

For discussion
on 18 October 2021

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Planning for the provision of public sector primary and secondary school places in light of changes in student population

Purpose

This paper outlines the Education Bureau's (EDB) planning for the provision of school places and related measures under the Primary One Admission (POA) System and the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) System in recent years. It also gives an account of the long-term planning direction for provision of school places in light of the projected student population in the future.

School places allocation mechanism

2. Under the prevailing school places allocation mechanism, the EDB must ensure sufficient provision of public sector school places¹, such that all eligible school-age applicant students can be allocated with Primary One (P1) or Secondary One (S1) places in public sector schools. In general, the provision of public sector primary school places is planned on a district basis. Under the principle of vicinity adopted by the POA System, the 18 districts in the territory are demarcated into 36 school nets. As for secondary schools, the provision of public sector school places is planned on a territory-wide basis. Under the SSPA System, the whole territory is divided into 18 school nets which are based on the administrative districts.

3. Given the uneven age distribution of population in different school nets and the movement of people between districts, it is not possible to achieve a complete balance between the demand and supply of P1 and S1 places in every school net, and the situation may change every year. To accommodate the year-on-year changes in the demand for school places in different school

¹ Public sector school places refer to school places in government schools, aided schools and caput schools.

nets, the EDB has been increasing the supply of school places in individual school nets according to the established mechanism to ensure the provision of sufficient public sector school places for all eligible school-age applicant students. Regarding the POA, the measures generally adopted by the EDB include making use of vacant classrooms for operating additional P1 classes (“operating additional P1 classes”) and borrowing school places from neighbouring school nets (“borrowing school places”). As for the SSPA, netting of school places from other districts is a long-standing arrangement which proves to be effective. When making netting arrangements, the EDB takes into account a number of factors, such as the demand and supply of school places in different districts, location of schools and the associated transport facilities, to ensure a stable supply of school places in each district and to provide parents with more choices. If necessary, the EDB will also consider increasing the number of S1 classes (“operating additional S1 classes”) in districts with a shortfall in school places to meet the demand.

Changes in demand for school places in recent years

4. Apart from the school-aged children population in Hong Kong, the annual demand for P1 and S1 places is affected by a number of factors including, among other things, the number of cross-boundary students and the number of school-age newly-arrived children. In addition, the demand for school places in individual districts and school nets is also affected by the demographic distribution, parental choices and student mobility etc.

5. Regarding the POA, the number of applicant students had been increasing since the 2012/13 school year and peaked in the 2018/19 school year. Following the implementation of the “zero delivery quota” for Mainland expectant mothers in early 2013 and the drop of P1 school-age population, the number of applicant students in POA decreased gradually from its peak at 56 648 students in the 2018/19 school year to 46 782 in the 2021/22 school year. As for the SSPA, the number of applicants dropped from over 80 000 students in the early 2000s to 45 544 students in the 2016/17 school year, and temporarily rebounded thereafter to 49 554 and 54 112 in the 2018/19 and 2020/21 school year respectively. The number of applicants then dropped to 52 055 in the 2021/22 school year. Details are as follows -

Table 1: Number of students participating in POA and SSPA from 2018 to 2021 cycles

Allocation cycle	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of students participating in POA	56 648	49 567	49 721	46 782
Number of students participating in SSPA	49 554	52 917	54 112	52 055

Note: The number of students participating in SSPA includes students studying in public sector schools, Direct Subsidy Scheme schools and private schools offering the local curriculum, but does not include those studying in special schools, the English Schools Foundation schools, other international schools and Private Independent Schools.

Measures to cope with the transient changes

6. To cope with a transient increase in the demand for P1 places, the EDB, on the consensus reached with the sector, adopted flexible arrangements to increase the provision of P1 places flexibly. Apart from “operating additional P1 classes” and “borrowing school places” as mentioned above, the EDB has also temporarily allocated more students per P1 class (“temporarily allocating more students”), and operated four time-limited schools. In addition, the EDB has put forward a series of measures to alleviate the impact of a declining student population on the sector, including cessation of P1 admission as planned by those time-limited schools and implementation of targeted relief measures starting from the 2019/20 school year² based on the consensus reached with the sector, so as to maintain a stable teaching force and facilitate the sustainable development of schools.

