

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Direct Investigation Support Services for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

Background

When children display problems with basic understanding or use of the spoken or written language via listening, reading, writing or mathematical calculation, they may be having Specific Learning Difficulties (“SpLD”).

2. The number of SpLD students at primary and secondary levels in the Education Bureau’s (“EDB”) database had increased dramatically from 1,360 in 2003/04 to 8,869 in 2007/08. Research by local academics suggests that the prevalence rate of SpLD in reading and writing (dyslexia) in Hong Kong is as high as 9.7% to 12.6%.

3. At the same time, there has been growing community concern over insufficient services for these children. The Ombudsman, therefore, decided to initiate a direct investigation into the measures adopted by EDB for primary and secondary schools in the public sector to provide support services to SpLD students. This is the third of a series of direct investigations started in 2005, on the subject of remedial support for SpLD students.

EDB Support to Schools

Assessment Tools and Resource Packages

4. EDB has developed:
- (a) assessment tools for early identification of SpLD students; and
 - (b) guidelines, teaching and learning kits for teachers to help students improve their literacy and learning skills.

Additional Funds and Resources

5. EDB provides additional resources under different support schemes to schools with students having special educational needs, including physical disabilities and SpLD, or significantly low academic achievement. Eligibility is by reference to enrolment of such students. Schools are expected to pool and deploy resources flexibly to cater for the different types of special educational needs, including SpLD.

6. An overview of the major support schemes introduced by EDB over the years is as follows:

Available to	Support Schemes*				
	IE Programme [#]	NF Mode/ Learning Support Grant	IRT Programme	SBR Programme [@]	New Initiative
Primary Schools	√	√	√	×	×
Secondary Schools	√	√	×	√	√
Additional Resources	One resource teacher, one teaching assistant, recurrent grant	Learning Support Grant	One teacher, recurrent grant	Additional teachers	Additional teachers

* *IE Programme: Integrated Education Programme (融合教育計劃)*
NF Mode: New Funding Mode (新資助模式)
IRT Programme: Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme (小學加強輔導教學計劃)
SBR Programme: School-based Remedial Support Programme (校本輔導計劃)
New Initiative: New Initiative to Cater for Academic Low Achievers at Junior Secondary Levels (為照顧成績稍遜初中學生的新措施)

[#] *EDB has ceased inviting new participants to join the IE Programme since the introduction of the NF Mode in 2003/04.*

[@] *SBR Programme was phased out in 2008/09 and replaced by the New Initiative.*

Professional Services

Educational Psychology Services

7. EDB sends its own or outside educational psychologists to serve public sector schools on a need basis.

School Visits by EDB Officers

8. Special Education Support Officers visit primary schools at least three times a year to advise teachers on teaching and learning strategies and on difficult cases.

9. Since April 2007, on a pilot basis, educational psychologists and Inspectors have identified 56 secondary schools which are in need of more intensive support. Consultation visits are paid to these schools.

Other Professional Support

10. Professional development seminars are organised throughout the school year for school principals, teachers and school social workers to keep them abreast of the latest developments in special education.

Special Education Resource Centre

11. EDB's Special Education Resource Centre provides a library for teachers with reference materials on good practices, trends and developments on support for students with special educational needs. The Centre is equipped with multi-media facilities so teachers can produce suitable teaching materials.

Teacher Training

In-service Training

12. Since 2007/08, EDB has put in place a five-year professional development framework for serving teachers, consisting of structured courses on special educational needs at three levels: basic (30 hours), advanced (90 hours) and thematic (60 hours).
13. EDB expects each school to meet the following targets by 2012/13:
- (a) Basic course: at least 10% of teachers have completed this course.
 - (b) Advanced course: at least three teachers have completed this course.
 - (c) Thematic course on SpLD: at least one Chinese Language teacher and one English Language teacher have completed this course.
 - (d) Thematic course on other special educational needs: at least one teacher has completed the thematic course on a particular special educational need that the school has to cater for.

Pre-service Training

14. Hong Kong Institute of Education is the only institute offering a compulsory module on special educational needs in pre-service teacher training.

EDB Monitoring and Feedback Systems

School Self-Evaluation and External Review

15. As a tool for schools' self-evaluation of performance in catering for student diversity, EDB has prepared a document "Catering for Student Differences ~ Indicators for Inclusion" to assist schools in setting observable targets and success criteria.

16. EDB conducts external school review, involving its own officers and outside educators, to validate self-evaluation by schools and to provide them with feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Regular School Visits

17. To ensure that schools are providing proper support to students with special educational needs, Special Education Support Officers and Inspectors make about three inspection visits each school year. After each cycle of visits, EDB will review the schools' performance. EDB Inspectors and specialists will visit the schools in need and advise them to improve their support for their students.

Specific Requirements for Schools

18. Schools receiving additional funds and resources are subject to specific requirements, regarding separate accounting for the funds, publicity through the school's website and annual reports on measures taken to support students with special educational needs, as well as a learning support plan for each of such students.

Redress System

19. EDB has established a mediation mechanism to handle complaints and grievances from parents about education opportunities for students with special educational needs. EDB publicises the service through its website and leaflets

Observations and Opinions

20. Over the years, EDB has been making substantial efforts and injecting additional funds and other resources into the education system to improve services for students with SpLD. EDB support is generally well conceived. However, scrutiny of information from EDB and our interview with some key stakeholders, namely, teachers, social workers, school principals, parents and non-governmental organisations, have identified a number of issues for attention and improvement.

