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Panel on Education

Meeting on 5 January 2018

Background brief on free quality kindergarten education policy

Purpose

This paper summarizes the deliberations of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") on the free quality kindergarten ("KG") education policy ("the policy").

Background

2. The policy has been implemented from the 2017-2018 school year to replace the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. The policy objectives are to provide good quality and highly affordable KG education, and enhance the accessibility of students to different modes of services that suit their specific needs. The key features of the policy are highlighted below:

- (a) providing direct subsidy to eligible local non-profit-making KGs for the provision of half-day ("HD") KG services for all eligible children aged between three and six;
- (b) providing an additional subsidy, which respectively set at 30% and 60% of the basic HD unit subsidy, for KGs offering whole-day ("WD") and long whole-day ("LWD") kindergarten places;
- (c) providing needy families with fee remission and a grant to defray the school-related expenses;
- (d) strengthening support to non-Chinese speaking ("NCS") students and students with diverse learning needs;

- (e) enhancing the overall teacher-pupil ratio from 1:15 to 1:11 and providing more support for KG teachers to upgrade their professional competence;
- (f) encouraging KGs to establish a career ladder for KG teachers and requiring them to offer teaching staff salaries within the salary ranges recommended by EDB;
- (g) revising the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum ("the Guide") to enhance learning and teaching;
- (h) refining the Quality Assurance Framework, enhancing the governance and transparency of KGs, and stepping up monitoring by the Government; and
- (i) enhancing parent engagement and parent education.

3. In July 2017, the Administration promulgated the implementation of the following priority measures under the policy:

- (a) providing for annual adjustment of the salary-related subsidies for teaching staff in line with the annual civil service pay adjustment with effect from the 2018-2019 school year; and
- (b) extending the two-year tide-over grant (2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years) for three more years till the 2021-2022 school year to ensure that KGs may retain their long serving teachers with higher salaries within the reference salary ranges promulgated by EDB.

4. The Chief Executive announced in her 2017 Policy Address that the Government has undertaken to review the salary arrangements for KG teachers with the aim of assessing the feasibility of introducing a salary scale for them.

5. According to the Administration, about 740 KGs (around 96% of about 770 eligible KGs¹) joined the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme ("the Scheme") in the 2017-2018 school year.

¹ To be eligible to apply for joining the Scheme, the KGs should be non-profit-making and offering a full local curriculum.

Major views and concerns

6. The deliberations of the Panel on issues relating to the implementation of the policy are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Provision of subsidy to WD/LWD KGs

7. Members expressed concern that many KGs might not offer WD/LWD services if these services were not fully subsidized. There was a concern about the pressing need of working parents/single parent families to send their children to attend WD and LWD KGs. Some members requested the Administration to provide full subsidy to WD/LWD KGs.

8. The Administration explained that HD, WD and LWD KGs had their respective roles in catering for the needs of different families. Flexibility should be allowed in the modes of operation of the KG sector and parents' choice should be respected. On top of the basic HD unit subsidy, additional subsidy at the levels of 30% and 60% of the HD unit subsidy would be provided for each WD and LWD KG place respectively. The suggestion of providing full subsidy for WD/LWD KGs would involve implication in deployment of public resources. Premised on the principle that WD/LWD services should be provided on a co-payment basis, the Administration and parents would each bear part of the additional cost. Various financial assistance schemes were also available for needy families. To meet the increasing demand for WD/LWD KG services, the planning standards for provision of KG places would be revised from the present 250 WD and 730 HD places to 500 WD and 500 HD places respectively as a long-term goal for every 1 000 children aged between three and six.

9. There was a view that the communication between EDB and the Labour Welfare Bureau ("LWB") should be strengthened to enhance the provision of WD/LWD KG and child-care services with a view to unleashing the potential of the local labour force. The Administration advised that EDB had been working in collaboration with LWB in the provision of services to children. For example, the fees of special child care centres administered by the Social Welfare Department would be waived upon implementation of the policy.

Salary arrangements for KG teachers

10. Members urged the Administration to establish a salary scale for KG teachers to attract and retain talents. The Administration reiterated that it attached great importance to maintaining the stability of teaching force. It would need more time to review the salary arrangements for KG teachers

and explore the feasibility of putting in place a salary scale for KG teachers in consultation with the KG sector and stakeholders.

Support for students with diverse learning needs

11. Members expressed concern that NCS students had encountered difficulties in applying for admission to local KGs. The Administration stressed that KGs were required to put in place a fair admission mechanism for all children. It had advised KGs through different channels, including school circulars and briefing sessions, reminding them of providing information in English to facilitate NCS parents choosing suitable KGs for their children. EDB would collect information from KGs under the Scheme on vacancy situation and provide assistance to NCS children who encountered difficulty in securing a KG place.

12. Members considered that additional resources should be allocated to strengthen the support for students with special education needs, particularly provision of services for the early identification of them. The Administration advised that it had launched a pilot scheme under which on-site pre-school rehabilitation service was provided for children on the waiting list of subvented pre-school rehabilitation service. The pilot scheme was expected to benefit over 2 900 children with special needs. Services would be enhanced in a progressive manner as it would take time to train adequate professionals.

Curriculum

13. Members expressed concerns about the homework load of KG students and the possible drilling in pre-school stage. Moreover, they considered that students attending nursery classes should not be asked to write with pencils/pens. Members urged the Administration to include specific guidelines in the Guide to ensure all school-based homework could be finished at schools, and to closely monitor the implementation of homework policy in KGs through focused inspections.

14. According to the Administration, the revised Guide which covered homework policy would be published in the first quarter of 2017. The Performance Indicators, which formed the basis of school self-evaluation and Quality Review, were being refined to tie in with the review of the Guide and the homework policy. The Administration did not support the practice of arranging students attending nursery classes to write with pencils/pens as young children should not be subject to undue pressure.

Premises-related issues

15. Members called on the Administration to increase government-owned KG premises in new public housing estates or residential development projects, and reserve sites/premises for KG use during the town planning stage. The Administration advised that it would reserve sites/premises for KG use in new public housing estates, and explore the feasibility of co-location of KGs and primary schools and increasing KG space in private housing development. The projected decline of KG student population in the next few years would be taken into account when considering the reservation of sites for KGs.

Miscellaneous fees

16. Members enquired about the regulation over KGs' collection of miscellaneous fees. The Administration advised that KGs would charge fees for school items and paid services, such as school uniforms and bags, which parents might purchase on a voluntary basis.

Relevant Council questions

17. At the Council meetings of 11 January, 8 February, 26 April and 7 June 2017, Mr CHEUNG Kwok-kwan, Dr Pierre CHAN and Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung raised questions to enquire, among others, the implementation of the Scheme, school fees and application fees charged by KGs, and the supply of KG premises.

Latest position

18. The Administration will brief the Panel on the latest development in the implementation of the policy at the meeting on 5 January 2018.

Relevant papers

19. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council Website is in the **Appendix**.

List of relevant papers

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	14.11.2016 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(4)415/16-17(01)
Legislative Council	11.1.2017	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 86 – 90 (Question 14)
Panel on Education	24.1.2017 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	8.2.2017	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 146 – 151 (Question 20)
Legislative Council	26.4.2017	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 23 – 27 (Question 5)
Legislative Council	7.6.2017	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 151 – 153 (Question 21)
Panel on Education	10.7.2017 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	31.10.2017 (Item I)	Agenda