

Message from the Working Group

To nurture talents, schools should provide a conducive learning environment so that our students enjoy learning, thinking and participation, and as a result, attain all-round cognitive and character development. The Medium of Instruction (MOI) and the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) mechanism are two important education issues that affect the school learning environment. They have all along been matters of great public concern. Given their inextricable links, the two issues are by nature complex and contentious.

Since the Education Commission's Working Group on Review of SSPA and MOI for Secondary Schools began its work in July 2003, my colleagues and I have drawn reference from a good number of research studies and literature reviews, conducted school visits and classroom observations, and held extensive and in-depth exchanges with different stakeholders to explore proposals which would take into account both the educational considerations and the practical needs.

With a view to achieving the objectives of basic education, we have formulated our proposals **with the interest of students as the primary concern. Attaining the aims of basic education guides our deliberation on how we can make steady improvements on the basis of current achievements.** Other considerations pale by comparison.

We firmly believe that **the mother tongue is the most effective MOI for all students. Learning through a second language** (i.e. English for the majority of students in Hong Kong) **inevitably creates language barriers, the kind and extent of which may vary from student to student.** For most students, the barriers would reduce their interest and effectiveness in learning. We therefore recommend the continued adoption of the mother tongue as the mainstream MOI for secondary schools. However, we understand the aspiration by some people for English-medium teaching. **We have no objection to some schools adopting English as the MOI, provided that they can fulfill the prescribed criteria** for English-medium teaching thereby minimizing the language barriers to learning.

We acknowledge that our students must be proficient in both Chinese and English in order to lay a sound foundation for life-long learning and maintain the competitiveness of Hong Kong as an international metropolis. Therefore, **irrespective of the MOI adopted, schools should endeavour to nurture talents proficient in both Chinese and English.**

We hope that through improvements to the SSPA mechanism, we can encourage the **diversified development** of schools and all-round development of students, **provide parents/students with more choices**, and contain the within-school diversity at a level currently manageable by **secondary schools and teachers** so as to give them space to **consolidate their experience in trying out “remedial and enhancement” measures** to address the problem.

I would like to express my gratitude to all members of the community who have given us their views in the course of our deliberation. We would appreciate your views/suggestions on our proposals set out in this document. Let us work together to make our school education more effective in nurturing talents for tomorrow’s society.

(Michael Tien)
Chairman,
Working Group on Review of
Secondary School Places Allocation and
Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools

Executive Summary

Background

1. In September 2000, the Government accepted the *Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong (Reform Proposals)* published by the Education Commission (EC), and undertook to review the short-term mechanism of the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) system in the 2003/04 school year. Separately, the Government started implementing the *Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools (Guidance)* in 1998. In 2000, the Government accepted the recommendation of a joint working group set up by the former Board of Education and the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) that the medium of instruction (MOI) arrangement for secondary schools should be considered alongside the review of the SSPA mechanism in the 2003/04 school year.

Objectives

2. The EC hence set up the Working Group on Review of SSPA and MOI for Secondary Schools (Working Group) in July 2003 to take forward the review. Members of the Working Group unanimously agreed that the review should be **guided by the interest of students** in order to **fulfill the following objectives of the nine-year basic education:**

- (a) **to enable every student to develop to the full his/her individual potential in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics;**
- (b) **to ensure that students attain the basic standards and encourage them to strive for excellence; and**
- (c) **to encourage students to take the initiative to learn, develop the ability to think and create, and cultivate positive attitudes and values.**

3. The Working Group has now completed the review. The proposals have been formulated on the basis of the guiding principles outlined in paragraph 2 above. Their essence is as follows:

- (a) Since mother-tongue teaching best realizes the objectives of education, **continuing to uphold mother-tongue teaching should be the orientation of the MOI arrangement for secondary schools.**

- (b) **Irrespective of the language through which they learn, students should enhance their proficiency in both Chinese and English** so as to establish a solid foundation for life-long learning.
- (c) **Learning through a second language inevitably creates language barriers, the kind and extent of which may vary from student to student. For most students, such barriers would reduce their interest and effectiveness in learning. Therefore, without prejudice to students' learning of content subjects and whole-person development, and only when schools fully fulfill the prescribed criteria of student ability, teacher capability and support measures, could they adopt English as the MOI.**
- (d) The proposed **SSPA mechanism should aim to increase parental choice as far as possible and promote all-round development of students.**
- (e) The proposed **SSPA mechanism should help contain the within-school student diversity at a level currently manageable by secondary schools and teachers.** The aim is to facilitate secondary schools to develop students' potentials through identifying support or enrichment strategies.

