

Minutes of Twenty-ninth Meeting of the Children's Rights Forum

Date : 3 March 2017 (Friday)
Time : 5:15 p.m.
Venue : Committee Rooms I to III,
Queen Elizabeth Stadium,
18 Oi Kwan Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong

Attendance:

Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau

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| 1) Mr D. C. CHEUNG (Acting Chairperson) | Principal Assistant Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs |
| 2) Mr Michael YAU | Assistant Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs |
| 3) Miss Ellen CHOW | Assistant Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs |

Non-government organisations

Representatives

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| 1) Against Child Abuse | Ms Wanda HAU |
| 2) Amazing Room for Stories | Ms MOK Loi-yan |
| 3) Centre for Governance and Citizenship, The Education University of Hong Kong | Dr Gail YUEN |
| 4) Hong Kong Committee for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) | Ms Joanne LAI
Mr NG Man-hin |
| | <u>UNICEF Young Envoys Club and Voices of Youth</u>
Abby LEUNG
CHUNG Cho-kiu
Coco WONG
CHAN Ying-yi
CHEUNG Tik-ki |
| 5) Hong Kong Committee on Children's Rights | Ms Angela LEE
Ms Billy WONG
Miss Shirley WONG |
| 6) Kids' Dream | Emma CHAU |
| 7) Justice Centre Hong Kong | Ms Chloe MARTIN
Ms Imelda LEUNG |

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| 8) | Hong Kong Student Aid Society Limited | Ms YIP Shuk-yin |
| 9) | Hong Kong Unison | Ms Phyllis CHEUNG
Ms Akbar Shabana |
| 10) | Society for Community Organisation | Ms SZE Lai-shan
Ms Elkie CHU

<u>Children's Rights Association</u>
YEUNG Nga-ching
FUNG Pui-man |
| 11 | The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong | Mr Francis MA
Ms Reann LAU |

Attendance by Invitation:

Discussion Item

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| 1) | Mrs CHAN SIU Suk-fan | Principal Education Officer (Kindergarten Education), Education Bureau |
| 2) | Mr WONG Wing-ming | Senior Education Officer (Kindergarten Special Duty), Education Bureau |
| 3) | Ms Doris PONG | Education Officer (Kindergarten Special Duty), Education Bureau |

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The acting Chairperson welcomed representatives of non-government organisations ("NGOs") and children representatives to the meeting.
- 1.2 As suggested by children representatives and in line with the arrangement of the previous meetings, future discussions at the Forum would be conducted in a group setting. Following the briefing given by the representative of the Education Bureau ("EDB"), attendees would be divided into two groups for group discussion.

2. Discussion item

Free Quality Kindergarten Education (Paper No. CRF 1/2017)

- 2.1 2.1.1 The acting Chairperson invited the representative of EDB to brief the meeting on free quality kindergarten ("KG") education.
- 2.1.2 Ms PONG gave a brief account of the paper (Paper No. CRF 1/2017) as follows:

- 2.1.3 At present, there were more than 1 000 KGs in Hong Kong. The KG sector was characterised by a high level of flexibility in operation, diversity and vibrancy. KGs provided different modes of services, such as whole-day and half-day services, and flexibly responded to the changing needs of society. The objectives of KG education were to lay the foundation of lifelong learning and foster in children an inquisitive mind; an interest in learning and exploration; a balanced development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics; a healthy self-concept; and the ability and confidence to adapt to the ever-changing world.
- 2.1.4 The Government would implement the free quality KG education policy starting from the 2017/18 school year. The policy objectives were to provide good quality and highly affordable KG education, and enhance the accessibility of students to different modes of services that suited their specific needs. The Government's annual recurrent expenditure on pre-primary education was estimated to increase from the current level of about \$4 billion to about \$6.7 billion. Starting from the 2017/18 school year, eligible local non-profit-making KGs would be provided with a basic subsidy for the provision of three-year quality half-day services for all eligible children. It was estimated that about 70% to 80% of subsidised half-day KG places would be free-of-charge. In addition, EDB would also provide an additional subsidy for students enrolled in eligible whole-day and long whole-day KGs. Besides, school-specific grants such as rental subsidy, premises maintenance grant, grant for a cook, grant for support to non-Chinese speaking ("NCS") students would also be provided to cater for the special circumstances of individual KGs.
- 2.1.5 Under the Free Quality KG Education Scheme, the quality of KG education would be enhanced in various aspects, including improving the teacher-pupil ratio and encouraging KGs to establish a career ladder and provide competitive remuneration. Ms PONG advised that the requirement in teacher-pupil ratio would be raised from the current 1:15 to 1:11 to strengthen support for students with diverse needs. As for the career ladder, a three-level teaching staff structure with a principal, senior teachers and class teachers was considered appropriate for KGs. For some KGs, a vice-principal might be needed to assist the principal in overseeing the school administration, curriculum development and operation matters. EDB would also provide a salary range for each position of teaching staff and KGs could remunerate their teaching staff reasonably having regard to factors such as qualifications, experience, performance and duties of individual staff members. This would ensure competitiveness and flexibility for KG management to determine the remuneration of their staff.
- 2.1.6 Ms PONG further advised that EDB had reviewed the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum, taking into consideration the experience of learning and teaching in KGs and societal needs; EDB would also refine the Quality Assurance Framework, enhance governance and transparency of KGs and step up the Government's monitoring efforts.

