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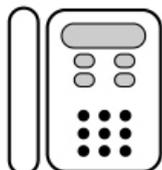
***Direct Investigation on Support Services for
Students with Specific Learning Difficulties***

The executive summary of the investigation report is at **Annex A**.



***Direct Investigation on
Free Admission Scheme for Leisure Facilities
from July to September 2008***

The executive summary of the investigation report is at **Annex B**.



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**Office of The Ombudsman, Hong Kong
26 March 2009**

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
March 2009**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Direct Investigation on Free Admission Scheme for Leisure Facilities from July to September 2008

Background

The Chief Executive announced in his 2007-08 Policy Address on 10 October 2007 a plan to highlight the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a main theme in promoting national education. The object was “so people will understand our country better and have a shared sense of national pride” and to promote sports among the public. To these ends, he announced making available for free public use from 1 July to 30 September 2008 the sports and recreational facilities managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (“LCSD”). At once, LCSD started to plan for the 92-day Free Admission Scheme (“the Scheme”).

2. The Scheme was well intended but received much public criticism, prompting The Ombudsman to initiate a direct investigation into the Scheme, in the hope that this experience could offer useful reference for other projects and similar initiatives in future.

The Scheme

3. The objectives of the Scheme were:

- to support the Beijing Olympic Games;
- to encourage the public to exercise more regularly; and
- to promote community sports.

Planned Arrangements

4. LCSD’s planning took reference from two previous schemes of free admission. We summarise the main features of the three schemes:

	Post-SARS Free Admission in 2003	Celebration of 10th Anniversary of HKSAR in 2007	The Scheme in 2008
Duration	Five public holidays in July (including four Sundays)	Two public holidays (1-2 July)	92 days from July to September
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indoor leisure facilities - Swimming pools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indoor leisure facilities - Swimming pools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indoor leisure facilities - Swimming pools - Outdoor leisure facilities (excluding sports grounds and turf pitches) - Water sports centres facilities - Holiday camps
Sessions Available	112,835	76,783	Over 3,000,000
Booking Channels for Facilities other than Swimming Pools	Free permits pre-distributed at venues	LCSD counters	All booking channels under Leisure Link System (“LLS”): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Counters - Internet - Telephone - Self-service kiosks (launched on 3 March 2008)
Booking Period	Monday before each free-admission day	7 days in advance	30 days in advance

5. **Enhancement of Booking Channels.** Since migration to GovHK, Government’s one-stop portal, in January 2008, LLS has been enhanced to ensure system stability and to reduce processing time for all booking channels. In May 2008, in anticipation of overwhelming response to the Scheme, LCSD further enhanced the system to reduce the average transaction time of each internet booking by 30 seconds, from 2.5 to 2 minutes, and to increase correspondingly the number of concurrent users from 800 to 1,100.

6. **Prevention of Abuse.** Measures were introduced to prevent abuse of the Scheme: (a) each person could book a maximum of two sessions a day, irrespective of facilities; and (b) a minimum number of users was required for some facilities.

7. **Publicity.** LCSD announced details for free use of camp facilities on 3 March 2008, as application for such facilities for July could be made before 31 March. Details of the Scheme were announced in the second round of publicity launched on 9 May 2008. Publicity was

conducted through the media, posters, banners, leaflets and newspaper advertisements. A specially designed LCSD webpage was launched for the Scheme. Radio Announcements of Public Interest (“APIs”) publicised the Scheme from 29 May to 30 September 2008.

Improvement during the Scheme Period

8. **Monitoring of Attendance.** LCSD’s original plan was for venues to collate statistics on usage and absence of original hirers and report to the Headquarters monthly. Upon public criticism since booking started in June, LCSD revised the arrangements and required venues to provide statistics on a daily basis from 1 July 2008.

9. **Cancellation of Bookings.** Normally, hirers may request cancellation of bookings in writing, but there will be no refund. Requests for a change of time for a confirmed booking are deemed by LCSD to be cancellation. However, this is only briefly mentioned among other matters in the Conditions of Use for Leisure Facilities. Meanwhile, information on LCSD website states that since a hirer has already paid for the booking, it cannot be changed or cancelled. Having considered complaints and suggestions about the Scheme, LCSD made available at venues a standard form from 18 July 2008 to facilitate cancellation, so as to release vacated sessions for booking by others. Completed forms or cancellation requests in writing could be sent to the venues concerned for processing.

