

J. R. M. P.

8 Dec, 1978.

Big jump in English school fees

By HALIMA GUTERRES

The Government yesterday announced proposals for a major restructuring of the English schools and plans for a hefty increase in fees starting next September.

In the wake of complaints about the standard of education provided at the English schools, the Government has recommended that the English Schools Foundation take over the management of all these schools in the public sector.

At the same time fees will be raised from \$1,900 a year to about \$3,500 in the junior English schools and from \$3,040 a year to about \$5,300 in the English secondary schools.

If the ESF accepts the offer they will have "a substantial measure of freedom

to introduce improvements in standards and facilities to meet the wishes of parents," the Government said.

This will include the power to reduce class sizes and to hire more teachers.

But Government sources noted the planned fee rise does not allow for any significant improvements to be made so that if parents want these they will have to pay even more.

"There will be no marked improvements in standards initially and the schools will carry on next year much as they are now," one source said.

"It will probably be another year or two before they are able to do very much and even then at a rough guess I would say fees will have to go up by some hundreds of dollars before they can achieve anything measurable."

The ESF presently runs two secondary schools and three primary schools while a third secondary school and five primary schools are run by the Government, making a total student population of about 6,000.

A spokesman for the Gov-

ernment said, subject to acceptance of financial implications by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council, it is hoped the new arrangements will be brought into effect from the beginning of the next school year.

The 130 Government teachers who will be affected have been assured that their jobs will not be jeopardised and arrangements will be made for their initial secondment to the ESF as well as their subsequent employment if they accept contracts offered by the foundation.

The Secretary for the English Schools Foundation, the Reverend Geoffrey Speak, said last night there were some immediate problems that need to be ironed out but in the long-term the proposed arrangement promises "very exciting prospects as it will give us a good deal of freedom to develop and plan."

"Moreover teachers and parents will have very much more influence over policy," he said.

But first the foundation will need to know if the Government staff are going to be properly protected.

They will have to check the financial proposals and the extra fees recommended to make sure that it all adds up properly, he said.

Speaking in the capacity of a parent rather than as the chairman of the Joint Council of the Parents' and Teachers' Association, Mr Michael Guildford said he favoured the integration of the English schools under a single body.

At the moment the dual system operating is not particularly satisfactory in view of the compulsory zoning of schools, Mr Guildford said.

As for the rise however, Mr Guildford said that at a rough estimate the inflation rate since the last fee review in 1976 has only been in the order of 15 per cent.

Yet fees in the junior schools may be going up by 85 per cent and in the secondary schools by 75 per cent.

"I think there is no justification for increasing the fees over and above the 15 per cent to keep pace with inflation without commensurate benefits for the education of our children," he said.

The decentralisation of control over the English schools stemmed from an administrative review conducted by the Government of all aspects of the schooling for English-speaking children.

"The main conclusion is that the time has come for a basic change in the direction of the system. We believe that the schools will work better if they are all under one master," a Government spokesman said.

Explaining the reasons for
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the fee rise, the spokesman said that in the course of the review it had been necessary to look hard at the financing of English schools and particularly at the level of fees.

"It has been concluded that the mechanism designed to give effect to Government's policy of parity of subsidy with Anglo-Chinese schools has not worked satisfactorily," he said.

"As a result, a new formula has been derived which will also take into account rising costs."

Sources explained that subsidy arrangements for the English schools are based on the parity principle recommended in the 1965 White Paper on education.

According to this principle, the amount of money Government provides for the education of English-speaking children should be the same as that allowed for local children and any additional costs must be met by parents in the form of school fees.

The English schools have always incurred additional costs chiefly because they have to employ expatriate teachers and provide fringe benefits such as housing and travelling allowances.

In 1973 a Code of Aid for English schools was introduced with the view to producing an equitable subsidy system to ensure that the principle of parity was strictly observed.

However, sources said it had become increasingly obvious in the last year or so that the system was not working out as intended and the actual subsidy to each child in the English schools was much higher than in the Chi-

nese and Anglo-Chinese schools although it is no secret that even among these schools there are great variations.

At a very conservative estimate the difference is estimated to be about \$1,200 although some sources put it as high as \$2,000 in the case of English secondary schools and \$1,500 for a child in the junior schools.

It is in order to eliminate these discrepancies the Government has agreed in principle to raise fees, sources said.

The Government has also stressed that the fee rise and the change over in management are two separate issues.

Fees would still need to rise to levels similar to those proposed even without the transfer.

If the arrangements are finalised, the ESF will receive a grant which will be equivalent to that given to a standard secondary school in the public sector and all costs above this will be paid for by school fees.

Quite apart from the numerous implications for the English-speaking schools, the new arrangements are likely to have wide repercussions for the entire school system.

As education insiders pointed out, if the new arrangement works there is no reason why other types of schools should not go for the same kind of system.

"If the Anglo-Chinese or Chinese schools wish to opt

for this arrangement, we would be prepared to consider it," high-level Government sources said.

The English schools have operated under the principle that they provide an education similar in content to British State schools.

But parents and principals have for years complained that although the content and the nature of the system may be similar, class sizes are much bigger and standards a great deal lower.

In the past year or so there has been increasing pressure on the Government to make improvements but as long as the English schools remained part of the public sector the authorities felt they could not grant these requests without agreeing to similar improvements in the Chinese schools.

It was against this background that the ESF was given the choice of opting out of the public sector so that it could eventually make the changes which parents feel are needed.

The Government then decided the Government schools could not operate on a different system particularly as English school places are allocated on a fairly rigid zoning system. Therefore it proposed that the running of Government schools be handed over to the foundation, a statutory body comprising about 60 members charged with the responsibility of running the aided English schools.