- 2.1.7 Taking into account the diverse needs of students, EDB would strengthen support for students through various measures. Students from needy families would be provided fee remission and an additional grant. To provide support for NCS students, KGs admitting eight or more NCS students would be provided with a grant for enhancing support for their NCS students. In addition, EDB would facilitate early identification of students with diverse learning needs and provision of support to these students at schools through various measures such as improving the teacher-pupil ratio and strengthening training programmes for teachers. Other measures to improve the quality of KG education included enhancing parent engagement and parent education, such as encouraging parents to have a better understanding of the developmental needs of their children. In the long run, EDB would improve school premises and facilities, and explore feasible measures to increase the provision of KG premises.
- 2.1.8 Ms PONG then gave a brief account of the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (“the Guide”) issued in 2017. The aims of KG curriculum were to nurture children to attain a balanced development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics; develop good living habits and healthy body; foster an interest in learning and an inquisitive mind; develop their interest in exploration, positive values and attitudes.
- 2.1.9 Ms PONG said that there were diversities in children’s characters, abilities, interests, pace of development, languages, cultures and living habits. As such, teachers should understand the individual needs of children and provide support as appropriate. Teachers could draw reference from the proposed strategies set out in the Guide to cater for children’s diversities and promote an inclusive culture. On support for NCS students to learn Chinese, the Guide advocated diversified learning and teaching strategies to enhance students’ interest in learning. EDB would also organise professional development programmes for teachers and provide school-based support services to enhance teachers’ knowledge and competence in teaching NCS students. On promoting the interface between KGs and primary schools, the Guide provided specific suggestions to KGs, primary schools and parents. To avoid unnecessary pressure and drilling, the Guide set out clearly that KGs should not ask K1 children to use pens/pencils for writing, and should not assign mechanical copying and calculation exercises to K2 and K3 children.
- 2.1.10 EDB would provide relevant information on parent education through different means, such as uploading parent education video clips and parent pamphlets onto the website, organising talks for parents, etc.
- 2.1.11 The acting Chairperson thanked Ms PONG for the briefing. To meet the needs of ethnic minority attendees, the acting Chairperson invited attendees and children representatives to divide into two groups to conduct discussions in English and Chinese respectively.

2.2 Comments and questions on free quality KG education put forward by attendees and children representatives, as well as responses from the representative of EDB were as follows (Group 1):

- 2.2.1 An attendee held that it would be difficult for schools to follow the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide 2017 ("the Guide") issued by EDB. With too much homework, it would be difficult to foster children's balanced developments. The attendee recommended EDB to issue a specific set of guidelines on the transition from KG to primary one as many students found it very difficult to cope with the homework and adapt to the mode of learning when they enter primary one.
- 2.2.2 A children representative applauded EDB's measure to improve the teacher-pupil ratio such that teachers would be able to address individual needs. The children representative also recommended EDB to make available more resources to take care of students with special educational needs. The children representative also acknowledged the importance to retain quality teachers. In the light of recent student suicidal incidents, the children representative was of the view that intensive sensory playing should be introduced into the curriculum of KG education. In this way, students would be better equipped to overcome social and interpersonal issues.
- 2.2.3 A children representative asked whether EDB had measures in place to ensure KGs' compliance with the Guide and how EDB provided support to KG teachers. He/she was also concerned as to whether extra resources would be provided to prepare for students' transition to primary one.
- 2.2.4 An attendee asked whether EDB had provided subsidies to support NCS students. He/she also shared with the meeting that his/her child who had studied in a local mainstream KG for three years only to find that his/her child could not write in Chinese. The attendee agreed that the transition from KG to primary one was a huge jump. He/she was concerned that his/her child would be forced to change to a designated school in light of the pressure and difficulties his/her child faced at school. The attendee lamented the lack of support from the community despite his/her eagerness to integrate into society.
- 2.2.5 An attendee called for education for all in expressing his/her concern over the admission system of KGs. He/she commented that the needs of students with special educational needs and NCS students had been overlooked and that more bilingual information should be made available. The attendee also shared the concern with regards to adherence to the Guide in respect of the prohibition of mechanical copying. He/she also recommended EDB to offer grants to schools which admit NCS students on a per head basis, in line with the funding to students with special educational needs. The attendee was of the view that teachers' training on cultural sensitivity was of utmost importance.

