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Panel on Education

Meeting on 4 June 2021

**Background brief on support to
students with special educational needs in ordinary schools**

Purpose

This paper summarizes the deliberations of members of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") on the measures for helping public sector ordinary schools to support students with special educational needs ("SEN").

Background

2. Students with SEN refer to students who need special educational support because of certain learning or adjusting difficulties. The major types of SEN include specific learning difficulties, attention deficits and hyperactivity disorder, autistic spectrum disorder, speech and language impairment, hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical disability, and intellectual disability.

3. The Government currently adopts a dual-track mode in delivering special education. The Education Bureau ("EDB") will, subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and the consent of parents, refer students with more severe or multiple disabilities to special schools for intensive support services. Other students with SEN will attend ordinary schools so that they could benefit from mainstream education. Based on the information provided by EDB in May 2019, about 49 080 students with SEN studied in 456 public sector ordinary primary schools and 389 public sector ordinary secondary schools in the 2018-2019 school year.

4. To help public sector ordinary schools cater for students with SEN, EDB provides schools with additional resources on top of the regular subvention,

professional support and teacher training. In the 2018-2019 school year, resources provided for public sector ordinary schools to implement integrated education ("IE") amounted to about \$2 021 million. From the 2019-2020 school year, an additional expenditure of around \$820 million each year was allocated for the implementation of a series of enhancement measures on IE. The enhancement measures included restructuring various funding schemes on IE, extending the Learning Support Grant ("LSG"), multiplying the grant rate for Tier-3 support and provision of additional permanent teaching posts; upgrading the post of Special Educational Needs Coordinator ("SENCO") to a promotion rank in public sector ordinary schools with a comparatively large number of students with SEN; extending further the Enhanced School-based Educational Psychology Service; and enhancing the school-based therapy services.

Major views and concerns

5. In the Sixth Legislative Council, the Panel discussed the support measures for students with SEN at various meetings. The major views and concerns expressed by members are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Teacher training and professional support

6. Some members expressed concern that in the 2018-2019 school year, only 30% to 40% of the teachers of public sector primary and secondary schools had received special education training. They considered that the Administration should step up measures to provide teachers with sufficient training to meet the growing number of students with SEN. In this regard, a motion was passed at the meeting on 3 May 2019, urging the Administration to increase progressively the proportion of teachers having received basic special education training from 30% - 40% to 100% by 2024, so as to ensure that teachers of students with SEN possess basic knowledge in the field of SEN.

7. The Administration advised that with a view to better equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills in catering for students with SEN, local teacher education institutions had included a module on special education or catering for students with diversity in all pre-service teacher training courses. Structured training courses pitched at Basic, Advanced and Thematic levels with duration from 30 hours to 120 hours were conducted for serving teachers and training targets were set. The targets would be revised taking into account the position of teachers trained in public sector schools and the types and number of students with SEN enrolled in schools. The Administration had also organized different theme-based training activities, including seminars and sharing sessions, to share good practices in catering for students with SEN.

8. Members noted that starting from the 2017-2018 school year, public sector ordinary schools would be provided with an additional post by phases in 3 years so that a designated teacher could be assigned as SENCO. As SENCOs would be required to take up a certain amount of teaching load, concerns were raised as to whether SENCOs could perform teaching duties and support students with SEN at the same time.

9. The Administration advised that in the 2019-2020 school year, all public sector ordinary schools would have the provision of SENCO and the SENCO post in those schools with comparatively large number of students with SEN would be upgraded to a promotion rank. SENCOs at promotion rank should devote about 70% of their time to perform duties relating to the support of students with SEN. Nevertheless, the Administration considered the teaching work performed by SENCO necessary to enable the continued enrichment of the SENCO's experience in quality teaching.

10. Some members considered it necessary to enhance the professional support to students with SEN, such as providing every public sector ordinary school with an educational psychologist and a speech therapist. The Administration advised that EDB would take into account the practical circumstances in enhancing the school-based professional services.

Learning Support Grant

11. Members noted that the Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme ("IRTP") and IE Programme would be replaced by LSG from the 2019-2020 school year. There was a view that after the implementation of the replacement measure, resources allocated to schools would be reduced and teaching posts under IRTP and IE Programme would not be retained, thereby defeating the objectives of maintaining a stable teaching force and strengthening the support for students with SEN.

