

An exercise on improving education

IN ANOTHER recent debate on education, all those who spoke agreed more resources were needed for basic education.

In reply to the legislators, the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Mr John Chan, said: "Unlike the tertiary sector, which is undergoing a phase of quantitative expansion, the school sector is entering a period of consolidation where the emphasis is on quality rather than numbers."

"The decline in enrolment in schools due to demographic changes together with the more cost-effective measures that we introduced have resulted in considerable savings which have been ploughed back to the school sector for various improvements."

Data on education expenses provided by the Government tells a different story. Unit costs — measured by total expenditures of schools by the number of students — for primary and secondary schools — dropped in real terms at the beginning of the current fiscal year 1992-93. According to Government projections, the trend will continue at least for the next two years.

We believe the Government should take more concrete steps to reaffirm its commitment to quality primary and secondary education. We have identified two priority areas to which additional funding should be directed.

A direct way of enhancing the quality of education is by improving the professional standard of the teaching force. We have put forward two specific targets:

Firstly, provide more in-service training for teachers. We believe in-service training should be increased in terms of quantity as well as the variety of course content to fit changing demands on the teaching profession.

More than a decade has passed

Legislative Councillor TIK CHI-YUEN writes on why he will this week move a Legislative Council motion pressing for urgent improvements to Hongkong's schools.

since the introduction of nine-year compulsory education. However, the gradual development away from elite education has not been accompanied by a corresponding change in school curriculum and teaching methods. We hear too often complaints from teachers about the declining academic standards of students and the impossibility of keeping order in class. Meanwhile, students are complaining about the boredom of school life.

Our school system has lagged far behind social changes. **N**EVERTHELESS, a number of innovative programmes have been suggested in the past few years and are awaiting implementation on a large scale. Examples include the School Management Initiative which gives public sector schools more decision-making powers, the school-based curriculum project scheme which encourages teachers and other education professionals to develop projects to suit the different abilities and needs of students, and target-related assessments which are designed to assess the academic standards of individual students and to suggest an appropriate medium of instruction.

The success of these innovative programmes requires the co-operation of and skilful implementation by teachers. It is therefore important to ensure teachers understand the thinking behind these programmes and acquire the necessary skills for their implementation.

Secondly, a longer term target

Firstly, we aim to reduce non-teaching duties for the teaching staff. At present, much of teachers' energies go into assisting to prepare and checking applications for reduced student fares, health and dental schemes, grants, etc., and other administrative tasks in schools. This is in addition to an average of 28 to 30 teaching periods per week.

The heavy workload leaves little room for teachers to give attention to the individual needs of students, or to achieve the ideals for quality education.

A study conducted by the Subsidised School Council reveals that at the 181 aided schools which have responded to the questionnaire, an average 14 per cent turnover rate was recorded for the academic year 1990-91. This represents seven teachers per school, four of whom have chosen to quit the profession. This is a worrying trend demanding attention.

Secondly, we must improve the teacher-student ratio. Statistics show there has not been much improvement to the teacher-student ratio for primary schools since the mid-1980s; it remained at about 1:27 until 1991-92. Secondary schools saw some improvement, moving from 1:30 in 1990 to 1:23 in 1988 and 1:21.5 in 1991-92.

Both, however, compared badly with most developed countries.

An improved teacher-student ratio would allow teachers to spend more time on teaching related work and student guidance. An improved teacher-student ratio should be accompanied by a reduced number of students in each class so that innovative teaching methods can be introduced.

These are the priority areas for improvements in education. It is time for Government to commit to improving the quality of basic education in Hongkong.