- 2.2.6 An attendee said that KG students were in their golden years to learn. He/she expressed her concern over refugees' children's admissibility to education in Hong Kong. He/she noted the difficulties these children faced such as emotional problems and the lack of financial resources for textbooks. An attendee took the view that education was crucial to the holistic development of a child. He/she lamented the difficulties of getting admitted to KGs when the student was being identified as a student with special educational needs. He/she also commented that schools did not have sufficient resources to address the needs of these students. The attendee applauded EDB's effort in making the prohibition on using pens/pencils for writing and copying more specifically in the Guide.
- 2.2.7 A children representative appreciated EDB's effort in prohibiting the use of pens/pencils for writing and copying. He/she also recalled his/her unpleasant experience with mechanical copying and dictation when he/she was young. The children representative championed project-based learning as this mode of learning would equip students with problem-solving and interpersonal skills which were essential skill sets in modern society.
- 2.2.8 An attendee was concerned as to how the current curriculum could make learning joyful. He/she took the view that there should be a change of approach in handling the same issues that were handled two decades ago. The attendee noted that both the Free Quality KG Education Scheme and the Guide would run in parallel in the 2017/18 school year and recommended to have them implemented in phases to ensure stability and a smooth transition. In addition, he/she was concerned over how to ensure that the teacher-pupil ratio was to be capped at 1:11 and how to strengthen training and development of teaching staff.
- 2.2.9 A children representative raised the issue of difficulties faced by students with special educational needs in access to On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services ("OPRS"). From his/her observation, it took at least a 6 to 9-month wait before a student was eligible for assessment to join OPRS. He/she also urged the setting up of more Special Child Care Centres to alleviate the situation.
- 2.2.10 In response to the questions and concerns of children representatives and attendees, Ms SIU grouped her responses into three major parts, i.e. admission to KG curriculum guide and students with special needs. Ms SIU noted that there had been progressive improvements in KGs' awareness of equal opportunities in handling admission. KGs were required by the Government to offer support to NCS students as far as possible, such as arranging interpretation services for these students or allowing parents to be accompanied by other persons who could offer assistance at interviews.
- 2.2.11 An attendee questioned why interviews were needed. A children representative also shared the same concern. He/she observed that

students faced keen competition as early as the KG stage. Ms SIU responded that KGs could better understand the needs of children through interviews, and that could provide reference for KGs to deploy resources to cater for the needs of students.

