could not cater for the varying circumstances in different districts. After discussion with different stakeholders and having balanced their needs and interests, the Administration announced in late November 2012 to adopt a flexible approach of district-based/school-based adjustment to the number of students to be allocated to each S1 class, underpinned by the principle of reverting to the prevailing S1 class size upon rebound of S1 student population. In each of the three school years starting from 2013-2014, all public sector secondary schools would reduce their S1 class size either by two, one and one places ("2-1-1 option") or by one place in each of the school years ("1-1-1 option"), having regard to the prevailing circumstances of the schools and districts concerned.

Concerns about closure of schools and reduction in classes

11. Members were gravely concerned about the possible closure of secondary schools due to insufficient enrolment as a result of the decline in secondary student population in the next few years. In this regard, the Administration assured members that there was no consolidation policy for secondary schools (commonly phrased as the "killing school" policy). On the contrary, EDB had been deploying substantial resources since the 2006-2007 school year to implement a basket of relief measures to sustain the development of secondary schools and stabilize the teaching force.

12. The EDB also informed the Panel that according to the 2012 Hong Kong Population Projections released by the Census and Statistics Department, the annual intake of S1 students was anticipated to drop by 17% from 64 800 in the 2012-2013 school year to 54 000 in the 2016-2017 school years. However, the number of S1 students would rebound steadily and annually from the 2017-2018 school year onwards, surpassing the level of 2012-2013 school year. In consideration that the decline was temporary in nature, the Administration took the view that

what were needed were timely and targeted relief measures to preserve the stability of the secondary school sector during the transient period.

13. At the meetings held in April and July 2013, some members of the Panel had pursued with the Administration the extent to which classes would be packed as a result of insufficient enrolment. It was noted that according to some stakeholders, about 100 S1 classes would be reduced in the 2013-2014 school year. The estimation was made by simply dividing the estimated decrease in the number of students and/or the number of surplus places by the number of students to be allocated to each class. The Administration had explained to the Panel that the above estimation was a misconception as there were other factors which would affect the number of S1 classes operated by a school. For instance, as a result of the various relief measures, the actual intake of an S1 class could be lower than the maximum number of students for allocation (i.e. 32 places for allocation under the "2-1-1 option" plus 2 repeater places for each class). Moreover, after the release of SSPA results in July each year, some students might seek admission to S1 in individual schools for various reasons during the summer holiday. Hence, the actual number of students admitted and the impact of the S1 student population drop on schools could only be ascertained after the mid-September headcount of the 2013-2014 school year.

14. Members further noted from the Secretary for Education's reply to the written question raised by Dr Hon LAM Tai-fai at the Council meeting on 11 December 2013 that based on the mid-September 2013 student headcount, only 12 public sector secondary schools had each reduced one S1 class (i.e. reduction of a total of 12 classes). Among the 388 public sector secondary schools participating in the SSPA, only one school continued to operate with one S1 class according to its development plan and it was the only school with an intake of less than 25 S1 students.

Measures to stabilize the teaching force

15. Given the drop in secondary student population, members were concerned that there would be a large number of surplus teachers as a result of the reduction in the number of classes. The quality of education would also be adversely affected if experienced teachers quitted the profession.

16. The Administration stressed that one of the objectives of the basket of relief measures was to sustain the stability of the teaching force during the transient period when the secondary school sector faced a decline in

student population. The initiative of extending the retention period of surplus teachers from one year to three years would help safeguard that no teacher holding a permanent post would need to be laid off during this temporary decline in S1 student population.

17. Some members were of the view that the Administration should take the opportunity of the decline in secondary student population to consider reducing the number of teaching sessions for teachers and providing more opportunities for serving teachers to receive on-the-job training, especially on catering for students with special educational needs ("SEN students").

