

**Study on the Effectiveness
of
Public-sector Secondary Schools (Phase 2)**

Cross Case Report

Research Team

on Study on the Effectiveness of Public-sector Secondary Schools

(Phase 2)

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Study on the Effectiveness of Public-sector Secondary Schools (Phase 2)

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Executive Summary

In Phase 1 of the research study, which was conducted by the Education Department (ED), the main task had been to identify a number of effective schools in Hong Kong. Schools were identified on the basis of the following criteria: value-added academic results; District Education Officers' nominations; survey results on students' attitude and self-concept, perceptions of principals, teachers and students on students' participation in extra-curricular activities; and reports on the affective and social outcomes of students available from the records of various ED sections. The criteria, therefore, embraced academic, social and affective aspects of schooling. Based on the criteria, the Education Department identified six schools with very different contextual backgrounds as "effective" (*Section 1.1 Background of the study*).

In Phase 2, a Research Team from Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research and the Faculty of Education of the Chinese University of Hong Kong undertook to identify the characteristics that underlie school effectiveness in the six schools, to study the processes leading to the development of these characteristics, to make recommendations on how school effectiveness could be enhanced, and to identify the roles and functions of different stakeholders in facilitating the enhancement of school effectiveness. Such factors do not operate independently on their own. They interact with one another in a context unique to each case school to enhance effectiveness (*Section 5.8 The nature of school development: a holistic dynamic process*).

The research methodology adopted in Phase 2 involved a case study approach designed to capture a wide range of data in each of the six case study schools. The case study research was mainly qualitative but was supplemented by quantitative measures. Data were collected in two distinct time periods each lasting approximately one week. Questionnaires were prepared and on-site observations and interviews were conducted with the representatives of each stakeholder group in each of the six schools (*Section 3 The research design and process*).

The six case study schools were found to have more dissimilarities than similarities (*Section 4 Cross-cutting themes providing the basis for examining what*

appears to be the possible effective factors). Much of this was due to differences in terms of gender, ideology, location and student intake. The schools used a variety of different strategies and processes adapted to their particular attributes and context. Each school had its own way of operating, with its own people, goals, motivational patterns, leadership style, etc. One school, for example, sought to maintain uniformity and a harmonious family atmosphere, while another deliberately encouraged diversity of opinion. One school was observed to encourage student responsibility and self-discipline, while another adopted a more protective and controlling stance towards the students. Each school thus had its own way of working. Processes within the various schools were carefully observed, analysed, compared and contrasted (*Section 5.6 Uniqueness*).

Since the processes at work in these schools were so diverse and dependent on context and ideology, it is important to state that no instant recipe for effectiveness has emerged which can be applied universally. Nevertheless, some common features across all six schools were found – namely: strong leadership from the principal, strong staff commitment, and a stable teaching team (*Section 5.7 Common characteristics in the six case study schools*). There was firm leadership in each school. This seemed to create a favourable working environment for teachers and it provided a clear direction for school development, so that teachers were able to focus on providing learning experiences, support and feedback adapted to the needs of their students. Principals tended to recruit staff carefully in line with the culture of their school and to nurture them well so that they stayed and developed into a stable and experienced team. Some principals gave teachers a high degree of autonomy, which enabled them to grow professionally through exercising their professional expertise and judgement. Many teachers in the six schools clearly derived a strong sense of satisfaction from their work and were highly committed to it. It seemed that this was an important characteristic underpinning effectiveness.

All six schools attempted to place greater emphasis than before on the social and affective domains without neglecting academic studies, particularly those schools with an intake from the lower academic ability group (*Section 4.3 Focus on learning*). There was a strong focus on student self-esteem and sense of achievement in these schools, and extra-curricular activities within which all-round talents and personal development could be fostered were being actively developed.

The findings of the research study indicated that the majority of stakeholders in these six schools were ready and capable of taking up the challenge of improving school effectiveness. One constraint, however, was that a number of older teachers seemed to have lost their enthusiasm, and that many teachers felt overwhelmed and at times stressed by the workload, including excessive extra administration, brought upon them as a result of having to participate in a plethora of educational reforms, all launched more or less at the same time. The findings suggested that schools would have to pace reform carefully, and that Government must find extra human and financial resources to relieve the pressure of mounting workload (*Section 6.1 Implications for policy makers*). Other findings revealed that the planning and coordination of whole-school curriculum change in the six schools were generally weak. In addition, more and better staff development was required at all levels.

Teaching and learning lies at the heart of a school. However, observations in the six schools revealed that teaching and learning in most classrooms was still mainly in the mode of students “being told” what to think by teachers and textbooks, and teachers checking learning outcomes through closed questions and tests. Though some group work, discussion, project work and open-ended interaction between teacher and students were observed (*Section 4.2 Teaching and teaching effectiveness*), in most of the six schools more attention would need to be placed on self-directed investigation and learning and other task-based work, independent student practice, quality classroom interaction, differentiation, the use of a variety of teaching techniques and improvements to the physical characteristics of the classroom (*Section 6.2 Implications for practitioners in schools*).

While school cultures were very different across the six schools, each was positive and provided a disciplined teaching and learning climate (*Section 4.4 Generating a positive school climate*). However, all of the schools still had some way to go before developing the characteristics of a learning organisation practising and fostering lifelong learning for all of its stakeholders, teachers as well as students (*Section 6.2 Implications for practitioners in schools*).

The findings indicated that some schools did not pay much attention to monitoring the performance and progress of the school itself. Monitoring in most

schools was limited to looking at student academic results at departmental level (*Section 4.7 Monitoring progress at all levels*). It would seem that the six schools have not moved very far as yet towards self-evaluation and school-based management advocated in Education Commission Report No 7 and elsewhere (*Section 6.2 Implications for practitioners in schools*).

Findings revealed that the leadership styles of the principals and other members of the school management team varied greatly in the six schools, but that all of them were effective in their own way (*Section 5.7.1 Strong leadership of the principal*). Each principal adopted an approach suited to personality, ideological stance, school culture and context. Each approach had its own strengths and weaknesses. It is hoped that those involved in the professional development of school leaders will find the insights emerging from this study of value to them in their work (*Section 6.2 Implications for practitioners in schools*).

Findings in a few schools indicated that student empowerment (i.e. the giving of responsibility to students in learning and behaviour) was advantageous (*Section 4.6 Emphasising student responsibilities and rights*). In these schools the promotion of student empowerment seemed to bring about a better balance between telling the students what to think and do and giving them opportunities to develop their own views, knowledge and behavioural patterns (*Section 6.2 Implications for other stakeholders*).

In brief, the study has indicated some of the characteristics and processes that underpin school effectiveness in these six schools, and it is hoped that these findings will be of use to those engaged in working towards school improvement. It has also hinted at some of the interrelationships among the factors discussed. The associations that have been drawn among these factors, however, remain tentative. More follow-up studies are required to explore causality and test out hypotheses (*Section 7.3 Unresolved issues and future research directions*).