4. While considering ways to uphold mother-tongue teaching, the Working Group also emphasizes the importance of enhancing students' English proficiency. The Working Group considers it equally important that schools using English as the MOI should strengthen the teaching of Chinese and Chinese culture. Nevertheless, since Hong Kong is predominantly a Chinese society with plenty of exposure to Chinese and Chinese culture in daily life, parents are generally more concerned about the English standard of their children. The Working Group acknowledges this concern. Therefore, this document gives a more detailed treatment to ways to enhance students' English proficiency while mother-tongue teaching is practised.

Current MOI Policy for Secondary Schools

5. A number of studies indicate that **students learn best in their mother tongue. To learn effectively through a second language** (i.e. English for students in Hong Kong), **students need to have** high proficiency in both their first and second languages, as well as a **strong learning motivation and ability** to overcome the language barriers. In general, the **overall academic performance can be used to gauge learning motivation and ability.**

6. Hong Kong does have a practical need for a workforce with a high level of English

proficiency in order to maintain her competitiveness as an international commercial and financial centre. **Using English as the MOI** may increase students' exposure to English and enhance their English proficiency. **However, this is not the only or best means.** It is not worthwhile if students' subject learning is affected as a result. For the majority of students, **the key to enhancing their English proficiency lies in the teaching and learning of the language (language education), and not necessarily in using the language as the MOI (language in education).** The Working Group does not object to EMI teaching under appropriate conditions since this can facilitate the learning of English. However, this must not compromise students' subject learning.

7. The Government has been actively encouraging secondary schools to adopt Chinese as the MOI as early as in the 1980s. However, a great majority of schools opted for EMI and many students encountered difficulties in learning. Marking the explicit enforcement of mother-tongue teaching, the *Guidance* was promulgated in 1997. According to the *Guidance*, schools wishing to use English as the MOI must demonstrate their fulfillment of the three prescribed criteria, namely student ability, teacher capability and support measures. As a result, 112 public-sector secondary schools have been allowed to use English as their MOI (EMI schools), while some 300 schools have used Chinese as their MOI (CMI schools).

8. Results of the studies conducted by the Government and universities, quality assurance inspections conducted by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) since the implementation of the *Guidance* in the 1998/99 school year, school visits by the Working Group and analyses of the results of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 2003 and 2004 **all show that mother-tongue teaching is bearing fruit.** Mother-tongue teaching makes it easier for students to acquire subject knowledge, master high-order thinking skills, and develop interest in learning. The Working Group gauges from its school visits and discussions with stakeholders the progressive acceptance of the positive impacts of mother-tongue teaching. The Working Group considers that **the way forward is to continue with the adoption of mother-tongue teaching, making steady improvements on the basis of current achievements while also emphasizing the importance of enhancing students' English proficiency.**

Proposals on MOI for Secondary Schools

9. The Working Group concurs with the Government's promotion of mother-tongue (i.e. Chinese-medium) teaching. With the implementation of the *Guidance* in the past six years, mother-tongue teaching has started to bear fruit. In charting the way forward for the

MOI arrangement, the Working Group has arrived at the following conceptual framework:

In principle, all secondary schools should adopt mother-tongue teaching at junior secondary levels. There is no objection to individual schools using English as the MOI if they fully meet the prescribed criteria of student ability, teacher capability and support measures. However, we encourage these schools to adopt mother-tongue teaching. All secondary schools (including CMI schools) should endeavour to raise the English proficiency of their students.

10. The proposals of the Working Group on the prescribed criteria for EMI teaching are summed up below.

Student Ability

11. As mentioned in paragraph 5 above, since the overall academic performance can be used to gauge student ability, the Working Group proposes:

- (a) **In assessing students' ability, their overall academic performance in the internal assessment (IA) of their primary schools (the second term of Primary (P) 5 and the first and second terms of P6) is taken as the basis. However, given the disparity in the assessment modes and standards among schools, a scaling instrument is needed. For this purpose, the IA results will be scaled by the pre-Secondary 1 Hong Kong Attainment Test (pre-S1 HKAT) currently conducted annually.**
- (b) **Since past data demonstrate the stability of pre-S1 HKAT results between two adjacent cohorts of the same school, it is proposed to collect samples of the pre-S1 HKAT results biennially and to take the average of the results of the two most recently sampled pre-S1 HKATs to derive the instrument to scale primary schools' IA results of the coming cohort of P6 students proceeding to Secondary (S) 1.**
- (c) A research study indicates that currently, at most 40% of S1 students are able to learn through English. Therefore, the Working Group proposes that the scaled scores will be put into a pecking order and **the top 40% of students will be taken as having the ability to learn through English.**
- (d) According to the *Guidance*, schools intending to adopt English as the MOI

must have at least 85% of students being able to learn through English. We propose to continue with the requisite percentage. **Should the within-school streaming be adopted, an EMI class should have at least 85% of its students being EMI-capable. Should schools be bifurcated into EMI and CMI schools, then an EMI school should have at least 85% of its S1 intake being EMI-capable.**

