

For discussion
on 22 March 2016

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Pilot Project on Special Educational Needs Coordinators

Purpose

This paper outlines the details and implementation of the Pilot Project on Special Educational Needs Coordinators (the pilot project).

Background

2. Hong Kong adopts the Whole School Approach (WSA) to integrated education (IE). To help schools cater for students with special educational needs (SEN), the Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been providing public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools with additional resources, professional support and teacher training. Schools may deploy their resources flexibly to appoint additional manpower and procure professional services to render appropriate support to students based on their needs. In response to the request of the education sector and stakeholders to create a designated post in schools for coordinating matters concerning IE, the Subcommittee on IE under the Panel on Education of the Legislative Council recommended in its report of September 2014 that EDB should implement a pilot project by creating a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) post in some schools to evaluate objectively whether the arrangement could provide better tailored school-based support for students with SEN.

3. The Chief Executive announced in the 2015 Policy Address that the Government would invite the Community Care Fund (CCF) to consider providing a cash grant for ordinary schools with relatively more students with SEN and financial needs to strengthen the teaching force of the schools so that a designated teacher can be deployed to coordinate matters relating to SEN support in schools. At its meeting on 11 March 2015, the CCF Task Force deliberated and supported the relevant plan and specific arrangements. The above CCF assistance programme was formally approved by the Commission on Poverty (CoP) at its meeting of 27 March 2015.

Project Details

4. Based on the assistance programme approved by the CoP, the CCF launched a three-year pilot project from the 2015/16 school year to provide a cash grant to public sector ordinary schools with relatively more students with SEN and financial needs so that a teacher designated as a SENCO can be deployed to coordinate matters relating to SEN support in schools. Through the pilot project, EDB will examine the duties and qualifications of SENCOs and how the provision can tie in with the existing WSA. To consider the long-term development of SENCOs, a review will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot project.

5. Public sector ordinary schools participating in the pilot project should meet the following eligibility criteria:

- (i) the number of students with financial needs¹ should account for at least 55% of the total number of students of the school in the 2014/15 school year; and
- (ii) the school has admitted at least 50 students with SEN requiring Tier-2 or Tier-3 support under the 3-Tier Intervention Model² in the school year concerned.

6. Participating schools are required to take corresponding actions in the following areas:

- (i) assigning a suitable teacher to serve as SENCO to play the roles of leading, planning and implementation. The duties of SENCOs are set out at Annex;
- (ii) ensuring that the teaching load of a SENCO is equivalent to about 30% but not more than 50% of the average teaching load of fellow teachers in the school. This is to enable the continued enrichment of the SENCO's experience in supporting students with SEN in classroom teaching and adopting various support measures while ensuring adequate capacity for them to perform SEN-related duties;

¹ Students with financial needs include students receiving the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance and those receiving full grant or half grant under student financial assistance schemes.

² Schools currently adopt the 3-Tier Intervention Model to cater for student diversity. Tier-1 support refers to quality teaching in regular classrooms for supporting students with transient or mild learning difficulties. Tier-2 support refers to "add-on" intervention, such as small group learning and pull-out programmes, for students with persistent learning difficulties, including those with SEN. Tier-3 support refers to intensive individualised support for students with severe learning difficulties and SEN, including drawing up of an Individual Education Plan.

- (iii) mobilizing the entire teaching force to actively support the work of the SENCO and the SENCO-led student support team; and
- (iv) providing EDB with information and data as necessary for the review of the pilot project.

7. Since the SENCO is tasked to lead, plan and coordinate the implementation of various support measures, schools are required to designate a teacher who has at least three years' experience in teaching and implementing IE as well as having completed relevant training in special education (for example, having completed the training courses on catering for students with SEN pitched at Basic, Advanced and Thematic levels (BAT Courses)³, or equivalent qualifications) as the SENCO⁴.

8. The total funding provision for the three-year pilot project is about \$220 million. During the pilot period, the CCF will provide participating secondary and primary schools with a cash grant⁵, which is equivalent to the mid-point salary of Graduate Masters/Mistresses of secondary schools and Assistant Primary School Masters/Mistresses respectively. The grant is disbursed by two instalments each school year. In the 2015/16 school year, each participating secondary and primary school will be provided with a cash grant of \$541,560 and \$472,320 respectively. To ensure that the cash grant is mainly used to provide additional manpower for achieving the objective of the pilot project, schools are required to deploy at least 90% of the grant for the employment of additional teaching staff so that the SENCO may have more capacity to perform the duty of supporting students with SEN.

9. For the purpose of maintaining stability and continuity in schools' deployment of manpower resources and distribution of duties, as well as conducting a longitudinal study to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot project, participating schools can stay in the project even if there is a change in the number of eligible students during the three-school year period. Also, the number of participating schools will not be increased during the pilot period.