7. In response to the gradual rising demand for S1 places starting from the 2017/18 school year and the anticipated significant drop after the 2024/25 school year, the EDB met with the sector and reached a consensus in October 2017 on the framework of direction and strategies to address the situation,

² These measures include (a) from the 2019/20 to the 2024/25 school years, allowing aided primary schools to apply on an annual basis for retaining their redundant teachers on the approved teaching staff establishment arising from class reduction due to the decline of P1 student population, up to a maximum of three school years, provided that these redundant teachers cannot be absorbed through the prevailing mechanism for handling redundant teachers or are unable to secure a teaching post in another school; and (b) starting from P1 in the 2019/20 school year, adjusting the basis for calculating the number of approved classes downward from the original 25 students to 23 students per class if aided and government primary schools have redundant teachers on the approved teaching staff establishment arising from class reduction based on the student headcount at the beginning of the school year. The adjusted basis will be extended progressively to P6 together with that cohort of students. In the 2021/22 school year, the relaxed criterion is applicable to P1 to P3 whereas for P4 to P6 the student headcount is still conducted on the basis of 25 students per class.

which included adopting the established netting arrangements for the SSPA, progressively reverting the S1 allocation class size to 34 students according to the number of places previously reduced³ upon the rebound of the S1 student population (“place reinstating”), and “operating additional S1 classes” in districts with a shortfall in school places even after adopting the netting arrangements and “place reinstating”, to ensure sufficient supply of S1 places every cycle to meet the demand. Whilst the “place reinstating” arrangement could be implemented in SSPA 2018 according to the projected overall demand and supply of S1 places, the EDB agreed to withhold the arrangement in SSPA 2018 to facilitate preparation of the sector, and then implemented an across-the-board “place reinstating” by one school place in SSPA 2019. Based on the latest projected demand for S1 places as of October 2019, we have reached a consensus with the sector to withhold the “place reinstating” arrangement in both SSPA 2020 and SSPA 2021, and implement an across-the-board “place reinstating” by one and two school places⁴ in SSPA 2022 and SSPA 2023 respectively, with a view to reverting the S1 allocation class size to 34 students, so as to meet the demand for S1 places in the 2024/25 school year.

8. Owing to different factors such as the demand and supply of school places in individual districts, parental choices and student mobility, some secondary schools may not be able to maintain their original class structures. In view of this, some of the targeted relief measures⁵ previously implemented for the temporary decline in secondary student population will continue until the 2024/25 school year.

Situation in the 2021/22 school year

9. As set out in Table 1 in paragraph 5, the final number of students participating in POA 2021 (i.e., admission to P1 in the 2021/22 school year) was 46 782, a decrease of 2 939 students (by about 5.9%) as compared to the

³ From the 2013/14 to 2015/16 school years, all public sector secondary schools adopted a district-/ school-based approach to reducing progressively the number of students allocated to each S1 class each year according to either the “1-1-1” or “2-1-1” proposal. That is, under the “1-1-1” proposal, one place per S1 class was reduced in the allocation each year to 31 students per class; and under the “2-1-1” proposal, two places were reduced in the first year and then one place each in the following two years to 30 students per class.

⁴ Schools adopted the “1-1-1” proposal will reinstate one place to 34 students per class in SSPA 2023.

⁵ The targeted relief measures implemented by the EDB from the 2013/14 school year include: reducing the basis for calculating the number of approved S1 classes to 25 students per class; relaxing the “not less than three S1 classes” requirement under which schools with two approved S1 classes are not required to apply for any school development options; and allowing schools with S1 classes reduced to one or two to participate in the next SSPA with a cap of three S1 classes.

corresponding number in POA 2020. The number of school nets adopting the arrangements of “temporarily allocating more students” and “borrowing school places” from neighbouring school nets decreased respectively as compared to POA 2020. As regards SSPA 2021 (i.e., admission to S1 in the 2021/22 school year), the total number of students participating in SSPA was 52 055, a decrease of 2 057 students (about 3.8%) as compared to the corresponding number in SSPA 2020.

