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Abolish the JSEA 'as quickly as possible'

The Junior Secondary Education Assessment system should be abolished "as quickly as possible," according to the report of the overall review on Hongkong's education system.

With the phasing out of the JSEA, admission to senior secondary schools should then be based on internal assessment moderated to accommodate differences in student ability and teacher expectations from school to school.

And if it is not feasible to create sufficient forms four and five places in the Government and aided sectors so that the JSEA can be abolished, then the quality of existing places must be improved, the panel said.

It suggested that one way to do so would be for the Government to pay more for every bought place in a private school, to allow the school to charge private students more, and to define standards to make sure that the additional income is used for the intended purpose.

The outcome of a policy to boost financial provisions to the private sector is that private schools would become either good enough to be accepted into the aid scheme (given appropriate upgrading of physical facilities) or not good enough from which to buy places.

"This would be a step closer towards equality of educational opportunity within compulsory education as well as a means of taking the edge off the sifting process at the end of primary school," the report said.

Hitting out at the great differences of quality that exist among schools, the panel said: "What we find unacceptable, on social as well as on educational grounds, is the situation wherein a large part of the students in compulsory secondary education (from one to three) are provided with 'bought' places in private schools, which in respect of basic quality criteria such as teacher qualifications and the

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scale and standard of physical facilities, are below that used by the Government for its own schools and set for those coming into the aid scheme."

This is where the impact of the examination problem lies, they continued.

In calling for increased financial provision to the private sector, the report said this was necessary to the extent that it is expected to fulfil a public function — in this case, the provision of compulsory secondary education of acceptable standard.

"A Government which enacts compulsory education up to a certain level must be responsible for securing adequate provision for it.

"Beside, the private schools are in a 'Catch 22' situation if, on the one hand, they are not allowed to charge any student more than the Government prescribed fee for a bought place, while on the other hand they are

criticised for poor standards of physical and programme provision," the report said.

Favouring a move towards greater equity in primary and junior secondary education, the panel suggested that consideration be given to the idea of "positive discrimination."

That is of giving special support to schools which, for instance, have produced or have had to accept, a particularly high share of less able pupils in transition from primary to secondary.

The panel found no case for extending compulsory schooling.

"However, subsidised post-compulsory education should be available to anyone who wants it.

"Given the high regard for learning and school achievement among the people of Hongkong, this may well amount to a virtual universal extension," it said.

Public spending still quite inadequate

Not enough money is being spent on education, the panel said.

Total resources — both public and private — going into the system were, on a per capita basis, "still unimpressive," the panel said.

The four experts said that while they did not underestimate the "magnificent" rate of increase in public expenditure on education over the past 20 years, "the base was very low."

They concluded that more could be allocated to education without detracting from other welfare services.

And the emphasis, in per capita terms, should be more towards the junior than the senior, and the vocational rather than the academic branches of education.

"It is indubitably the case that whichever social and economic path Hongkong follows, it will require greater allocation of staff, buildings and equipment for educational purposes," the report said.