18. In this regard, the Administration informed members that the student-to-teacher ratio in public sector secondary schools had improved significantly from 18.0 to 1 in the 2005-2006 school year to 15.3 to 1 in the 2011-2012 school year. In addition, the teacher-to-class ratio for senior secondary levels (i.e. S4 to S6) had also been raised from 1.9 teachers per class to 2.0 teachers per class starting from the 2012-2013 school year. With the above improvements, schools would be in a much better staffing position to support and cater for the needs of SEN students, as well as raise teaching effectiveness.

19. In the motion passed at the meeting on 12 November 2012 (**Appendix I**), members urged the Government to, amongst others, improve the teacher-to-student ratio and class-to-teacher ratio, so as to cater for learner diversity and enhance teaching conditions. In the other motion passed on 17 April 2013 (**Appendix II**), members were keen to ensure that the Administration would live up to its words by implementing properly the measures of "sustaining schools, retaining teachers and preserving strength".

Implementation of small class teaching in secondary schools

20. Some members considered that the Government should seize the opportunity of the decline in secondary student population to enhance the quality of secondary education by implementing small class teaching ("SCT") in secondary schools or immediately reducing the class size to 30 students and then progressively to 25 students per class.

21. Some members were of the view that reducing the class size to a certain level might not necessarily be equivalent to SCT. The reduction in class size should take place in a progressive manner, instead of an immediate and across-the-board reduction. As a proper balance should be struck between the interests of different stakeholders, it might not be

appropriate to adopt any across-the-board measure without due regard to the circumstances of individual schools and districts.

22. According to the Administration, reducing the class size and implementing SCT were two separate issues. It was of the view that conceptually speaking, SCT was a kind of teaching setting or grouping driven by teaching considerations. Many secondary schools had in fact conducted group teaching/discussion on a need basis. However, its effectiveness in secondary schools was inconclusive from international studies. On whether SCT should be implemented in secondary schools, the Administration would need to consolidate the experience gained in primary schools and take into careful consideration relevant factors including 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. As the introduction of SCT was a major change to the secondary education system, the Administration stressed the need for careful study. The Administration's stance was that SCT should not be implemented simply for the sake of alleviating the impact of the temporary decline in student population on secondary schools.

23. In the motion passed on 12 November 2012, the Panel urged the Administration to, amongst others, immediately reduce the class size of secondary schools to 30 students and in the long term to implement progressively SCT with a class size of 25 students in secondary schools across the territory.

Long-term planning

24. Noting the Administration's projection of a rebound in the number of S1 students from the 2017-2018 school year onwards, some members were of the view that in the light of the fluctuations in secondary student population in the next decade or so, the Administration should formulate a long-term plan to sustain the stability of the secondary school sector and the quality of education. The Administration was also urged to take into account the possible demand for education from cross-boundary students who had been born in Hong Kong to Mainland women and who would return to Hong Kong.

25. In this regard, the Administration informed members that the projected student-age population residing in Hong Kong had taken into account the number of babies born in Hong Kong to Mainland women and who would settle in Hong Kong. The projected number however had not included cross-boundary students. The Administration further

advised that according to the current assessment, the capacity of existing secondary schools would be able to accommodate the estimated rebound in S1 student population.

26. In response to members' enquiry on whether the relief measures would need to continue in future, the Administration explained that the various measures had been implemented to address the impact arising from the temporary decline of S1 student population. They might no longer be required or appropriate when the S1 student population rebounded. If any measures would remain to be ongoing, they would be considered in a separate context.