10. According to the headcount on the actual student enrolment in schools conducted in mid-September, the EDB has adjusted the number of approved classes in individual public sector schools for the 2021/22 school year. Compared with the number of classes approved respectively in March and April this year, the number of P1 and S1 classes has been reduced by 15 and 8 respectively. In general, the number of approved classes is affected by various factors, and the adjusted figures often reflect the student population mobility, including relocation, parental choices (including transferring from public sector schools to Direct Subsidy Scheme or private/international schools), and the migration of students into and out of Hong Kong, etc. We will maintain close contact with schools concerned to provide relevant support.

Projected changes in future school-age population

11. According to the “Hong Kong Population Projections” released by the Census and Statistics Department in September 2020, the EDB projects that the school-age population aged six residing in Hong Kong in the next eight years (from 2022 to 2029) will decrease from 58 500 to 50 000. As for S1, it is estimated that the school-age population aged 12 residing in Hong Kong will decrease gradually from 69 500 in 2024 to 60 100 in 2029. The projected mid-year school-age population aged 6 and 12 from 2022 to 2029 (those age groups are considered appropriate for P1 and S1 education respectively from the 2022/23 to 2029/30 school years) is tabulated as follows -

Table 2: Projected Mid-year School-age Population Aged 6 and 12 Who are Residing in Hong Kong, 2022 – 2029 Years

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
School-age population aged 6	58 500	57 300	53 300	52 000	48 700	48 500	51 700	50 000
School-age population aged 12	63 100	71 600	69 500	60 000	57 800	62 700	61 000	60 100

Notes:

- (1) The projections of school-age population residing in Hong Kong are compiled based on the 2019-based Population Projections released by the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) in September 2020. The projections have taken into account a number of factors and assumptions. Any deviations in the assumptions from the eventual situation may render the projected figures different from the actual turnout figures.
- (2) School-age population aged 6 is considered appropriate for primary education (i.e. Primary 1), while school-age population aged 12 is considered appropriate for secondary education (i.e. Secondary 1).
- (3) Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

12. As seen from the above projections, the changes in future student population will be completely different from those in the past decade or so, and it is anticipated that the gradual decrease in future school-age population will not be transient but structural. In fact, the number of children ever born in Hong Kong has been on the downward trend from 2016 (60 856 newborns) to 2019 (52 856 newborns). The number reached the lowest level in 20 years in 2020 (43 031 newborns as compared with 46 965 in 2003) against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, we expect that there will be another significant decline in the population of P1 in 2026 and that of S1 in 2032. In addition, it remains uncertain whether and when the birth rate in Hong Kong will rebound after the pandemic. As the future school-age population will continue to drop, it is necessary to adjust the number of primary and secondary classes correspondingly. Moreover, the 2021 Population Census, which is currently in progress, will provide the latest demographic data on Hong Kong's population and help the EDB plan for future development.

School places allocation arrangements in the 2022 cycle

13. Regarding POA 2022, the preliminary number of applicants participating in POA will only be available after compiling the application results in respect of discretionary places in November. We will continue to

keep in view the situation of different school nets, and timely review the related arrangements of this year in accordance with the established mechanism. These include “operating additional P1 classes” and “borrowing school places” in individual school nets with insufficient school places, and reviewing the need of “temporarily allocating more students”. As for SSPA 2022, the EDB will continue to review the projected demand for school places based on the established framework of strategies and the latest data. Besides, the EDB will meet with the representatives of Hong Kong Subsidised Secondary Schools Council and the secondary school heads from the 18 districts in mid-October to discuss the arrangements of “place reinstating” and “operating additional S1 classes” having regard to the latest data.

Planning direction against the long-term changes in student population

14. Since the projected continuous decrease in school-age population is structural instead of transient, and the magnitude of decline may be greater than originally estimated, we need to plan ahead to formulate long-term measures to deal with the surplus of school places while transitional relief measures adopted in the past may no longer be appropriate. When working out the plans, interest of students has to be our prime concern. As a place for nurturing students, it is essential for schools to maintain an optimal size of student population for creating a conducive teaching and learning environment and providing opportunities for learning in groups, so as to meet the different learning and development needs of students while ensuring the quality of education. Taking secondary schools as an example, a small overall number of students will limit the choices of senior secondary elective subjects that can be offered in the school. This goes against the principle of the New Senior Secondary academic structure to provide students with a broad and balanced curriculum, so that they can select different elective subjects in different combinations to cater for their different learning needs and interests. On the other hand, the EDB has to make good use of the limited public resources to ensure that the education expenditure is used effectively in a targeted manner to provide quality education for our students.

