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Dear Teachers,

All along, the Permanent Secretary and I have been meeting with frontline teachers and listening to their views and concern. We thank you for sharing so frankly with us your problems and needs. We believe that through frank and open dialogue, we may solve most of the problems.

Difficulties encountered by teachers

Our teachers are facing challenges on various fronts. Some arise from social changes, for example, the decline in birth rate, parents' high expectations of education, and the influence of social values and culture on students. Other challenges are more job-related: teachers have to adjust to the new curriculum and assessment mechanism, handle students with special education needs, and manage students' diversified learning needs. Our teachers have to face students and parents, and at the same time deal with school administration and personnel matters. Their job is complex and demanding.

This morning I had a meeting with several school councils. The atmosphere was constructive, positive and harmonious. We managed to reach consensus on various issues. Now I would like to announce a series of measures aimed at giving teachers some relief, so as to help them concentrate on teaching.

Increasing permanent posts to provide a stable working environment

Over the past few years the government has been providing additional resources to schools. But as there was uncertainty over our financial prospect, some of the resources could only be provided in the form of cash grants or on a time-limited basis. As a result, teachers are employed on contract terms, and may not have a sense of job security.

We therefore reviewed two popular and effective pilot schemes, and have decided to make them permanent. The teaching posts provided under the two schemes will become part of the school establishment.

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- Starting from the 2006/07 school year, the teaching posts created for specialised teaching in Chinese, English and Mathematics will be included in the permanent establishment of primary schools. At the same time, the teacher-to-class ratio of whole-day primary schools will be improved to 1.5 : 1. It will benefit even schools with less than 12 classes. This initiative will increase 660 permanent teaching posts.
- Since the 2002/03 school year, primary schools have been provided with curriculum leaders. It is a five-year plan, and a comprehensive review will be carried out in the next school year to consolidate experiences and disseminate good practices. We have now decided that these approximately 620 primary school curriculum leader teaching posts should be included in the permanent teaching establishment with effect from the 2007/08 school year.

Increasing manpower to enhance teaching and learning

We understand that teachers need more time and space to prepare lessons and attend to the needs of students, especially those who are less privileged. Therefore, we will further increase the number of teaching posts in schools. Schools can choose to reduce teaching periods or adjust the class size to achieve the best results for teaching and learning. Additional resources will also be provided for schools to employ more teaching or supporting staff to reduce the workload of teachers and enable them to concentrate on teaching.

- With effect from the next school year, the manning ratio of student guidance (SG) service for primary students will be improved, from the original one SG personnel per 24 classes to one SG personnel per 18 classes. In this way, all primary schools will receive one form of SG support or another. The number of schools provided with one full-time SG officer/teacher or a whole unit of the SG Service Grant will increase to 330.
- As for secondary schools, a measure to provide greater support for academic low achievers will be implemented at junior secondary levels over a period of three years from the next school year. Additional teachers will be provided to enhance the class-to-teacher ratio, from 1 : 1.3 to 1 : 2 for the weakest 10% students; and to 1 : 1.6 for the rest of the Band 3 students. This will lead to an increase of 730 permanent teaching posts.
- We have recently provided an additional \$1.65 billion to increase the Capacity Enhancement Grant (CEG) for primary and secondary schools for a period of three years, up to the end of the 2007/08 school year. With immediate effect, we will turn the basic provision of CEG, amounting to around \$450 million a year, into a recurrent grant.

Streamlining procedures to reduce workload

I understand that some teachers are concerned about the extra workload arising from the various additional resources. As a matter of fact, we have introduced school-based management to give schools greater flexibility in the deployment of resources. We have also, by way of legislation, ensured that teachers have direct participation in the decision making process. We hope schools will strengthen their internal communication so that there is consensus on the use of resources. Additional resources are meant to enhance teachers' capacity. We have also streamlined funding procedures to reduce paper work. For example, the CEG is made a block grant, so that schools do not have to submit applications for each item.

With the heavy investment in education, it is natural that the community has high expectations of the quality and effectiveness of teaching. There will also be increasing demand for schools to enhance their transparency and accountability. I fully understand the teachers' wish to be able to concentrate on teaching and to take up less clerical and administrative work. We will review the relevant policies and administrative arrangements.

- We will simplify the requirements of school-based assessment for the Chinese and English language subjects in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in 2007. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority will strengthen support and training for teachers to help them prepare for the assessment. The Authority will consult frontline teachers before finalising specific implementation plans in mid-April.
- The Territory-wide System Assessment will be extended to Secondary 3 this year. We will conduct a full review of the assessment arrangements in the 2006/07 school year, having regard to the experiences in the past three years. We hope to identify ways to improve the existing administrative arrangements, including the assessment cycle.
- Self-evaluation supplemented with External School Review (ESR) can help promote self-improvement and sustainable development. The first cycle of ESR will be completed within the next one or two years. We will then conduct a comprehensive review on its overall effectiveness, including the review cycle, before we finalise the implementation details. The second cycle of ESR will not be conducted before the 2008/09 school year. Meanwhile, we will further improve the existing arrangements of ESR in the middle of this year, for example, by simplifying the assessment indicators so that schools yet to have their ESR will also benefit.

- The Quality Education Fund (QEF) is well received with as many as 1 000 applications every year. We will consult the QEF Steering Committee to further streamline the vetting procedures and to accept QEF applications on a year-round basis. In this way, teachers will not be required to rush to meet deadlines. We would also urge the school authorities to take teachers' workload into consideration before applying for the Fund.

The above initiatives will create a total of 2 800 permanent teaching posts, half of which are new posts. The recurrent expenditures involved amount to about \$1.76 billion. I hope that this will provide teachers with a stable working environment and give them the opportunity to concentrate on teaching, which will help sustain school development.

In the meantime, the Committee on Teachers' Work, chaired by Professor Edmond Ko, is conducting an in-depth study of the arrangement and management of teachers' work, with a view to identifying improvement measures. I hope that frontline teachers will not hesitate to come forward to reflect their views and let the Committee know the current situation. This will facilitate the Committee in putting forward specific recommendations for improvement within this year.

Thanks to all teachers who have devoted time and effort to teaching over the years, our education reform is bearing fruit. Your efforts are not in vain. Students, parents and everyone in the community appreciate your efforts and are ready to support your work. As Secretary for Education and Manpower, I will do my best to give you the support you need, so that you can concentrate on providing quality education to our younger generation.

Looking ahead, the Education and Manpower Bureau will strengthen direct communication with our frontline teachers to establish a harmonious working relationship. With mutual trust, let us work together for a better future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arthur K C LI'. The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial 'A' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

(Arthur K C LI)

Secretary for Education and Manpower