

For information on  
16 December 2014

**Legislative Council Panel on Education**  
**Subcommittee to Study the**  
**Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education**  
**Overview of Subjects to be Studied and**  
**Progress of Related Work of the**  
**Committee on Free Kindergarten Education**

**Purpose**

This paper provides an overview of each of the following subjects to be studied by the Subcommittee to Study the Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education and the progress of work of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education (the Committee) on these subjects:

- (a) the policy and proposed scope of free kindergarten (KG) education;
- (b) the operating needs of and services provided by half-day (HD); whole-day (WD) and long whole-day (LWD) KGs and how they should be supported under the provision of free KG education;
- (c) premises-related issues; and
- (d) issues related to manpower requirement and teacher professionalism.

**Background**

2. The Committee was set up in April 2013 to make recommendation to the Government on how to practicably implement free KG education. The Committee and its five sub-committees<sup>1</sup> have been conducting in-depth studies on various issues regarding KG

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<sup>1</sup> The five subcommittees are: Sub-committee on Objectives, Teacher Professionalism and Research, Sub-committee on Operation and Governance, Sub-committee on Funding Modes, Sub-committee on Catering for Student Diversity, and Sub-committee on Communication Strategy.

education. As an integral part of their work, the Committee and the sub-committees have maintained communication with the KG sector to keep it informed of their progress, and gauge the sector's views from time to time.

3. The Committee submitted a progress report to the Education Bureau (EDB) in December 2013 and proposed in the report some short-term support measures to address the sector's imminent needs. The short-term measures included a one-off increase of the voucher subsidy under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) by \$2,500 per student per annum (pspa) in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 school years and lifting the fee remission ceilings under the KG and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme. The EDB has accepted and put in place the short-term measures, the details of which were reported to the Legislative Council Panel on Education (the Panel) on 16 July 2014 [LC Paper No. CB(4)913/13-14(01)].

4. Since establishment, the Committee and its five sub-committees have conducted more than 50 meetings to deliberate on various issues relating to free KG education. The progress of work of the Committee has been reported to the Panel at the meetings of 9 July 2013, 10 February 2014 and 16 July 2014. In the past few months, for the purpose of engagement and communication with various stakeholders, the Committee has conducted the second round of focus group<sup>2</sup> meetings in September and October 2014, all of which were chaired by the Vice-chairman of the Committee and attended by members of the Committee as well as sub-committees. The Chairman and/or Vice-chairman of the Committee have also met with school heads associations in different districts, various political parties, Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations and concern groups, etc. to listen to their views. Moreover, two videos have been produced and broadcast through different channels to keep the public informed of the progress work of the Committee.

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<sup>2</sup> Five focus groups have been set up with various stakeholders, including school sponsoring bodies, KG principals, teachers, parents and teacher education institutions. The first round of focus group meetings was held between October and December 2013.

5. While the Committee has developed initial views on certain issues relating to free KG education, more deliberations are required for other issues on which there are diverse opinions. Three consultancy studies have been commissioned to examine the human resources requirements and remuneration, accommodation and rental issues with a view to collecting more comprehensive information and making recommendations for consideration of the Committee. Details are outlined in ensuing sections of this paper.

**(a) The policy and proposed scope of free KG education**

6. As set out in LC Paper No. CB(4)913/13-14(01), the Committee has proposed a framework of KG education in Hong Kong which encompasses the vision and mission as well as the objectives of KG education. An integral part of the framework is the five principles which the Committee believes can help guide the deliberation on the implementation strategies to achieve the objectives of KG education. These five principles are uniqueness, equity, quality, diversity and sustainability.

7. The Committee recognizes that KG education is a foundation stage of learning and whole person development of the children with unique pedagogical characteristics that integrate care and education. As a matter of equity, all eligible children aged 3 to 6 should have access to quality KG education. In formulating the free KG education policy, the Committee respects and considers it important to maintain the uniqueness and diversity of KG education, as the different modes of operation arising from such characteristics are essential for the sector to cater for the diverse needs of the children. Last but not least, the policy must be practicable and sustainable.

8. As far as the scope is concerned, the Committee's initial view is that the Government's subsidy under free KG education should cover the school fees that relate to the expenses directly attributable to students' learning and school operation. Taking into a balanced account of such factors as the financial implications for Government, parents' choice and

financial burden, as well as the sustainable and quality development of the KG sector marked by diversity, other charges collected by KGs for various school items as well as the expenses arising from paid or above-standard services should be borne by parents. To ensure that no children would be deprived of the opportunity to receive KG education because of financial difficulties, financial assistance should be made available for children from needy families to defray expenses related to KG education.