10. **Other Measures to Prevent Wastage.** Since mid-July 2008, greater flexibility was exercised in the use of vacant sessions of land-based facilities. Lanes in swimming pools reserved for groups or programmes, but with low attendance, would be released for use by the public.

Usage

Attendances

11. The Scheme attracted over 12.8 million attendances, including more than 7.62 million to swimming pools and more than 5 million to land-based facilities. For the around 322,000 hirers of land-based facilities, about 50% (or 161,000) had not booked any LCSD facilities in the previous 12 months.

Booking Channels

12. The total number of over 2,489,000 bookings through the four channels under the Scheme was doubled, when compared with the same period in 2007.

Facilities

13. Except holiday camps which had a three percent point decrease in usage compared to the same period in 2007, all other facilities: every land-based facility, water sports centres and swimming pools, registered increased usage. Some increases were fairly significant, e.g. swimming pool attendances surged 68% and overall land-based facilities increased 26 percent point to 76%.

14. However, wastage could be serious. For land-based facilities, most were booked over 90% under the Scheme. Of these booked sessions, an average of 62% were used by original hirers, 16% by walk-in users and the remaining 22% unused. This indicated an absence rate of original hirers of 38%. Some situations were even more serious. Our spot check revealed 74% and 78% no-show rate on some days in certain facilities of a sports centre. The absence rate of original hirers of craft at water sports centres even reached 54%.

Review and Evaluation

15. Since its launch, the Scheme received much criticism from the public. LCSD received a total of 1,059 complaints about the Scheme. Most were related to difficulty in booking, lack of safeguard against abuse and wastage from no-show, and congestion in on-line booking.

16. This Office received 33 complaints from June to September 2008 about the Scheme on issues similar to those received by LCSD.

17. We received 23 public submissions for this direct investigation. Most of them offered views similar to those expressed in complaints but seven were in praise of the Scheme for taking care of the needs of the less well-off in the community and encouraging people to exercise more. LCSD also received 20 submissions in praise of the Scheme from different channels.

Suggestions for Improvement

18. During the interim review in early July 2008, LCSD considered the suggestions for improvement raised by the public not suitable for implementation for the remaining period of the Scheme.

19. By March 2009, LCSD was in the final stage of completing a preliminary evaluation report on the Scheme. LCSD indicated that some of the suggestions could be helpful for similar events in future, provided certain hurdles were overcome and sufficient resources made available.

LCSD will take into account the recommendations of this direct investigation before deciding on the improvement measures.

Observations and Opinions

Objectives of the Scheme

20. The increase in usage of most facilities and the fact that over half of the hirers of land-based facilities under the Scheme were “infrequent hirers” proved that the Scheme had succeeded in promoting interest in sports and exercise. The Scheme was clearly welcome by many, as reflected by the support voiced by some members of the public, and by others implicitly through participation.

21. In principle and in concept, we consider the Scheme laudable. The objectives are certainly positive. Given the considerable scale and duration of the Scheme launched in the summer months, it was no easy task for LCSD. Broadly speaking, LCSD has discharged itself commendably. Nevertheless, there were deficiencies in arrangements.

Planning

22. LCSD had deployed high-level subject officers, under the leadership of an Assistant Director, to plan and execute the Scheme and also to monitor implementation. The team generally did well in the latter task: keeping a watching brief to make changes in some arrangements from mid-July.

23. **Booking.** In estimating usage of facilities under the Scheme, LCSD had sensibly not only drawn reference from the two previous schemes, but particularly assessed the popularity of various facilities. For greater public convenience, in view of the large volume of sessions available for booking over a considerable duration, it decided to use all four established booking channels instead of just one single booking channel as had been done for the previous two schemes.

24. LCSD upgraded the LLS internet booking channel to cater for the anticipated significant increase in booking under the Scheme. However, owing to the limited supply of popular facilities and sessions, free admission would inevitably occasion a surge in booking attempts during the peak time. LCSD’s consideration on enhancing the booking capacity was a matter of judgment on striking a balance between prudent use of public resources, convenience to the public and equal opportunities in making booking for a one-off scheme of three months.

25. We accept that LCSD had taken realistic and reasonable steps — as indicated in its planned schedule for LLS enhancement, testing and rolling-out — to plan carefully for the anticipated influx of bookings under the Scheme.

26. **Publicity.** The publicity plan of the Scheme did not anticipate the need for changes after the Scheme's roll-out. As a result, interim measures and special arrangements during the Scheme were not fully publicised.

