

For discussion on 29 February 2008

LegCo Panel on Education

Small Class Teaching in Public Sector Primary Schools

Purpose

This paper reports the progress of our preparation for the implementation of small class teaching (SCT) in public sector primary schools.

Background

2. The Chief Executive has announced in his 2007 Policy Address that the Government will implement SCT in public-sector (i.e. government and aided) primary schools by phases, starting from the cohort of Primary One students in the 2009/10 school year and extending to all classes from Primary One to Primary Six by the 2014/15 school year.

3. In implementing SCT, we need to take into account practical circumstances, as well as the wishes and needs of schools, parents and students. It would not be possible to implement SCT in every single public sector primary school with effect from the 2009/10 school year as there would probably be insufficient classrooms to meet the demand for school places in certain school nets. We also need to ensure an adequate supply of trained teachers to support this policy initiative. Hence, we should be pragmatic and flexible with implementation, including giving schools the option of using alternative school-based measures to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

4. Along the above policy direction, schools not opting for small classes will be allocated students on the basis of 30 students per class. For schools which have indicated their readiness to implement SCT i.e. using 25 students per class as the basis for school places allocation, but are located in school nets where we would be expecting a shortfall of classrooms to meet projected demand, we may not be able to entertain their preference from as early as the 2009/10 school year. We will explore ways to resolve the problem and consider how we could assist schools in taking forward school-based measures that would enhance the quality of teaching and learning pending SCT.

5. The objective of small class teaching is to improve the quality of teaching and learning through a reduction in class size. In this regard, we intend to impose an enrolment cap to complement the policy on SCT.

Progress

6. In the past few months, we have obtained returns from our public sector primary schools on their readiness to progressively implement SCT from the 2009/10 school year. We have also thrashed out the proposed details regarding the approach for examining the feasibility of SCT in individual school nets, the interim support for schools which are not able to implement SCT and the enrolment cap. We have conducted a series of consultation sessions in December 2007 and January 2008 to gather views from stakeholders (including schools councils, educational bodies, teacher unions, school sponsoring bodies, parent representatives and primary schools) on such implementation issues. The views received and our response are set out in paragraphs 7 to 18 below.

Readiness of schools to implement SCT

7. Out of 463 public sector primary schools participating in the current cycle of the POA, 323 schools or 70% have confirmed their readiness to implement SCT with effect from the P1 cohort in the 2009/10 school year, i.e. they would like to adopt the class size of 25 for admission of students under the Primary One Admission System (POA) beginning that year. For the rest of the schools which have indicated their intention to admit students under the POA on the basis of 30 students per class, a considerable number have so preferred because they want longer lead time to prepare for the change.

8. A school will not be given the option of reverting back to 30 students per class once it has opted for implementation of SCT, as such switching to and fro would create confusion and compromise the efforts put in by the Government, the schools and their teachers in planning for SCT. On the other hand, schools which have opted to remain in larger classes are welcome to come forward for SCT any time.

9. Parents generally welcome the offer of flexibility for individual schools to remain in 30 students per class. On the other hand, some stakeholders, particularly school managements, have suggested that SCT should be made mandatory so long as supply of school places in the school net concerned would not be a problem. The suggestion is mainly premised upon the worry that individual schools adopting “larger” class size would be labeled as popular schools and that schools implementing SCT would lose out to these schools in student admission. We do not think that these are sufficient reasons for the Government to overturn its announced policy direction. Our considerations are as follows –

- (a) Over the years there has been wide support within the community and the school sector for implementation of SCT in our primary schools. We have always expected that the majority of schools would support the initiative. We are also reasonably optimistic that the minority who do not wish to implement SCT from 2009/10 for various school-based reasons would in due course join the rest of the sector.

- (b) The worry over possible labeling effect is academic. In fact, even under the present regime, schools may opt for a standard class size of 32 or 37 (to be revised respectively to 30 or 35 in the 2008/09 school year). The majority of schools have opted for 32 (or 30 in the 2008/09 school year) but obviously labeling has not been a concern (nor is such labeling apparent). After all, parents form their impression of schools on the basis of many factors and the popularity of a school is usually established over a period of time. Even if all schools were to implement SCT at the same time, parents would still have their own perception of which are to them the more popular schools. Furthermore, if schools implementing SCT could indeed make use of the small class environment to improve teaching and learning, they should, all things being comparable, have a competitive edge over schools which do not practise SCT.

The approach for assessing whether SCT is feasible for individual schools

10. In assessing whether SCT could be implemented in a school net, we will take into account the projected demand and supply of school places. The projected supply will have regard to the schools' preference and readiness to operate in small classes and their physical capacity. As it takes 6 years to realize the full-year effect of SCT for the first cohort of students across Primary One to Six, we see it appropriate to conduct an assessment of the supply and

demand of places in each school net for a six-year period beginning 2009/10. For school nets with anticipated shortage of classes during the six-year period, we will assess the scope for addressing the shortfall through borrowing school places from adjacent school nets with surplus, as well as consulting individual schools in the relevant net on possible increases in the number of classes through changes in the use of rooms or minor conversion works which could be delivered in the short term. Where the shortfall cannot be addressed in the short term, it is possible that some or all schools in the net may have to remain in larger classes for the time being. For these school nets, we will, as a longer term measure, consider plans for school building and/or revisions to the delineation among school nets.