- 2.2.12 An attendee shared his/her experience that students were denied entry to KGs as KGs lacked manpower to take care of students with special educational needs. He/she recommended EDB to offer subsidies for KGs to strengthen their manpower.
- 2.2.13 Ms SIU responded to the attendee's concerns on the implementation of the Guide. EDB officers would understand the implementation of the curriculum in KGs through school visits, inspections and lesson observations. If the curriculum of a KG was found incommensurate with the abilities and developmental needs of children, EDB would request the KG to make improvements and stop the improper arrangement.
- 2.2.14 An attendee queried about actions parents could take when students were denied admission to a KG on grounds of ethnicity. Ms SIU advised that KGs had been reminded through guidelines and briefings that admission arrangements should be fair, just and open, and in compliance with the four anti-discrimination ordinances (including the Race Discrimination Ordinance). If specific details of relevant cases were available, parents could contact EDB for follow-up. The attendee further queried about asylum seekers' children's entry to KGs. Ms SIU responded that asylum seekers' children were eligible for admission to KG upon obtaining approval of the Director of Immigration.
- 2.2.15 Ms SIU further explained that EDB would conduct inspections and quality reviews which examine the overall school performance, including compliance with the Guide. Drawing on past experience, KGs would generally take on the advice given by EDB after school inspection and quality review, and make improvements as appropriate. On the other hand, parents, KGs and primary schools should make concerted efforts to address students' developmental needs and promote the well-being and joyful learning of students so as to develop their interest in learning.
- 2.2.16 An attendee concurred that drilling should be viewed holistically with reference to the whole education system. He/she shared his/her observation that drilling in KG was directly linked to the pressure to get KG students ready for primary one. The attendee also doubted whether the Finnish school system, such as forest schools, was suitable for Hong Kong students as students might experience a difficult transition from KG to primary one were the Finnish system adopted. Nevertheless, the attendee had reservation as to the effectiveness of EDB's measures without any legal intervention. An attendee took the view that compliance might be strengthened if warnings to KGs were disclosed to the public.
- 2.2.17 Ms SIU said that K1 students were developing their fine motor skills and they were not ready for using pens/pencils for writing. Requiring these

students to write might adversely affect their developments or even result in their losing of interest in learning. At KG stage, children should be encouraged to learn through play and exploration.

- 2.2.18 A children representative asked if EDB would consider offering special funding to support the implementation of special programmes such as drawing programmes. Ms SIU responded that KGs should consider the needs of students, and make reference to the curriculum guide, to offer appropriate programmes (including those in arts) for developing students' abilities and skills, as well as catering for their diversities.
- 2.2.19 An attendee expressed his/her concerns over the compact learning environment in Hong Kong. Play is discouraged as KGs were ill-equipped for time and space. Ms SIU expressed that some parents did not understand the importance of learning through play. EDB would enhance parent education in this regard.
- 2.2.20 A children representative recommended EDB to encourage KGs to admit students with special educational needs with grants and impose a cap on the number of students with special educational needs to be admitted to each KG. The children representative noted that this policy was likely to be more effective than monitoring alone.
- 2.2.21 Ms SIU said that the provision of additional resources on the basis of the number of students with special educational needs was currently adopted in primary and secondary schools. At KG stage, given the young age of the children, it might be premature to define if a student had special educational needs. If a child was suspected to have developmental problem, he/she would generally be considered as at risk of developmental delay. Appropriate support or intervention at an early stage could bring about improvements. Currently, the Labour and Welfare Bureau ("LWB") was implementing a two-year pilot scheme to provide on-site rehabilitation services for KGs. An attendee took the view that diagnosis was possible with sufficient resources and support. He/she remarked that quality education would be very difficult if teachers did not have sufficient time and support to look after individual needs. Ms SIU added that for more serious cases of children having been diagnosed by the Department of Health and referred by the Social Welfare Department (SWD), they could receive rehabilitation services through the Integrated Programme, Early Education and Training Centre and Special Child Care Centre under SWD.
- 2.2.22 A children representative hoped that KG students might embrace a happy learning atmosphere instead of facing the pressure stemming from drilling and portfolio building. An attendee concurred and called for a creative children-based curriculum with less emphasis on memorising. He/she further remarked that KG students should not be required to cope with a complicated curriculum designed for primary one students.
- 2.2.23 Ms SIU thanked the attendees and children representatives for their questions and suggestions.

2.3 Comments and questions on free quality KG education put forward by attendees and children representatives, as well as responses from the representative of EDB were as follows (Group 2):