Latest development

27. The Panel will re-visit issues related to measures to address issues arising from the drop in secondary student population at the meeting to be held on 18 March 2014.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
12 March 2014

Motion passed at the meeting on 12 November 2012
在2012年11月12日會議上通過的議案

議案措辭

未來4年，全港中學各級累減3.5萬名學生，本事務委員會促請政府：(1)為了穩定中學制度，並回應教育界的建議，即時減少中學每班學生人數至30人，當中照顧弱勢學生的學校立即減至25人；長遠而言，應逐步推動全港中學25人的小班教學，優化學校環境；(2)為了提升教育質素，應增加常額教席，改善師生及班師比例，以加強照顧學生的學習差異，優化教學條件。

(葉建源議員動議)

Wording of the Motion

(Translation)

That, given that the accumulated decrease in the number of secondary school students at different levels in Hong Kong will reach 35 000 in the coming four years, this Panel urges the Government: (1) for the purpose of stabilizing the secondary school system and responding to the proposals of the education sector, to immediately reduce the class size of secondary schools to 30 students, and to immediately reduce the class size of the schools catering for disadvantaged students to 25 students; and in the long term, to implement progressively small class teaching with a class size of 25 students in secondary schools across the territory so as to improve the school environment; (2) for the purpose of improving the quality of education, to increase the number of permanent teaching posts and to improve both the teacher-to-student ratio and the class-to-teacher ratio, so as to better cater for learner diversity and enhance teaching conditions.

(Moved by Hon IP Kin-yuen)

Motion passed at the meeting on 17 April 2013
在2013年4月17日會議上通過的議案

議案措辭

本事務委員會對於教育局局長吳克儉先生於2012年11月12日在委員會通過一項議決之後，隨即提出另一個完全不同的方案，而事先既沒有向本委員會申明、解釋，或與本委員會商討，事後也沒有及時向本委員會交代及跟進報告，置本委員會通過的議案於不顧。本事務委員會對此表示極度不滿，認為問責局長在此事上沒有尊重本委員會的議案，漠視民意代表的意見，本委員會對此表示極度遺憾。

本委員會督促當局今後重視本委員會通過的議案和委員發表的意見；同時要求當局信守承諾，講得出，做得到，做好「保學校、保教師、保實力」的措施，穩定教師團隊，不裁員，不殺校。

(葉建源議員動議)

Wording of the Motion

(Translation)

That this Panel expresses strong dissatisfaction at the fact that the Secretary for Education, Mr Eddie NG, proposed another completely different option on 12 November 2012 immediately after the passage of a motion by this Panel without any prior exposition and explanation to or discussion with this Panel, nor has he given any subsequent account and follow-up report to this Panel in a timely manner, which showed that he was oblivious to the motion passed by this Panel; this Panel also expresses grave dismay at the disrespect shown by the accountable Director of Bureau for this Panel's motion on this matter and at his disregard for the views of the representatives of public opinion.

That this Panel urges the authorities to attach importance to the motions passed by this Panel and the views expressed by its members in future, and also requests the authorities to uphold their pledges and live up to their words by implementing properly the measures of "sustaining schools, retaining teachers and preserving strength", stabilizing the teaching force as well as not laying off staff and closing schools.

(Moved by Hon IP Kin-yuen)

List of relevant papers

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	12.6.2006 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)2276/05-06(01)
Panel on Education	10.11.2008 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)205/08-09(01)
Panel on Education	8.11.2010 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)182/10-11(03) CB(2)212/10-11(01)
Panel on Education	11.4.2011 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)1444/10-11(01)
Panel on Education	21.10.2011	Minutes (P.7-8)
Legislative Council	17.10.2012	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 67 – 79 (Question 4)
Panel on Education	2.11.2012	Agenda Minutes CB(4)247/12-13(01) CB(4)290/12-13(01)
Panel on Education	3.11.2012	Agenda Minutes CB(4)247/12-13(01) CB(4)290/12-13(01)

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	12.11.2012 (Item VII)	Agenda Minutes CB(4)229/12-13(01) CB(4)392/12-13(01)
Panel on Education	17.4.2013 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes CB(4)644/12-13(01) CB(4)647/12-13(02)
Panel on Education	9.7.2013 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes CB(4)888/12-13(01)
Legislative Council	11.12.2013	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 160 – 172 (Question 18)

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
12 March 2014