

Bid to halt classroom increase

By CAROL SCOTT

LEGISLATORS have agreed to ask the Government to postpone its plan to increase the size of school classes until after the Budget speech on March 4.

Teachers have asked for the postponement because the Government is expected to announce a surplus of \$8 billion to \$12 billion this financial year and teachers hope that extra money will be diverted to the Education Department.

The proposal was put to members of the Omelco Education Panel by the teachers' representative in the Legislative Council, Mr Cheung Man-kwong, who



John Chan

said members agreed to a postponement.

The meeting was the last stage in the consultative process for the Education Department's controversial plan to save \$406 million

over three years by expanding classes in Primary One, Form One and Form Four from 38 to 40 students each.

The administration explained the savings exercise was to ensure that the growth in public expenditure did not exceed the rate of economic growth.

Whether there was a surplus or not was irrelevant, according to the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Mr John Chan Cho-chak.

However, Mr Chan said the postponement request would be considered favourably.

Teachers have claimed the scheme would damage the quality of education and worsen problems of disci-

pline and student suicide.

Their concern was shared by the Board of Education, which endorsed the proposal with reluctance on Monday. Board chairman Mr Timothy Ha Wing-ho said the board had agreed to the proposal only because none of the alternative schemes would allow the required savings to be made.

Mr Cheung said the panel had also discussed the salaries of kindergarten teachers.

He said the low salaries — untrained teachers are paid around \$4,000 per month, while their qualified colleagues receive between \$5,000 and \$7,000 — was leading to a shortage of teachers in the sector.