- 2.3.1 An attendee considered the Guide as well drawn up but was worried that there might be difficulties in implementation, such as in what ways inspection and monitoring would be conducted to find out whether children were assigned with mechanical copying. In response, Mr WONG advised that EDB officers would understand the implementation of the curriculum in KGs through school visits, inspections and lesson observations. If the curriculum of a KG was found incommensurate with the abilities and developmental needs of children, EDB would request the KG to make improvements and stop the improper arrangement. KG curriculum should cover the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics. K1 children should not be required to write with pens/pencils, while K2 and K3 children should not be assigned with mechanical copying exercises. He emphasised that parents should also set reasonable expectations for their children and co-operate with schools to create a living and learning environment that was fine and conducive to the balanced developments of children.
- 2.3.2 An attendee raised the issue that free quality KG education was not entirely free. Some KGs had to charge school fees for half-day classes for meeting rental expenditure that could not be fully covered by rental subsidies. Besides, school fees were also charged for whole-day and long whole-day classes. Another attendee said that given that the living environment was crowded or parents had to go out to work, some students had to enroll in KGs that offered whole-day classes. He/She urged the Government to examine whether resources and support for low-income families were adequate to make quality KG education affordable.
- 2.3.3 The Free Quality KG Education Scheme would be rolled out in half a year's time, an attendee asked how EDB would explain the new Scheme to the public.
- 2.3.4 An attendee indicated that as the three stages of learning in KGs, primary schools and secondary schools were tightly connected, quality education and joyful learning were not necessarily related. Another attendee said that children nowadays had been enrolled to too many learning and interest classes which kept them very busy. This situation should be reviewed.
- 2.3.5 An attendee pointed out that the new Scheme only covered children in the age group of three to six, and those in the age group of two to three could not benefit from it. Besides, the entry qualifications of KG teachers and child care workers had long been aligned, excluding the remuneration and career ladder of child care workers who taught children in the age group of two to three from the Scheme would result in a gap in terms of remuneration packages.

- 2.3.6 An attendee said that teaching positions in KGs lacked attractiveness. He/She noted that in some NGO-operated KGs where there was a succession problem, management positions were taken up by social workers. He/She noted that some teachers had not only attained professional qualifications, but also qualifications in music, sports or arts, he/she suggested the Government to consider raising the salary correspondingly to retain talents.
- 2.3.7 Given that KGs had placed great importance in question and answer sessions for parents in admission interviews, an attendee proposed that consideration might be given to drawing up guidelines for interviews.
- 2.3.8 An attendee asked in what ways KG education was enhanced under the new Scheme when compared with the previous Scheme. Mr WONG responded that the Government would implement the free quality KG education policy with effect from the 2017/18 school year. The Government's annual recurrent expenditure on pre-primary education was estimated to increase from the current level of about \$4 billion to about \$6.7 billion. Under the new Scheme, eligible local non-profit-making KGs would be provided with a direct subsidy for the provision of quality half-day services for all eligible children aged between three and six. The Government would also provide an additional grant for whole-day and long whole-day KGs to alleviate the financial burden of school fees on parents. Besides, EDB would improve the quality of KG education in various aspects such as upgrading teachers' professional competence through various means; improving teacher-pupil ratio, and encouraging KGs to provide competitive remuneration and establish a career ladder to attract and retain quality teachers; reviewing the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum taking into consideration the experience of learning and teaching in KGs and societal needs; refining the Quality Assurance Framework; enhancing the governance and transparency of KGs with the Government stepping up monitoring; strengthening support for students with diverse needs, including students from needy families, NCS students and students with special needs; enhancing parent engagement and parent education; improving school premises and facilities, and exploring feasible measures to increase the provision of KG premises.
- 2.3.9 A children representative who was a primary five student reflected that some of his/her schoolmates did not like copying. He/She considered that children should be asked to write since they were young. An attendee concurred that the lack of writing practices would make it more difficult for KG children to transit to primary one, and so writing practices should be stepped up in K3. He/She also noted that low-income families could hardly afford the high fees charged for extra-curricular activities and hoped that the Government would provide more subsidies.
- 2.3.10 An attendee enquired whether the grant for school-related expenses would cover expenses on computer equipment. Mr WONG responded that the grant could be used for defraying school-related expenses incurred from the students' KG education. Parents should also note that as KG students

were still young, prolonged use of electronic screen products should be avoided.

- 2.3.11 An attendee noted that students under the age of six were in their golden years to learn. He/She enquired how the new Scheme would cater for the special educational needs of children. Mr WONG responded that the Government had been providing different services for children with developmental delay through the collaborative efforts of various Government departments. For example, LWB launched a two-year pilot scheme on On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services to provide rehabilitation services to children with special needs in KGs or KG-cum-child care centres as early as possible. A review would be conducted upon the completion of the pilot scheme to help determine the mode of operation when the scheme was regularised. In addition, EDB would strengthen trainings for teachers to facilitate early identification of and cater for students with special needs.
- 2.3.12 An attendee suggested that teachers should step up collaboration with school social workers, and that EDB should consider engaging students in school inspections to have a better grasp of the actual classroom activities.
- 2.3.13 Mr WONG thanked the attendees and children representatives for their questions and suggestions.