

13pc boost 'not fairly distributed'

By CAROL SCOTT

THE Government will boost its spending on education by 13 per cent to \$19 billion this year, but educationists say they are unhappy about the way the extra money will be distributed.

Teachers' groups have said the Government is right to commit funds to the tertiary sector but have claimed that universities and polytechnics are getting a big slice of the cake at the expense of other areas.

The Government has estimated it will spend \$5.21 billion on the seven institutions funded by the University and Polytechnic Grants Committee next year — an increase of 18½ per cent over this year.

The other sectors — pre-primary, primary, secondary, post-secondary, adult education and services for the disabled — will receive \$11.85 billion, an increase of 1½ per cent overall.

The teaching profession's representative in Legco, Mr Cheung Man-kwong, said he was "very dissatisfied with the distribution of the education budget."

He said that over the last few years, the budget allocated to the tertiary sector had risen while the money allocated to primary and secondary schooling has dropped.

Mr Cheung also disagreed that the Government had allocated a 1½ per cent increase to the school, adult education and disabled sectors. He said the figure was actually 1.27 per cent.

"That is much lower than the economic growth rate, which is five per cent, and much lower than inflation which is running at 11 per cent," he said.

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Chairman of the Education Action Group, Mr Anthony Ha Man-ho, described the expenditure as, "a big step backwards for the pre-primary, primary and secondary sectors".

Spending in the pre-primary sector is to be reduced from \$113.5 million last year to \$112.5 million this year. In the primary sector, expenditure will fall from \$4.52 billion last year to \$4.48 billion.

Spending on the secondary sector will rise from \$6.19 billion to \$6.39 billion, but Mr Ha said the 3.1 per cent increase did not keep pace with inflation.

"It is very disappointing to see this real decrease, especially given the fact that there are many problems in these three sectors, such as discipline, triad-related activity and student suicide," Mr Ha said.

"We agree with the expansion of the tertiary sector but the rate of expansion is too fast [the Government is pursuing a policy which will provide 18 per cent of students with a higher education within three to four years].

"We're concerned about the portion of expenditure they're obtaining and also about the quality of tertiary education if it expands too fast."

Secretary for the Hongkong Association for Continuing Education, Mr Mervyn Cheung Man-ping, said the tertiary sector needed extra money to help fund expansion, the development of research programmes and full-time courses.

But Mr Cheung, who is also a district board member for Shamshuipo, said the Government should pay

more attention to other sectors.

Primary education, for instance, deserved more attention because more than 90 per cent of children now attend pre-schooling.

Funding of post-secondary education — the sector provides training for kindergarten teachers and non-graduate primary and secondary school teachers — will be reduced from \$231 million to \$223.4 million.

Mr Cheung said teacher training needed to be improved — none of Hongkong's primary school teachers were graduates. But he said the Government should wait until the Fifth Report of the Education Commission — which will focus on upgrading teacher quality and training — was published later this year, before deciding how much money to allocate to the sector.

Spending on adult education will increase from \$53.8 million last year to \$55 million, this year. Mr Cheung described the increase as "absurd and indicative of the lack of care and attention the Government pays open education".

"Money should be put into civic education such as education for the elderly. The population is ageing fairly rapidly. One million people are now aged over 50 and many of our older people are not at all educated. They need education to help them with literacy, reading and interpersonal skills and political training to cope with direct elections," Mr Cheung said.

Spending on services for the disabled will increase from \$569 million to \$592 million.

Government spokesmen were not available for comment last night.