



Report from the Consultation Meeting for the 2013 Policy Address

The purpose of the consultation meeting was to collect opinions from the early childhood education profession in preparation for the 2013 Policy Address, to be announced in January, 2013. To strengthen coordination between policy formulation and financial planning, the Secretary for Finances Services and Treasury, the Secretary for Education, the Secretary for Home Affairs, and the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs were also present together with the Chief Secretary. The following recommendations were expressed by Dr. Maggie Koong, on behalf of OMEP-HK, at the policy address consultation meeting:

1. Increase Hong Kong's Investment in Early Childhood Education.

As early as 1996, the European Commission Network on Childcare advised all countries to invest at least 1% of GDP in ECE. By 2004, investment in pre-primary education (for children ages 0 to 6) was 1.7% of the GDP in Sweden and an average of 0.5% for the 19 other countries in the European Union (EU). Additionally, the percentage education budget spent on ECE is, on average, 8% for OECD countries. Nineteen governments in the EU shouldered 87.7% of the education expenses for children above three years of age. By contrast, investment in ECE in Hong Kong is only 0.14%, far behind the OECD countries. Only 3.9% of the Hong Kong educational expenditure is spent on ECE.

Request: We recommend increasing investment in Hong Kong ECE, up to 0.28% of the GDP by 2013-2014. We also recommend increasing expenditure, up to 6% of the educational expenditure, in Hong Kong.

2. Increase the Salary of Graduate ECE Teachers.

ECE teachers have long been struggling to gain the recognition they deserve as educators of our youngest children. They work in a system that is largely neglected and not included in Hong Kong's compulsory education; and since the voucher scheme was implemented, there is no longer a teacher salary scale for them to follow. ECE teachers have been striving to improve their qualifications to the degree level, but the salary of qualified ECE teachers remains far lower than that of their primary and secondary counterparts. This has significantly presented difficulties to ECE teachers in establishing their professional image, and has affected the stability and the quality of ECE in Hong Kong.

Request: We request that Hong Kong establish a teacher salary structure, with entry pay for qualified ECE teachers equal to their counterparts in the primary and secondary sectors, to ascertain the professional status of ECE, attract talented candidates to join the ECE profession, stabilize the ECE system, and ensure the quality and development of the



sector. All these are important for ensuring proper growth and development of each child.

3. Slant Resources towards Disadvantaged Families.

The increasing disparity between the rich and the poor is already a serious social problem in Hong Kong. Children in low income families are already disadvantaged by limited resources at home, and will be doubly disadvantaged if they cannot receive high quality education outside the home. UNESCO (2006) has confirmed from relevant research that appropriate care and education can compensate for the negative impacts of a poor family background. Hence, early interference and provision of comprehensive ECE can reduce unfairness and enhance equality from the outset, allowing fair competition amongst our future generations and breaking the vicious cycle of transferring poverty across generations.

Request: We call for the use of Proportionate Universalism to slant ECE resources towards poor families. We also recommend that the Government increase funding to kindergartens serving lower income families, enabling these schools to increase the number of teachers and amount of teaching resources.

4. Enact Early Intervention for Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Despite the fact that 6023 places for young children were available in various ECE schools and centers, according to the statistics of the Social Welfare Department, there were still 6190 students with SEN on the waiting list as of September 30, 2012. Clearly, there is an inadequacy of appropriate ECE places to cater for the specific needs of SEN students. As a result, many SEN students are unfortunately falling behind at a crucial time in their life.

Request: We call for the increase of resources and legislation to ensure that students with SEN can receive proper counseling, training, and education to help them in the early years and prevent the development of secondary handicaps. Furthermore, there is a need to increase SEN training for ECE teachers, as well as a need to increase SEN teaching resources and professional support. The additional support will allow for early identification of SEN students, as well as for earlier intervention to reduce blocks to students' development, thereby enhancing their chances of entering regular schools and participating in all activities in the Hong Kong society.