

1 March 2024

Education Bureau Circular No. 7/2024

Class Structure and Future Planning of Primary Schools

[Note : This circular should be read by –

- (a) School Sponsoring Bodies, Supervisors and Heads of Aided Primary Schools (excluding Special Schools); and
- (b) Heads of Government Primary Schools, Direct Subsidy Scheme Primary Schools and Special Schools, and Heads of Sections – for information.]

Summary

This circular informs School Sponsoring Bodies (SSBs) of aided primary schools as well as schools of the related arrangements and support measures concerning class structure. It should be read in conjunction with other relevant circulars, letters, or guidelines that are still applicable.

Details

2. In planning for the provision of public sector school places and the development of schools, the prime consideration of Education Bureau (EDB) is the interest of student learning, ensuring a healthy and sustainable development of education system in Hong Kong. As the decline in student population is structural rather than transient, the future demand for school places will correspondingly decrease. EDB will closely monitor the changes in student population, conduct dynamic assessment of the demand and supply of school places, and with the aim of “soft landing”, continue to maintain close communication with SSBs in supporting the sector to plan ahead and adopt appropriate measures to consolidate resources to respond to changes in demand and supply of school places. In tandem, for enhancing

the quality of education, EDB will keep providing students with opportunities for whole-person development and diversified learning, and ensure the optimal use of public resources. SSBs and schools should act according to circumstances, prepare ahead, taking into consideration the district and school circumstances, and population situation, in devising a feasible way forward for development. They should carefully read the related arrangements and support measures regarding the aided primary school class structure in this circular, in order to plan for and formulate the most suitable long-term development direction for schools as early as possible.

Operation of Primary One (P1) classes

3. The actual number of P1 classes that a school may operate depends on a number of factors, including parental choices and the number of classrooms available. Based on the number of students admitted by a school during the Discretionary Places Admission (DP) stage of Primary One Admission (POA) and the result of computer analysis of the actual choices made by parents during the Central Allocation (CA) stage, EDB will work out the total number of students to be allocated to each primary school¹. This will form the basis for deciding the actual number of P1 classes that a school may operate.

4. Under the existing criteria for operation of P1 classes, if a total of 16 or more students are allocated through POA to a public sector school, the school will be allowed to operate subsidised P1 classes. Unless there are special factors for consideration, if the total number of students allocated to a public sector school through POA is less than 16 and there are still unfilled P1 places in other schools of the same school net under POA, the school, in principle, will not be allowed to operate subsidised P1 classes. However, if there are insufficient school places to meet the demand in a school net, a school may still be allowed to operate a subsidised P1 class even though the number of students allocated to it is below 16. Schools that are unable to operate subsidised P1 classes may apply for an option set out at Appendix.

¹ After the DP stage, the remaining places of the school will be allocated during the CA stage.

Approved classes and manpower planning

5. Every September, EDB collects student data from public sector schools for verifying the actual number of students enrolled and determine whether adjustments are needed in the approved number of classes at different class levels. If there are redundant teachers arising from class reduction due to insufficient enrolment, the basis for calculating the number of approved classes from P1 to Primary Five (P5) is 23 students per class.

6. The approved number of classes of Primary Six (P6) is being carried forward from the approved number of P5 classes of last school year and will not be affected by the actual enrolment. This arrangement is implemented for a trial period of three years starting from the 2023/24 school year².

7. If the approved number of classes of a school is reduced after the September headcount, the SSB and the school should adopt appropriate measures to resolve the situation of redundant teachers that may arise. Such measures include redeploying redundant teachers to other schools under the same SSB, appointing redundant teachers to fill temporary posts, or arranging job-sharing and teachers taking no-pay leave. In case the SSB/school cannot absorb all of their redundant teachers through the relevant measures, redundant teachers can be tolerated until the end of that school year³. Schools are reminded to rectify the redundant teacher situation as early as possible. For details of the prevailing arrangements for handling redundant teachers, please refer to the relevant circular memorandum⁴ issued by EDB annually.

² The details of the trial arrangement were announced by EDB in a letter addressed to aided primary schools on 30 May 2023.

³ Please also refer to the relevant arrangements as stated in EDB Circular No. 10/2019 “Relief Measures for Facilitating Sustainable Development of Primary Schools”, that aided primary schools are allowed to apply on an annual basis for retaining their redundant teachers on the approved teaching staff establishment arising from class reduction for the next school year due to the decline of P1 student population for the period from the 2019/20 to 2024/25 school years (including schools which fail to enrol sufficient P1 students to retain the pre-approved number of classes as a result of the September headcount of the school year), up to a maximum of three school years for each cohort, providing that before the commencement of the next school year, their redundant teachers cannot be absorbed through the prevailing mechanism for handling redundant teachers or are unable to secure a teaching post in another school.

⁴ The relevant circular memorandum for the 2023/24 school year is No. 28/2023 “Arrangements for Redundant Teachers of Aided Primary Schools in the 2023/24 School Year”.