10. Besides, for effective implementation of the pilot project, EDB has commissioned experienced overseas consultants to provide training to SENCOS, review the overall effectiveness of the pilot project and make feasible recommendations on the way forward.

³ The EDB has been providing Basic, Advanced and Thematic (BAT) Courses on catering for students with SEN for serving teachers since the 2007/08 school year.

⁴ SENCOS not fulfilling the requirement for SEN training are required to complete the relevant courses within the first year of the pilot project.

⁵ The cash grant is adjusted annually with regard to the mid-point salary of Graduate Masters/Mistresses of secondary schools and Assistant Primary School Masters/Mistresses.

Latest Progress

11. In mid-2015, EDB invited schools meeting the eligibility criteria as set out in Paragraph 5 above to participate in the pilot project and introduced the project details to schools through briefing sessions. A total of 124 schools, including 65 secondary schools and 59 primary schools, have participated in the pilot project. The first instalment of grant for the 2015/16 school year, which accounted for 50% of the total annual provision, was disbursed in September 2015 and the second instalment will be disbursed in March 2016. We expect that the pilot project will benefit more than 9 000 students with SEN every year.

Professional Training

12. To enhance the SENCOs' professional capability in leading the student support team to formulate, implement and review their school-based IE policy and support measures, EDB has commissioned an overseas expert⁶ to provide all SENCOs with professional training, including biannual training courses, school visits and advisory service for school networks or individual schools. In September 2015, the overseas expert visited four schools and conducted a three-day induction course, which included a half-day session for school heads on the first day, to enhance the SENCOs' ability in administering, coordinating and formulating SEN support measures. All SENCOs have attended the induction course and positively evaluated the course. They found the course insightful, helpful in discerning the SENCOs' roles and duties as well as enhancing their capability in leadership and management. Some SENCOs have extensively applied the strategies learnt to their schools and the outcome was encouraging. The overseas expert will come again in late April 2016 to conduct a two-day advanced course and carry out three days of professional network activities. All SENCOs are required to attend the advanced course and join the network activities.

13. In addition, since November 2015, EDB has been organising regional network activities for participating schools and assisting the SENCOs in strengthening the regional support network to promote professional exchange and experience sharing. As regards the concerns of some SENCOs such as monitoring of the utilization of resources, evaluation of the outcome, optimal use of community resources and promotion of home-school co-operation, EDB will continue to invite experienced schools and local tertiary institutions to share successful experiences when necessary.

⁶ The overseas expert is the Leader of the National Award for SEN Coordination for the Eastern Region in the United Kingdom who has rich relevant experiences.

Outcome Evaluation

14. To evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot project and gain more understanding about implementation of the project in schools at different levels as well as making feasible recommendations on the way forward, the EDB-commissioned consultant will, based on the genuine situation of primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, adopt both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to collect information and relevant data of the participating schools and to understand the views of different stakeholders through a range of assessment tools. The work involved, including collection of school information and data as well as school visits by the expert, is being carried out progressively.

15. In the coming two years of the pilot period, the overseas expert will continue to provide professional training for the SENCOs, including various advanced courses and network activities. The project coordinators of EDB will visit the participating schools to understand more about the work and training needs of SENCOs, monitor the operation of the pilot project and follow up on the specific arrangements in evaluation. EDB will consider the way forward for SENCOs in light of the effectiveness of the pilot project.

Advice Sought

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

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Requirements and Duties of SENCOs

SENCOs should play a leading role in coordinating the formulation, implementation and review of IE support measures in schools for strengthening the effectiveness of IE to benefit the students concerned. SENCOs should lead the student support team to perform the following duties:

- Strategically formulate, implement and monitor, review and evaluate various support measures and resource deployment of the school, including optimal use of the Learning Support Grant and deployment of manpower resources, according to the basic principles for promotion of IE¹;
- Promote early identification and early intervention for students with SEN through a multi-disciplinary team approach;
- Collaborate with other teachers/functional teams in the school through a WSA to devise support programmes, adapt the curriculum and teaching strategies and make special arrangements in examination and assessment for students with SEN;
- Enhance home-school co-operation and work together with parents to support students with SEN;
- Review the special education training needs taking into account profiles of teachers in the school, arrange teachers to receive relevant training in a systematic manner, and plan and organise school-based professional development activities to enhance the capacity of the teaching force;
- Strengthen external liaison with relevant parties such as professionals, community resource providers and parents to muster support for students with SEN; and
- Guide fellow teachers in the school to adopt effective support strategies for enhancing the learning effectiveness of students with SEN through collaborative lesson planning and co-teaching.

¹ The EDB promotes IE in accordance with five basic principles, namely early identification, early intervention, WSA, home-school co-operation and cross-sector collaboration.