Teacher Capability

12. Regarding the language proficiency requirement of EMI teachers, the Working Group considers the basic requirement as **“teachers should be able to communicate their subject content to students intelligibly and their use of English should have no adverse impact on students’ acquisition of the English language”**. Specifically, the Working Group proposes that teachers should attain any of the following qualifications in order to be eligible to teach in EMI:

- (a) **a Grade C or above in English Language (Syllabus B) in the HKCEE, or its equivalent** (including band 6 or above in the International English Language Testing System; a pass or above in English in the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (Overseas) Examination);
- (b) a Grade D or above in Use of English in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination;
- (c) having met the Language Proficiency Requirements (English); or
- (d) a Grade C or above in English Language in the defunct Hong Kong Higher Level Examination.

13. As for **serving EMI teachers who have not attained any of the above qualifications**, they may have their capability certified **in one of the following ways**:

- (a) **to obtain the relevant qualifications within two years starting from the 2005/06 school year; or**
- (b) **to opt for classroom observation by both subject and language experts appointed by the EMB** to assess their overall capability to teach through English, *viz.* “to communicate the subject content intelligibly and their use of English should have no adverse impact on students’ acquisition of the English

language”.

14. Besides, EMI teachers should accumulate a minimum of 15 hours of EMI-related continuous professional development activities for every three years.

Support Measures

15. The Working Group is of the view that secondary schools using English as the MOI should purposefully and **strategically provide a language environment conducive to learning English.** These include, for instance:

- (a) strengthening the teaching and learning of English as a subject;
- (b) creating an English-rich environment; and
- (c) devising well designed bridging programmes.

16. The Working Group proposes that schools intending to adopt English as the MOI should set out the related support strategies and specific measures in their **school development plans and annual school reports. Based on the results of schools’ self-evaluation and external school review mechanism, the EMB could then assess qualitatively and quantitatively whether adequate support measures are in place.**

MOI Arrangement at Junior Secondary Levels

17. The Working Group has considered two main options, namely the within-school approach and the bifurcation approach. Intuitively, **the within-school approach** (i.e. adopting different MOI for different classes) not only **allows greater flexibility to schools,** but also reduces the “MOI-mismatch” of students and provides parents with more choices. However, there are many drawbacks associated with this option:

- (a) Given the community’s prevailing preference for EMI teaching, the number of EMI classes in a school might be conveniently used as an “indicator” of how “good” a school is. People may devise a more elaborate school labelling schema by drawing up a “league table” of schools according to the number/proportion of EMI classes they operate, i.e. with full adoption of EMI being regarded as grade one schools, and the grade drops in tandem with the decreasing number or proportion of EMI classes. It would, in effect, create multiple labelling among schools.

- (b) The strong labelling effect could induce schools to seek to operate as many EMI classes as possible so as to attract students. Due to market forces, many schools might operate EMI class(es) as far as they can. Some schools that have so far been upholding mother-tongue teaching would be under immense pressure to operate some EMI classes, even though this may be contrary to their education philosophy.
- (c) The streaming of students into EMI or CMI classes within the same school would also undermine the self-image of CMI students and induce within-school labelling. Students would also be subject to the unsettling effects of possible switches between CMI and EMI teaching in S2 and S3.
- (d) In the pursuit of more EMI classes, schools may find it prudent to require teachers to obtain the qualifications for EMI teachers as mentioned in paragraphs 12 and 13 above as early as possible. Besides, teachers need to prepare teaching materials and examination papers in both English and Chinese, as well as to devise different teaching pedagogies and support measures for different MOI classes. The pressure on and workload for teachers will increase significantly.

Overall, the within-school approach would impede the overall development of schools and bring about undue pressure on teachers and students.

18. If bifurcation of CMI and EMI schools is maintained,
- (a) Secondary schools will continue to be predominantly CMI schools. Schools would not feel pressured to switch to EMI teaching for some junior secondary classes, thus obviating the problem set out in paragraph 17 above.
 - (b) With the same MOI, all CMI schools will have a “fair competition”. They can develop their own characteristics in school-based curriculum, student support, diversified extra-curricular activities and home-school cooperation, etc. They can also capitalize on the relatively greater space for development by focusing on teaching pedagogy improvements and strengthening of language education.
 - (c) It entails lesser pressure on teachers, thus enabling them to have more time

for student support, professional development and enhancing teaching effectiveness.