12. The Administration explained that from the 2019-2020 school year, EDB would restructure LSG, IRTP and IE Programme. Under the new measure, apart from having LSG, schools would have additional regular teaching post(s) (through conversion or provision) when LSG reaching the threshold(s). For instance, when the amount of LSG reached the threshold of \$600,000, schools would convert around \$360,000, i.e. an amount equivalent to the annual salary at starting pay point of a basic rank graduate teacher, for a graduate teaching post in the establishment, and have the remaining LSG for employing additional teacher(s) and teaching assistant(s), as well as hiring support services. In other words, schools would not be worse off in terms of resources for supporting students with SEN. In fact, it was estimated that around 1 000 additional regular teaching posts

would be created under the new measure. No school needed to use the newly provided SENCO post to retain IRTP teachers. The Administration had also put in place a special arrangement for retaining IRTP teachers in the establishment that no IRTP teachers were affected.

13. While welcoming the increase of LSG unit grant rate for Tier-3 support, some members suggested that the Administration should consider increasing the grant rate for Tier-1 and Tier-2 support and disbursing the grant to parents directly to allow them to choose the types of services which best suited their own needs. According to the Administration, LSG was provided to schools according to the number of students with SEN and academic low achievers (for primary schools) enrolled in the school and the tier of support the students required. Therefore, it was not a direct subsidy provided to individual students with SEN.

Students with special educational needs taking the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination

14. Noting that only one kind of speech-to-text software was available for candidates with dyslexia taking the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education ("HKDSE") Examination, there was a suggestion that more softwares should be provided for candidates' selection.

15. The Administration advised that it was the first time to allow eligible candidates with dyslexia to use speech-to-text software in HKDSE Examination in 2017. EDB would keep in view with the implementation of the new arrangement with the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority and explore improvement measures if necessary.

Transition of students with special educational needs from kindergartens to primary schools

16. To ensure a smooth transition for students with SEN from kindergartens ("KGs") to primary schools, some members urged EDB to strengthen communication with other relevant bureaux/departments, such as conducting meetings for the student support teams of KGs and primary schools. Some other members suggested introducing individualized transition/bridging programmes for pre-school SEN children under which information of the child would be transferred to primary schools to facilitate SENCOs to plan for the support services for these students in advance. The Administration assured members that EDB would continue to maintain a close dialogue with the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") to achieve a smooth transition for students with SEN from KGs to primary schools.

17. Some members considered that the pre-school rehabilitation services provided by SWD for children aged from birth to six such services should continue until these children proceeded to primary schooling. The Administration advised that the provision of pre-school rehabilitation services would cease when the child reached the first 1 September after attaining the age of six. In other words, if the child reached the age of six during the school year, he/she would be provided with the services until the next school year commenced.

Central database for students with special educational needs

18. Members urged for, subject to parental consent, the establishment of a central database for students with SEN so that information of individual students could be assessed by frontline personnel, including social workers, psychologists, etc. for provision of appropriate support services.

19. The Administration advised that EDB and SWD had agreed on a mechanism for the transfer of progress information of pre-school children from their KGs to their designated public sector primary schools. There was also an established mechanism for the transfer of students' SEN information from primary and secondary schools. EDB would closely monitor the operation of the respective information transfer mechanisms in the first place and consider the feasibility and effectiveness of setting up a central database at a later stage.

Safeguarding students with SEN

20. Some members urged EDB to make reference to overseas jurisdictions and establish legislation to safeguard students with SEN. With legislation, individual education plan ("IEP") should be formulated for every student with SEN to develop their potentials, and an independent redress mechanism should be set up to guarantee the rights and privileges of students with SEN. On the other hand, a member expressed reservation in the establishment of legislation on SEN at the present stage. The member considered that the Administration should gauge more fully views and concerns of the relevant stakeholders and step up measures to help cater for the needs of students with SEN.

21. The Administration explained that IEP was only one of the many strategies for supporting students with SEN. Under the existing 3-Tier Intervention Model, IEP would be formulated for students with severe learning or adjustment difficulties receiving Tier-3 support based on professional judgment and decision of schools. On complaint handling mechanism, EDB had established mechanism to handle complaints against schools and students with SEN were well protected under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 487). In the Administration's view, it was more appropriate to focus, at this stage, on exploring

how support measures for implementing IE could be further strengthened so as to intensify the effectiveness of IE.

Latest position

22. The Administration will brief the Panel on the provision of professional support to ordinary schools for implementing IE at the meeting to be held on 4 June 2021.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
28 May 2021

List of relevant papers

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	22.3.2016	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	26.6.2017	Agenda Minutes CB(4)1468/16-17(01)
Panel on Education	10.7.2017	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	2.3.2018	Agenda Minutes CB(4)155/18-19(01)
Legislative Council	30.1.2019	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 110-118 (Question 18)
Panel on Education	3.5.2019	Agenda Minutes CB(4)1143/18-19(01)
Legislative Council	26.6.2019	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 82-93 (Question 13)
Legislative Council	24.6.2020	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 252-257 (Question 19)