Admission arrangements

8. EDB has all along been closely reviewing the demand and supply for primary school places in individual districts/school nets. If circumstances and resources permit, EDB will, in a timely and orderly manner, implement small class teaching (SCT) in public sector primary schools as far as possible to enhance the quality of teaching. It is expected that in the 2024/25 school year, over 90% of the public sector primary schools will implement SCT. For schools currently implementing SCT, the standard class size under POA is 25 per class, whereas that for other schools is 30 per class. The enrolment cap of each class is at 10% above the standard P1 class size. In other words, the enrolment cap per class is 27 for primary schools with 25 students as the standard class size and 33 for those with 30 students as the standard class size.

9. The number of school places between the enrolment cap and the standard class size, which schools may use to admit students who were not allocated to the school under POA, is commonly referred to as “door-knocking places”. Starting from the 2023/24 school year, EDB has implemented a trial arrangement of reducing the use of “door-knocking places” in P1 of public sector schools. For primary schools with a standard class size of 25 students, the average number of “door-knocking places” per class is changed from 2 to 1. In other words, the average number of students admitted using “door-knocking places”, who were not allocated to the school under POA, is changed to 1 per class. For primary schools with a standard class size of 30 students, the number of “door-knocking places” is changed from 3 to 2. Adjusting the number of students per class is beneficial for enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. This trial arrangement is implemented for three school years⁵.

Enquiries

10. For enquiries, please contact the respective Senior School Development Officers.

Dr Verena LAU
for Permanent Secretary for Education

⁵ The details of the trial arrangement were announced by EDB in a letter addressed to aided primary schools on 30 May 2023.

Options for schools to plan their way forward and support measures

Foreword

1. EDB is committed to enhancing the quality of education, providing students with diversified learning opportunities, promoting their holistic development, and ensuring the optimal use of public resources. A school is a place where students may learn in groups, and if a school fails to maintain an appropriate number of students and provide a conducive teaching environment and opportunities for students to learn in groups, it will be difficult to meet their diverse learning and holistic development needs. EDB actively supports SSBs and schools to plan ahead, responding to changes in demand and supply of school places and enhancing the quality of education in tandem. SSBs and schools should act according to circumstances, prepare ahead, taking into consideration the district and school circumstances, and population situation, in devising a feasible way forward for development.
2. According to existing requirements, schools that are not approved to operate subsidised P1 classes under POA will not be eligible to participate in future POA unless special approval is granted. In general, for schools that cannot participate in POA, EDB will cease providing subsidies to them starting from the third school year (i.e. the N+3 school year) after the first year when the schools are not able to operate subsidised P1 classes (i.e. year N)⁶. They will cease operation then.
3. Four options as well as support measures provided by EDB are listed in this appendix for the aforementioned schools to apply for. For example, schools may consider to merge with another school to consolidate resources, and enhance synergy and the quality of learning and teaching. EDB will provide an additional allowance and an extended retention period for redundant teachers

⁶ For example, if a school is unable to operate a subsidised P1 class in the 2024/25 school year and subsequently fails to participate in POA, EDB will cease providing subsidies starting from the 2027/28 school year.

for the merger. Schools may also consider applying for Special Review or operation of a privately-funded P1 class. Schools should carefully consider their own situation as well as resources available and choose to apply for **one** of the options mentioned below based on their school circumstances. EDB will review the documents and relevant information submitted by schools to decide whether their application can be approved.

4. If a school does not choose any option or if the selected option is not approved, EDB will cease providing any form of subsidies to the school starting from the N+3 school year. At that time, students who have not completed their primary school curriculum yet will be provided with placement arrangements by EDB to transfer to other public sector schools to continue their studies. As P5 and P6 are crucial stages before students entering secondary school, in order to ensure the well-being of students and maintain continuity and stability in their learning, EDB reminds schools to make arrangements for students as early as possible to avoid P5 students having to transfer to other schools to continue their P6 studies in the N+3 school year. If schools encounter difficulties in making arrangements, EDB can provide assistance, such as making placement arrangements for students entering P5 in the N+2 school year in advance, allowing them to continue their P5 and P6 studies at other public sector schools.

Option 1: Merger with other schools

5. Schools may consider merging with another school under the same or different SSB. Merging schools can help consolidate resources, and enhance synergy and the quality of learning and teaching and ensure the well-being of students. Students who cannot complete their primary school curriculum in their original school do not need the placement arrangements by EDB to transfer them to other public sector schools to continue their studies. As schools will no longer receive government subsidies starting from the N+3 school year, they have to complete the merger by the beginning of the N+3 school year at the latest. Schools must propose to EDB the mode, schedule and all details of the merger for the consideration of whether the application can be approved. They have to obtain consent from the respective SSBs and Incorporated Management Committees (IMCs) / School Management Committees (SMCs). They should also inform the major stakeholders (including teachers and parents) and respond

to their views and enquiries.