Funding and Resource Support

Openness and Transparency

21. In line with EDB policy for School-Based Management (校本管理) giving schools flexibility and autonomy in management, the Learning Support Grant under the NF Mode, calculated on a **per capita basis**, is allocated to **the school as a whole** on top of basic and other EDB provisions. Schools are encouraged to pool all available resources holistically for optimal cost-effectiveness. Similarly, entitlements under other support schemes, including additional manpower, are to be merged with other resources available and then deployed flexibly.

22. This "global" approach, however, risks overlooking the specific needs and goals in respect of individual students who do not conform to the needs and goals of the "mainstream" body of students. Some parents are highly suspicious that funds intended for redressing special educational needs have been used for other school priorities (e.g. for gifted students). Openness and transparency on school policy and measures for supporting students with special educational needs are, therefore, needed to dispel doubt and suspicion among parents.

23. In this regard, EDB expects schools to publicise their support measures on their websites. But implementation seems to have been left entirely to the school management. Not surprisingly, the outcome is inconsistent. Parents are most keen to know which support schemes apply to their children's schools and how the additional funds and resources have been translated into services for their children.

24. EDB tells us that some schools are developing a more transparent policy on supporting students with special educational needs. The Bureau is trying to help those schools by advising them to strengthen home-school cooperation. However, there appears to have been no timeline for

those schools to catch up in this aspect.

Delay in Support for Secondary Schools

25. While EDB has made considerable efforts to support primary school students with SpLD, there had been no **dedicated** funding or resources for secondary schools until the introduction of the Learning Support Grant to secondary schools in the school year 2008/09.

Monitoring and Feedback Systems

Loophole of Not Earmarking

26. EDB's additional funds and resources for support services are not earmarked for individual students or groups, so their effective utilisation is dependent entirely on the attitude of the school management, and how enlightened, liberal and accountable they want to be. Close monitoring and timely intervention by EDB is therefore, essential.

Parental Involvement

27. Parental involvement is also crucial to the effectiveness of schools' support measures because:

- (a) it enhances parents' understanding of the school's stance and therefore confidence that the school is working for the greater benefit of their children;
- (b) it provides feedback on SpLD students' performance and whether the support measures are effective; and
- (c) parents can provide home help to reinforce their children's learning.

28. EDB subscribes to the importance of parental involvement and requires schools to engage parents at various stages of provision of support. However, practice varies significantly from school to school.

29. It is EDB's intention to have a flexible, interactive regime of support whereby schools, professionals and parents work together to devise strategies to help SpLD students. The Bureau should, therefore, strive to facilitate and encourage parents to be more instrumental in deciding services for their children, to be kept informed of progress and to raise concern without fear of reprisal by the school.

Redress System

30. Some parents dare not stand up to the school management in their quest for support for their children at school. EDB records show that only one parent used the Bureau's mediation service in the last three years (from 2005/06 to 2007/08). Parents' choice to suffer in silence is understandable, but misguided. It does not help their children to get appropriate help to which they are entitled. EDB should, therefore, step up publicity of its mediation service. Furthermore, the Bureau should assume a more positive and proactive role in identifying systemic failure in schools and in effecting timely rectification.

Professional Services

Educational Psychology Services

31. Shortage of educational psychologists is a chronic problem in Hong Kong, with only about 100 of them and a total primary and secondary student population of some 872,000. On EDB's suggestion, the University Grants Committee has agreed to increase the provision of training places for educational psychologists. To encourage meritorious students to pursue an educational psychology career, EDB should consider introducing scholarships or bursaries for professional training in educational psychology.

Teacher Training

32. Even now, not all teacher training institutes offer potential teachers training in special educational needs as a matter of their curriculum. Regrettably, therefore, EDB's in-service teacher training programme will always be playing "catch up", as it is very likely that the number of new teachers entering the teaching profession will always exceed the number of in-service teachers trained by EDB.

33. At present, only 27% of primary school teachers and 11% of secondary school teachers in the public sector have received basic training in SpLD. Of schools in Hong Kong which already have admitted SpLD students, 30% of the primary schools and 76% of the secondary schools do not have any teacher trained in SpLD at all. Although serving teachers can obtain basic training in special educational needs by attending training courses and sharing sessions organised by EDB, non-governmental organisations and teacher training institutes, EDB's target of providing only 10% of teachers with basic training through structured courses by 2012/13 leaves much to be desired. Unless there are policy changes regarding teacher training, it would take decades for EDB's in-service teacher training programme to cover the whole teaching profession, even then it would only be for a total of 180 hours for each participant.

Recommendations

34. The Ombudsman recommends that EDB:
- (a) Step up efforts and formulate a timeline for enhancing openness and transparency among schools on the latter's policy on supporting students with SpLD and other special educational needs, the resources they have received and basic information on the measures they can be expected to adopt to support these students.
 - (b) Monitor more closely the effectiveness of the Learning Support Grant, in particular in secondary schools.
 - (c) Initiate timely intervention and effect rectification when schools under-perform.

- (d) Require and help all schools to establish an effective and structured mechanism to keep parents informed of students' progress and to enable parents to be more active in the decision-making process of the school.
- (e) Conduct regular meetings with parents' concern groups to be kept informed of their aspirations and to obtain feedback on how the support system for students with special educational needs is working.
- (f) Step up publicity of the mediation service.
- (g) Record and analyse parents' grievances and complaints about inadequate support services, conduct probes into schools suspected of having recurrent or systemic problems.
- (h) Consider introducing scholarships or bursaries for professional training in educational psychology with undertaking of post-graduation service with Government.
- (i) Explore with the University Grants Committee the possibility of making training in special educational needs compulsory in all pre-service teacher training programmes.
- (j) Review the target for basic training for teachers in SpLD.

**Office of The Ombudsman
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