11. For some school nets which could afford implementation of SCT by some but not all schools wishing to practise SCT, we propose that priority be given to -

- (a) schools which are participating in the SCT Study and SCT Scheme in Schools with High Concentration of Disadvantaged Pupils (the SCT Scheme), so as to sustain the SCT development in these schools to facilitate the dissemination of experience and good practice to other schools;
- (b) schools with a relatively higher concentration of disadvantaged students but are not currently participating in the SCT Scheme, as research findings have revealed that SCT has more significant effects on pupils with weak family support; and
- (c) schools with a relatively larger number of newly-arrived children / non-Chinese speaking children / children with special educational needs.

Stakeholders are generally receptive to our suggested approach for assessing feasibility and for facilitating the implementation of SCT in school nets with projected shortfall of classrooms.

Additional resources for schools maintaining 30 students per class

12. We have proposed the offer of additional resources to those schools which are prepared to implement SCT but could not do so due to practical constraints. This is meant to be an interim measure to facilitate the deployment of measures by these schools to improve teaching and learning pending the transition to SCT.

13. In our consultation with the stakeholders,, we have proposed that schools operating 2 approved classes or more with class size of 30 at each grade level (excluding classes operated under the Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme) will be granted additional resources in the form of additional Assistant Primary School Master (APSM) posts to be provided over a six-year period by phases, according to the total number of operating classes in Primary One to Primary Six:

- ◆ Two additional APSM posts for schools operating 12 – 23 classes
- ◆ Three additional APSM posts for schools operating 24 – 35 classes
- ◆ Four additional APSM posts for schools operating 36 classes or more

14. The schools should be responsible for phasing out the additional teachers which would become surplus when they practise SCT eventually, or in case of reduction of classes or their having an actual average enrolment of 25 per class or less for consecutive cohorts of students despite their announced class size of 30 students per class (i.e. the school is de facto implementing SCT).

15. Stakeholders generally welcome the proposed offer of additional resources to these schools which are willing but could not implement SCT due to projected shortfall in school places for the school nets concerned. Views are divided, however, on whether the same additional resources should be offered to the other schools which do not wish to implement SCT. Some are concerned that the offer may become an incentive for these schools to maintain a class size of 30 and therefore go against the policy direction of promoting (though not mandating) SCT. After all, these schools have preferred to maintain the status quo out of their own volition. On the other hand, some have suggested that for those schools which do not wish to implement SCT but would like to explore other means for improving teaching and learning, the Government should be more open-minded and should facilitate such an attempt by offering the schools concerned with the same additional resources. On balance, for the interests of students, we are inclined to offer the proposed additional resources to all schools remaining in larger classes of 30 students each, provided that the schools have drawn up concrete plans for improving teaching and learning with the additional resources to be provided.

Enrolment cap

16. At present, primary schools can admit students at their discretion up to the maximum accommodation capacity for a classroom, which is 40-45 per class depending on the permitted accommodation of individual schools, outside the POA system which allocates 32 or 37 per class in 2007/08 (and 30 or 35 per class in 2008/09).

17. In our consultation with the stakeholders, we have proposed an enrolment cap at 10% above the approved class size from the 2009/10 school

year. This would mean capping at 27 per class for schools opting for SCT (25 per class x 110%, rounded down) and 33 (30 per class x 110%) for those with class size of 30. Given the policy direction of promoting 25 students per class, we are prepared to consider further reduction in the buffer in future, after the school sector and parents have adjusted to the changes now proposed and taking into account the actual situation of “over-enrolment” after the gradual implementation of SCT from 2009/10 onwards.

18. Both the school sector and the parent community welcome the continued provision of a buffer that would allow a certain degree of flexibility for admissions outside POA. While a buffer of two to three places per class is generally accepted, some in the school sector have suggested that the Government should reduce the number of students to be allocated under POA to 23 (for those in SCT) or 28 (for those in “larger” classes) so that the enrolment cap would not exceed 25 or 30 respectively after including the buffer. We have difficulties acceding to this request as it would be tantamount to a request for a further reduction in the standard class size from 25 to 23 across the board and would have resource implications for the Government. It will also exacerbate the pressure on infrastructure following the implementation of SCT. We also note that parents generally welcome the Government’s proposal to cap at 27 or 33.

Way Forward

19. For the next few months, we will proceed with our assessment into the situation of each school net. Where necessary, we will explore into any short-term mitigating measures in consultation with stakeholders in the relevant school nets (paragraphs 10 and 11 above), with a view to facilitating as far as possible implementation of SCT for those schools which have indicated

readiness. We aim to confirm around June 2008 the class size for each school for the 2009 POA and thereafter so that schools could prepare for commencement of the 2009 POA process accordingly. The projections on supply and demand of primary school places will be rolled over annually for continuous assessment on the feasibility of SCT for individual school nets.

20. For schools which will not be operating in small classes from 2009/10, we will offer interim support on an application basis (paragraph 15). We will also implement the proposed enrolment cap for all public sector primary schools beginning from the P1 cohort in 2009/10 (paragraph 17).

21. SCT should not simply involve a sheer reduction in class size. In the coming months, we will draw up plans for the professional development of teachers and the provision of school-based support to help schools make best use of the reduction in class size to enhance teaching and learning. In this regard, we have started initial discussions with the teacher training institutions and will take into account their views as well as the recommendations of the SCT Study to be completed later in the year when developing the plans. We will also finalise plans for the creation of time-limited posts to support schools in their preparation for SCT.

Other issues for further consideration

22. With the implementation of SCT, ordinary schools will have more capacity to enhance the learning effectiveness of students with special educational needs. As regards the class size for special schools, different types of special schools have already been operating in small classes ranging from 8 to 20 students per class. Such class sizes have been set with reference to the circumstances of students in the different types of special schools. We have

nonetheless been reviewing the class sizes of the different categories of special schools with regard to their practical needs and will further discuss with stakeholders in the coming months.

Education Bureau
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