27. **Monitoring.** The initial plan of collating monthly statistics indicated not only an under-estimation of the size of the wastage problem due to no-show but low alertness of the need for close monitoring of the demand for facilities upon roll-out of the Scheme.

Execution

28. **Publicity.** In the execution stage, LCSD failed to publicise its interim measures, to promote the less popular facilities and to address the public outcry through the media. It may not be easy to incorporate changes into pre-printed materials such as posters and leaflets, but newspapers and the electronic media could have helped relay more effectively messages at short notice, in different stages during the Scheme.

29. **Monitoring.** Despite deficiencies in planning, LCSD is commended for acting promptly to rectify defects once detected. Monthly monitoring of usage was quickly upgraded to daily monitoring, a standard form for cancellation was introduced at an early stage and the initial requirement for a minimum number of users, introduced for preventing abuse, was soon relaxed.

Prevention of Abuse

30. **Cancellation of Bookings.** LCSD had clearly under-estimated the incidence of no-show by original hirers, which reached 38% for land-based facilities, and thus had no plan for publicising or streamlining the arrangements for cancelling bookings. However, the Department was quick to identify and rectify this by introducing a cancellation form from 18 July.

31. On the other hand, the procedures for cancellation were fraught with deficiencies and were not user-friendly. The form was not available for downloading from the LCSD website. There was little publicity. The low cancellation figures speak for the ineffectiveness of the procedures: 420 cancellations, or 0.05%, *versus* about 800,000 no-shows.

32. To some extent, the incidence of notified cancellation does indicate that responsible hirers were prepared to take the extra time and trouble to release their booked sessions for others. We applaud their civic-mindedness. LCSD should streamline the procedures and properly publicise the cancellation arrangements even for normal fee-paying bookings.

33. **Usage of Facilities.** The high no-show rate of original hirers and high wastage rate of booked sessions, even taking into account subsequent walk-in uses, indicated a sheer waste of public resources. LCSD should look into these cases, identify the reasons for the high no-show rates and work out preventive and promotional measures for future schemes of this nature.

34. LCSD should also consider public education messages for responsible use of public facilities.

35. For facilities such as fitness rooms, sport climbing walls and craft at water sports centres, where booking rates were low due to the requirement of proof of proficiency, corresponding training sessions, with proper promotion, might help boost interest and usage in these activities.

Review and Evaluation

36. LCSD has been quick to review its arrangements albeit in response to complaints and criticisms. It has considered comments and suggestions raised by the public, some of which would involve costly and time-consuming changes to the booking or refund systems. It would not be realistic, or worthwhile, to introduce these mid-way during the Scheme. However, these suggestions are well worth studying for similar initiatives in the future.

Revised Scheme

37. To encourage the public to exercise and to maximise use of under-utilised facilities, we see a case for a scheme on a smaller scale and on a regular basis. A good example is the free access to LCSD museums every Wednesday. LCSD should consider exploring other options, bearing the main considerations of: (a) access on a regular basis, not *ad hoc*; and (b) measures against abuse and wastage.

38. We note LCSD's scheme since 2000 for schools and organisations to use some under-utilised facilities during non-peak hours free of charge. It should publicise the scheme more widely and consider extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries. We believe that with more prudent planning, infrequent users thus attracted could be managed without undue interference with the frequent and paying patrons.

Recommendations

39. Initiatives like the Scheme have demonstrably helped to generate public interest in sports and LCSD facilities. However, the Scheme has also attracted some outcry of public dissatisfaction. From our findings, The Ombudsman makes the following recommendations:

- (1) When planning for similar initiatives, care should be taken to balance the interests of both regular paying patrons and prospective clientele attracted by free admission.
- (2) To build in flexibility in both planning and execution of publicity arrangements for timely and effective announcement of changes, interim measures and special arrangements.
- (3) To build in mechanism for close monitoring of implementation, right from the outset.
- (4) To provide user-friendly arrangements for cancellation of bookings both during normal fee-paying days and for free admission schemes.
- (5) To appeal to the public for responsible use of public facilities.
- (6) To institute safeguards for detecting, deterring and preventing abuse.
- (7) To keep a watching brief on the commercial booking services at a charge.
- (8) To analyse the data on usage of facilities and booking channels to devise incentives for use of under-utilised facilities.
- (9) To consider promoting the existing Free Use Scheme more widely and extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries to maximise the usage of under-utilised facilities.

40. LCSD has accepted all the recommendations. We will monitor progress of implementation.

Office of The Ombudsman
March 2008