6. In order to facilitate the smooth implementation and transition of approved merger:
 - (i) If the same cohort of students of the school without P1 classes can complete their primary school curriculum in the same school through merger and no placement arrangements by EDB as mentioned in the fourth paragraph of this appendix are required to transfer the students to other public sector schools to continue their studies, **a one-off additional allowance in the amount of \$1 million** will be granted to the school that continues to operate P1 classes after the merger to cover additional expenses incurred during the merger.
 - (ii) If, in the year(s) of merger, there are redundant teachers in the school that continues to operate P1 classes, it will be allowed to retain, for three years, the incumbent teachers on the approved teaching staff establishment⁷ related to the levels under merger of the two schools in the school year preceding the merger so that the school may have time to adjust the staff strength⁸ through natural wastage and other means.
 - (iii) EDB will discuss individual merger proposals with SSBs and provide facilitation as far as practicable.

Option 2: Special Review

7. Primary schools not approved to operate subsidised P1 classes under POA may apply to EDB for Special Review if they consider there are sufficient grounds to show that their overall performance has reached a level of “good” or above after self-evaluation and upon obtaining consent from their IMC/SMC and the respective SSB.

⁷ Approved teaching staff establishment is stated in the approval letter on Class Organisation and Staff Establishment for the relevant school year. Teaching staff entitlement derived from the number of approved classes can be retained, while the additional teachers provided under specific improvement programmes will be subject to applicability. Teachers not holding a regular post and supply teachers appointed for temporary replacement (i.e. substituting for teacher on leave) are not included.

⁸ Schools have to follow the prevailing arrangement to handle the salary arrangement of redundant teachers and over-ranked teachers. For details of the prevailing arrangement for handling redundant teachers, please refer to the relevant circular memorandum issued by EDB annually. Schools should rectify the situation of redundant teacher before appointing any new teachers.

8. After submitting the application, the school is required to prepare a self-evaluation report based on the template provided by EDB and submit it to EDB on or before the specified date. EDB will comprehensively, professionally and prudently review the submitted documents, school self-evaluation data, other relevant information etc. to consider the application. The overall performance of the school must attain the level of “good” or above in order to be approved for undergoing Special Review.
9. Both the review of the submitted documents and the conduct of Special Review by EDB are evidence-based. EDB’s *Performance Indicators for Hong Kong Schools (2022)* form the basis for objective review of schools to ensure fairness, transparency and justice. The overall performance of a school can be rated as “good” only if its strengths outweigh its weaknesses.
10. If the school is approved for undergoing Special Review and the result of Special Review shows that the overall performance of a school has attained the level of “good” or above, the school can continue to participate in the POA in the subsequent school year. If the application for Special Review is not approved, or if the application for Special Review is approved but the overall performance of the school has not reached the level of “good”, or if the school is not allocated with sufficient students for operating P1 classes in the aforementioned subsequent POA, EDB will count the school year for which disbursement of subsidies to the school will be terminated (i.e. the N+3 school year) as from the first school year in which the school fails to operate a subsidised P1 class (i.e. the N school year), and provide student placement arrangements as specified in the fourth paragraph of this appendix.

Option 3: Operation of a privately-funded P1 class

11. A school may apply to operate a privately-funded P1 class in the school years where they are unable to operate subsidised P1 classes. Privately-funded classes do not receive government subsidies and cannot charge tuition fees. The SSB should provide all necessary funding for the privately-funded P1 class, taking into consideration the staff entitlement, required qualifications and

professional training of teachers, and subsidies related to supporting students as stipulated in the Code of Aid, ensuring that students of the privately-funded P1 class have access to educational resources no less than students in other class levels.

12. The school should submit detailed plans, data, and justifications (consisting of four domains: management and organisation, learning and teaching, school ethos and student support, and student performance) to demonstrate its capability to provide quality education to students. The learning environment and facilities of the school must meet the requirements for students' holistic development. The SSB must also provide a bank guarantee or bank statement to demonstrate that there is sufficient financial capacity to implement the plan.
13. If the school is approved to operate a privately-funded P1 class, it can participate in POA again in the subsequent school year. If the school is allocated with sufficient students to operate a P1 class, the school can then operate subsidised P1 class(es) in that school year, while the originally privately-funded P1 class can be turned into a subsidised P2 class. However, if the school is not allocated with sufficient students to operate a P1 class, EDB will count the school year for which disbursement of subsidies to the school will be terminated (i.e. the N+3 school year) as from the first school year in which the school fails to operate a subsidised P1 class (i.e. the N school year). In addition to the student placement arrangements described in the fourth paragraph of this appendix, EDB will provide placement service for students of the privately-funded classes after their completion of Primary Three at the school, and transfer them to other public sector schools to continue their Primary Four study.

Option 4: Cessation of operation of school or particular level(s) before the N+3 school year

14. If a school cannot maintain an optimal size of overall number of students for creating a conducive teaching environment and providing opportunities for learning in groups, the SSB, taking into account the school's specific circumstances, may consider advancing the cessation of operation of the school or particular class level(s) before the N+3 school year for the sake of our students.

This allows students to switch to other schools for studies earlier and adapt to new learning environments. EDB will provide feasible and appropriate support regarding the arrangements for students transferring to other public sector schools. The school has to consult stakeholders and, with the consent of the SSB and the IMC/SMC, submit plans for advancing the cessation of operation of the school or particular class level(s) to EDB for approval.