9. The Committee has an emerging consensus that free KG education should cover half-day service as basic provision for all eligible children, taking into consideration the development needs of the children as well as overseas practices. That said, the Committee acknowledges that some families may need extra child care services but considers it important to distinguish between availability of services (provision) and subsidy (use of taxpayers' money). There are therefore some holding the principled view that free or subsidized WD and LWD KG places should be provided on a need basis for children who meet certain prescribed criteria. While the eligibility criteria will be subject to further deliberation, family income and social needs seem to be the criteria to which most can subscribe.

10. The Committee considers that in line with the existing practice, local non-profit-making (NPM) KGs should be covered under the free KG education policy while non-local KGs<sup>3</sup> should not. On whether local private independent (PI) KGs<sup>4</sup> should be covered, there are diverse views. Some are concerned that the use of public funds could not be justified and safeguarded if PI KGs, being allowed to distribute profit and dividend to shareholders, would be covered. Others are of the view that local PI KGs should be covered to provide a wider choice of KGs for parents. The issue is subject to further deliberation by the Committee.

11. In the course of consultation with various stakeholders, the Committee has heard strong views that in implementing free KG education, the diversity, vibrancy and uniqueness of the KG sector should

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<sup>3</sup> In the 2013/14 school year, there are 100 non-local KGs (representing 10% of all KGs) enrolling some 9 000 students (5% of total KG enrolment).

<sup>4</sup> In the 2013/14 school year, there are 110 local PI KGs (representing 11% of all KGs) enrolling some 21 000 students (12% of total KG enrolment).

be maintained. In this connection, in considering whether funding mode for aided primary and secondary schools can be applied to KG sector, there are noteworthy concerns such as the need to maintain the diversified services offered and the flexibility in the operation of KGs. There are concerns that under the subvention mode of aided schools, a standardized threshold would be set for an operating class, which may result in packing of classes. This would create pressure for closure of some very small KGs and a knock-on effect on the stability of the KG teaching force in times of student population drop. There are also views that if the subvention mode of aided schools is adopted, there is a need to centralize the allocation of KG places to ensure fairness through the creation of KG school nets. This will in turn affect the sector's overall operating flexibility to cope with the rise and fall of students in different districts.

12. There are views that a more innovative funding mode should be adopted so as to cater for the different modes of KG operation and the diverse needs of the students and parents. For instance, the funding for individual KGs could be provided partly on a per student basis and partly on a per school basis. Additional resources could also be provided in accordance with the special circumstances of the KGs or the students. There should also be subsidy for premises-related expenses such as rental payment. The funding mode is subject to further deliberation.

**(b) The operating needs of and services provided by HD, WD and LWD KGs and how they should be supported under the provision of free KG education**

13. At present, KGs offer diversified services, with some classes operating on a HD basis (around 3 to 3.5 hours per day) and some on a WD basis (around 7 to 7.5 hours per day including time for lunch and afternoon nap). A considerable number of KGs are operating both HD and WD classes in the same premises. There are also 246 KGs (which are former aided child care centres (FACs) operated under the Social Welfare Department), operating longer service hours (around 10 hours per day and five and a half days per week), some of which also offer

ancillary services<sup>5</sup>. These KGs are all PEVS KGs and commonly known as LWD KGs.

14. The Committee is aware that HD, WD and LWD KGs have different operational needs. The Committee is of the view that their operating hours, nature of services and requirements in manpower/resources should be taken into account when determining the level of funding for different types of KGs. The Committee will further deliberate on the issue in conjunction with premises-related issues and issues related to manpower requirement, more details of which are provided in paragraphs 15 to 22.

**(c) Premises-related issues**

15. KGs are operated in different types of school premises and the rental costs vary considerably. The significant variation of rental charges among different KGs is a critical issue to be addressed in the implementation of free KG education. Currently, some KGs are operated in Government-allocated premises (such as public housing estates), others in private premises such as commercial buildings, church or private sites owned by school sponsors. In 2013-14, 394 KGs, i.e. about 50% of all NPM KGs, received rent reimbursement under the Rent Reimbursement Scheme with the amount of rent reimbursed ranged from \$3,100 to \$350,000 per month.

16. With regard to the premises and facilities, there are stipulated requirements in the Operation Manual for Pre-primary Institutions (Operation Manual) on the location, maximum height and space, etc. The Operation Manual may need to be reviewed to suit contemporary needs.