- (d) The labelling effect of the bifurcation approach is notably less than that of the within-school streaming.
- (e) Students can experience their junior secondary education through the same MOI, without being subject to the undue anxieties arising from switches between CMI and EMI classes.

Therefore, **with student effective learning and all-round development as the overriding concern, the Working Group proposes to maintain the current bifurcation approach under which most of our secondary schools would practise mother-tongue teaching. This would help promote the development of mother-tongue teaching which has begun to bear fruit.**

19. Besides, the Working Group proposes to **introduce a six-yearly review mechanism to assess whether there should be any change to the MOI adopted by individual schools.**

MOI Arrangement at Senior Secondary Levels

20. The Working Group **supports the continuation of the current flexible MOI arrangement at senior secondary levels.** Having built a sufficient foundation in content subject learning and English language during their junior secondary school years, some CMI students may register an enhancement in overall performance and in English proficiency to be able to learn through English at senior secondary levels. Since schools should, after teaching students for three years, have a clear idea of whether their students have the ability to manage the change in MOI, they would be better informed to make professional judgment on the choice of MOI for their senior secondary students. Moreover, it is believed that the need to sit for public examinations at the end of senior secondary education would induce schools, parents and students to make pragmatic and realistic choices of MOI. Hence, the Working Group proposes that, depending on their students' ability, schools adopting mother-tongue teaching at junior secondary levels may switch to EMI teaching for certain subjects in some classes at senior secondary levels, provided that they meet the prescribed criteria in respect of teacher capability and support measures as set out in paragraphs 12 to 16 above. Schools adopting EMI at junior secondary levels should continue with EMI teaching at senior secondary levels, in order to meet the aspirations of their students for

learning through English.

MOI Arrangement for Schools Joining the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS)

21. Having considered the broad direction of mother-tongue teaching, the Working Group is of the view that DSS schools have to meet the prescribed criteria of student ability, teacher capability and support measures if they are to adopt English as the MOI. In operationalizing this principle, having regard to the DSS concept, the Working Group **recommends that the current flexibility be maintained. However, since an immersion mode is more effective in overcoming the barriers of using a second language to learn, the Working Group does not recommend that DSS schools adopt different MOI for different subjects at junior secondary levels.**

22. For transparency, DSS schools should state in their school development plans and annual reports their MOI arrangement and the supporting educational considerations, the implementation strategies and fulfillment of the three prescribed criteria. It is an established practice of the EMB to conduct focus inspections at DSS schools as and when necessary. Should such inspections suggest any MOI practices being inconsistent with a school's professed education philosophy, the EMB would take appropriate measures, including requiring the school to rectify the situation immediately.

Capitalizing on Mother-tongue Teaching while Enhancing English Proficiency

23. The Working Group is of the view that **mother-tongue teaching and enhancement of students' English proficiency can be achieved concurrently.** While implementation of mother-tongue teaching will continue, all secondary schools should endeavour to enhance the English language proficiency of students. In this connection, we are gratified to note the achievements of many schools. There are many ways to enhance students' English proficiency, but in essence, they can be distilled into the following three broad approaches:

- (a) motivating students' interest in learning English;
 - (b) creating an English-rich environment; and
 - (c) promoting resource- and experience-sharing and encouraging professional development of teachers.
24. The community generally supports mother-tongue teaching but yearns for more

exposure to English for students using the mother tongue as the MOI. Since mother-tongue teaching should be more time-efficient, the Working Group proposes that CMI schools **might choose to allocate**, on top of English Language lessons, **no more than 15% of the total lesson time** in S1 - S3 **for extended learning activities conducted through English**, on condition that the normal teaching and learning of content subjects would not be adversely affected. Possible modes of operation include:

- (a) The extended learning and discussion of any content subject taught in the mother tongue may be conducted in English. However, such extended learning/discussion activities conducted in EMI must not take up more than 15% of the total lesson time of that subject;
- (b) Schools may provide cross-curricular English enrichment programmes;
- (c) Schools may strengthen the bridging programmes to facilitate students' smooth transition from CMI to EMI learning at senior secondary levels.

25. The Working Group is of the view that the Government **should continue with the provision of additional resources for CMI schools. To enhance the flexibility for resource deployment**, the Government should consider giving CMI schools the option of a cash grant in lieu of part or all of the additional teaching posts.