15. In view of the above considerations, the EDB will adopt a multi-pronged approach in addressing the challenges posed by the structural changes in student population in the long term with details as follows -

- (a) The EDB, being the school sponsoring body of government schools, will lead by example and formulate long-term development plans for individual government schools, taking into account various factors including government policies, demographic changes, demand and supply of school places, overall development needs of government schools and utilisation of government resources. For example, in a bid to reduce the long-term surplus of school places in certain districts, the EDB, after considering the above factors, has decided to cease the operation of schools with persistent under-enrolment or relocate schools in districts with a relatively sizeable surplus of school places to districts with excessive demand for school places or New Development Areas which are expected to have a greater demand for school places in the future. In this connection, the EDB has arranged the orderly and gradual cessation of operation of the Island Road Government Primary School from the 2021/22 school year, and will relocate Shau Kei Wan East Government Secondary School to a new campus at the Anderson Road Quarry site in Sai Kung District in the 2026/27 school year with a view to minimising the impact of declining demand for school places in related school nets on schools in the area and setting an example for other school sponsoring bodies;
- (b) In maintaining close communication with the sector, the EDB hopes to encourage the sector to plan ahead to cope with the impact of a declining student population. In this connection, the EDB has commenced discussion with some school sponsoring bodies to cease the operation of schools in an orderly and gradual manner in individual districts with a substantial surplus in school places for a long period of time, or to apply for cross-district reprovisioning of the schools concerned to New Development Areas to cope with the demands;
- (c) In response to the changes in student population, the four time-limited primary schools operated to cope with the transient increase in P1 student population in the past will cease operation gradually in the coming years;
- (d) In view of the decline in student population, our school premises allocation exercises in the future will focus on the reprovisioning /expansion of school premises to improve the quality of school

premises;

- (e) At present, small class teaching (SCT) has been implemented in about 80% of the public sector primary schools in the territory. Where conditions permit and subject to the availability of resources, we will continue to roll out SCT implementation in public sector primary schools. Arrangements have been made by the EDB for 11 schools to start implementing SCT in the 2022/23 school year. Some members of the sector expect the EDB to fully implement SCT in all public sector primary schools, or even start implementing SCT in secondary schools, in order to address the problem that some schools may have to reduce their approved classes or even cease operation in response to the declining school-age population. It is noteworthy that SCT is a teaching strategy aiming at promoting students' learning effectiveness as well as enhancing learning and teaching, rather than an approach to address the decline in school-age population. We will continue to review the demand and supply of school places in individual school nets, whether there are sufficient vacant classrooms in the school nets to facilitate the operation of additional classes due to the full implementation of SCT within the nets, and the additional resources involved. We will also continue to maintain liaison with the public sector primary schools which have yet to implement SCT and their respective school sponsoring bodies, for the purpose of encouraging them to get prepared for early implementation of SCT where conditions permit. As for secondary schools, international studies have suggested that SCT is most effective when students are of a younger age but its effectiveness tends to wane with students' age. In this regard, we have no plan to implement SCT in secondary schools;
- (f) The EDB will, with the interest of students and the quality of learning and teaching as its prime consideration, review whether the relief measures implemented in primary and secondary schools mentioned above are still applicable when there is a continuous decline in student population in the future to ensure the proper use of education expenditure for the benefit of students;
- (g) The class size and the overall number of students in a secondary school cannot be too small, lest it may undermine group interaction and affect students' whole-person development. In addition, schools

may not be able to provide students with a broad and balanced curriculum under the New Senior Secondary academic structure. In view of the above, we will timely review the number of students allocated to each S1 class in 2025 and subsequent school years, criteria for approving classes and other related arrangements to address the structural situation of a long-term persistent decrease in demand for S1 places while ensuring the quality of education.

Conclusion

16. The EDB will continue to closely monitor the changes in student population and, having regard to the latest information and data, keep close communication with the sector and encourage the sector to plan ahead, with a view to ensuring the sustainable development of the school sector as a whole and effective use of resources while maintaining the quality of education and ensuring the sufficient provision of P1 and S1 places to meet the demand.

Education Bureau
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