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<sup>5</sup> The ancillary services include (1) extended hours service (EHS); (2) occasional child care service (OCCS) and (3) integrated programme (IP). EHS is provided for children aged below 6 to meet the social needs of families and working parents. OCCS is provided on a full-day, half-day or two-hour sessional basis for children aged below 6 whose parents or carers have sudden engagements or various commitments. IP provides training and care for mildly disabled children aged 2 to 6 with a view to facilitating their future integration into the mainstream education system and the society. Currently, there are 97, 204 and 208 LWD KGs providing EHS, OCCS and IP respectively.

17. The Committee is of the view that the physical accommodation and facilities of KGs should be enhanced with a view to providing a more conducive environment for children's learning and development. The Government should also consider measures to ensure a stable supply of quality KG premises in the long run. To achieve this, KG premises may be either provided by the Government or owned by the KG operators. The Committee is of the view that some measures should be considered to increase government-owned KG premises in public housing estates. The feasibility of similar arrangements in private housing estates needs to be explored. Some have also suggested exploring the possibility of co-location of KGs and primary schools. Before the long-term goal is achieved, the Committee considers that rental subsidy may be provided to eligible KGs. In this regard, there are views that KGs should be required to meet certain criteria in order to be eligible for the subsidy. There are also views that as the rental charges among different KGs vary significantly, there should be a ceiling on the amount of subsidy to be provided for each eligible KG to ensure proper use of public funds. The eligibility criteria and subsidy ceiling are to be further deliberated. In addition, the Committee also proposes that the planning standards for WD KG places be reviewed when space is allocated for establishing KGs in housing estates and large-scale private development projects to increase the provision of such places to meet the increasing demand.

18. Two consultancy studies have been commissioned to study the accommodation and rental issues. They will examine the current situation of KG premises, gauge and analyze stakeholders' views and make recommendations for consideration of the Committee on the standard requirements on KG premises and facilities, and on the eligibility criteria as well as the ceiling for rental subsidy. The Committee will further deliberate on the issues upon receipt of the recommendations from the consultants.

**(d) Issues related to manpower requirement and teacher professionalism**

19. At present, KGs under the PEVS are required to employ sufficient teachers with the Certificate in Early Childhood Education

(C(ECE)) qualification based on the teacher to pupil ratio of 1:15. According to a teacher survey conducted in September 2013, the monthly salaries of teachers working whole-day in KGs under the PEVS ranged from about \$8,300 to over \$71,000 .

20. The Committee has critically examined various issues relating to KGs' manpower requirements and the remuneration of KG teachers. There are views that the threshold requirement of a 1:15 teacher to pupil ratio should be improved to provide more capacity for KGs to employ additional teachers to enhance the curriculum, and to create space for teachers for professional development, etc. The Committee is also of the view that in order to enhance the professional capacity of KG principals and teachers, the Government should formulate a continuous professional development policy for KG teachers, with reference to a teacher competency framework and principal competency framework to be devised. Moreover, the Certification Course for KG principals should also be revised with changes in course requirement, admission criteria and validity period, etc. Many Committee Members also hold the view that in the long run, the Government should consider raising the entry qualification of KG teachers to degree level.

21. The Committee recognizes that KGs should offer competitive remuneration and a career ladder so as to retain/attract quality teachers and maintain a stable teaching force for providing quality KG education. Some Members of the Committee are of the view that senior teacher posts should be established, and for KGs of a larger scale, there should also be vice-principal posts to assist the principals in overseeing the operation of the KGs. As for teachers' salary, there are views that a mandatory salary scale should be put in place for compliance of all KGs and the teachers' teaching experience should be recognized upon transfer from one KG to another. However, there are also opposite views that the Government should only provide salary ranges for reference of KGs, thus leaving KGs with the discretion to determine the remuneration of their teachers in accordance with their school-based mechanism which should be open, transparent and with checks and balances. The rationale put forward by the proponents is that a KG would most unlikely deliberately suppress teachers' remuneration as this could affect the quality of teaching and in turn the quality of service and the popularity of the KG. In addition,

respecting KGs' discretion in teacher remuneration is considered consistent with the principle of maintaining the flexibility and diversity of the KG sector.

22. A consultancy study has been commissioned to study and make recommendations on the requirements for teaching and non-teaching staff in KGs and their remuneration. The Committee will further deliberate on these issues upon receiving the recommendations from the consultant.

### **Views Sought**

23. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

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