Existing Mechanism of Secondary School Places Allocation

26. The EC proposed in its *Reform Proposals* the following long-term goals in reforming the SSPA mechanism:

- (a) The nine-year basic education will become a coherent stage (a through road) during which pupils should no longer be required to take any high-stake public examination; and
- (b) The allocation bands will be eliminated gradually to remove the labelling effect on schools and pupils.

27. The Government started to implement the short-term SSPA mechanism as from the 2000/01 school year in accordance with the blueprint recommended by the EC. The key features of the short-term SSPA mechanism are the abolition of the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT), the increase of the Discretionary Places (DP) quota and the reduction in the number of allocation bands. In exploring the way forward, the Working Group considers that the following issues require special attention:

- (a) Both parents and schools have made good use of the increased DP quota. The *Reform Proposals* recommends that each student could apply to two secondary schools at the DP stage so as to allow more parental choices. To implement this, we need to work out the operational details.
- (b) At the Central Allocation (CA) stage, the reduction of allocation bands has widened the within-school diversity in student ability in some secondary schools. There are still a considerable number of schools which are at the adaptation and exploratory stage in addressing the issue of student diversity.
- (c) Primary schools generally welcome the abolition of the AAT. However, some primary schools consider the existing scaling mechanism (*viz.* allocation bands being determined by a school's IA results scaled by the AATs of many years ago) as unfair. Many secondary schools also urge the retention of some form of scaling so as to contain the within-school student diversity to a manageable level.

Proposals on the SSPA Mechanism

28. **The Working Group agrees** to the merits of mixed ability learning and the gradual pursuit of the **long-term goal of “no banding and no scaling”** put forward by the EC in its *Reform Proposals*. However, the Working Group **considers that the following pre-conditions must be in place before the long-term goal can be realized:**

Primary Schools

- (a) **The majority of students meet the basic competency in Chinese, English and Mathematics when they complete their primary education.**

Secondary Schools

- (b) **The majority of secondary school teachers** possess sufficient professional knowledge and skills, as well as the space to develop school-based curriculum and effective teaching pedagogies to **cater for widened student diversity to ensure that most of their students meet the basic competency in Chinese, English and Mathematics when they complete junior secondary education.**

29. However, **the Working Group is of the view that these pre-conditions have yet to be met.** Therefore, in considering the way forward for the SSPA mechanism, the

Working Group reckons that, at the present stage, the existing mechanism can be improved to:

- (a) **provide parents with more choices and encourage diversified development of both students and schools; and**
- (b) **contain the within-school student diversity in secondary schools at a level currently manageable by secondary schools and teachers so that teachers can consolidate their experience in catering for wide student diversity and ensure student learning effectiveness.**

30. On the basis of the above considerations, the Working Group proposes:

(a) DP Stage

- (i) **increasing the DP quota from 20% to 30%;**
- (ii) **ceasing the provision of the “rank order list” to secondary schools; and**
- (iii) **allowing students to apply to two secondary schools.** In implementation, the following three options may be considered:
 - (1) Parents indicate their order of preference to the schools;
 - (2) Parents indicate their order of preference to the EMB only; or
 - (3) Parents indicate their order of preference to the EMB only, and schools may declare in advance that they will not consider second-choice applications.

(b) CA Stage

- (i) **10% of the CA places of every secondary school are set aside for allocation “unrestricted” by school nets.**
- (ii) **A scaling mechanism is retained in order to contain the within-school student diversity in secondary schools within a manageable level, so that teachers can consolidate their experience in catering for wide student diversity and ensure student learning effectiveness. If the community supports the need for scaling, the following options may be considered:**

- (1) **to continue with the current scaling mechanism; or**
 - (2) **to use the existing pre-S1 HKAT as a scaling tool. The average of the results of the two most recently sampled pre-S1 HKATs is taken to derive the instrument to scale primary schools' IA results of the coming cohort of P6 students proceeding to S1. The students will then be divided into allocation bands within each school net according to the scaled results.**
- (iii) **The three-band system is maintained.**

Implementation Timetable

31. If the proposals in this document are accepted, **the soonest the revised SSPA mechanism can apply is to the students who will be admitted to S1 in September 2007. The MOI arrangement can be effected in September 2008 at the earliest** and secondary schools which will have to change their MOI status will be notified by the end of 2007.

Inviting Feedbacks

32. The Working Group welcomes views from all sectors of the community on the above proposals. Comments should be sent to the Secretariat of the Working Group by post, fax or e-mail **on or before 2 May 2005:**

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