

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Executive Summary

1. Special Educational Needs (SEN) refer to the needs of students arising from various types of disabilities. The Education Bureau (EDB) classifies SEN into nine types, namely: (a) visual impairment (VI); (b) hearing impairment (HI); (c) physical disability (PD); (d) intellectual disability (ID); (e) specific learning difficulties; (f) attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder; (g) autism spectrum disorders; (h) speech and language impairment; and (i) mental illness. The Government adopts a dual-track mode in implementing special education. Children with more severe or multiple disabilities are placed in special schools for intensive support, subject to the assessment and recommendation of the specialists and with parents' consent. Other children with SEN who can participate in learning and daily activities in ordinary schools receive integrated education in ordinary schools.

2. Aided special schools receive subvention from EDB under the Code of Aid for Special Schools or Code of Aid for Aided Schools. They fall into six types, namely: (a) school for children with VI; (b) school for children with HI; (c) school for children with PD; (d) school for children with ID (schools for children with ID are further classified into schools for children with mild intellectual disability (MiID), schools for children with moderate intellectual disability (MoID) and schools for children with severe intellectual disability (SID)); (e) school for social development (SSD); and (f) Hospital School. Some special schools are provided with boarding facilities to cater for the long-term residential needs of students with severe disabilities and to facilitate them to receive school education during school days.

3. In school year 2018/19, there were 60 aided special schools and boarding services were provided in 28 of them (unless otherwise specified: (a) all years mentioned hereinafter refer to school years; and (b) the figures mentioned for a school year refer to the position as at 15 September of the respective school year). Of the 28 schools, 7 were SSDs and the boarding services for SSD students were provided by residential homes subvented by and under the purview of the Social Welfare Department (SWD). The boarding sections of the remaining 21 schools were subvented by and under the purview of EDB.

Executive Summary

4. In 2018/19, there were 7,939 students enrolled in the 60 special schools, comprising 3,783 primary school students and 4,156 secondary school students. Majority of the students enrolled in special schools were students with ID (including MiID, MoID or SID). Special Education is one of the programme areas of EDB. The amount of expenditure on the programme area increased by \$701.9 million (35%) from \$2,010.8 million in financial year 2014-15 to \$2,712.7 million in financial year 2018-19. The resources and support provided for special education include staffing (comprising teaching staff, specialist staff and non-specialist staff), professional development of staff, and various grants and support. Two Special Education Support Sections under the Special Education Division of EDB are responsible for special education services. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of EDB's work in the implementation of special education and SWD's work in connection with special education.

Provision and management of school places and boarding places

5. *Not all regions provided with all types of special school places.* Except for the Hospital School, EDB provides special school places either on a regional basis (a total of seven regions) or on a territory-wide basis. Audit reviewed the school places provided on a regional basis (i.e. the 7 schools for children with PD and the 41 schools for children with ID) and found that: (a) the Outlying Islands region did not have schools for children with PD and children with ID; and (b) the Sha Tin and Sai Kung region (excluding Tseung Kwan O) did not have schools for children with SID (paras. 2.2 and 2.3).

6. *Need to take measures to address the under-enrolment in some schools.* The enrolment in SSDs was not high in 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19. The overall enrolment rates of the eight SSDs were 51%, 53% and 57% respectively. In 2018/19, the enrolment rates of each of the eight SSDs ranged from 40% to 74% (paras. 2.5 and 2.7).

7. *Need to adopt more flexibility in placement arrangements for school-age students with ID and students with PD.* The placement arrangements for school-age students (i.e. students other than upcoming Primary One students) with ID and students with PD are more restrictive: (a) upcoming Primary One students with ID can apply for any school in the territory. However, school-age students with ID can only apply for a school whose Primary Catchment Area or Extended Catchment Area

Executive Summary

covers their residence; and (b) unlike the placement arrangements for upcoming Primary One students with SID which allow applications for any school in the territory, students with PD can only apply for a school whose catchment area covers their residence. However, for the provision of boarding places, EDB considers that both students with SID and students with PD have mobility problems and therefore, parents of students with SID or PD are subject to the same application restriction (para. 2.10).

8. ***Need to review reasons for prolonged enrolment of SSD students.*** SSDs aim to provide more intensive guidance to students so that they may reintegrate into ordinary schools as soon as possible. The short-term adjustment programme is implemented for students who are expected to be able to be discharged after receiving services at SSDs for three months to one year. For students not under the short-term adjustment programme, most students are expected to be able to achieve notable improvement and leave SSDs within two school years. Audit analysed the periods of stay in SSDs (between admission and discharge) for the students discharged from SSDs in the period from 2013/14 to 2017/18 and found that: (a) on average 41% of the students (ranging from 27% to 52%) under the short-term adjustment programme stayed in the schools for more than one year, and the longest period of stay (for one student discharged in 2013/14) was 3 years and 8 months; and (b) on average 46% of the students (ranging from 34% to 58%) not under the short-term adjustment programme stayed in the schools for more than two years, and the longest period of stay (for one student discharged in 2015/16) was 7 years (paras. 2.12 and 2.13).

9. ***Need to explore ways to rationalise boarding places for students with SID.*** Audit analysed the vacancy and waiting situation of boarding places in schools for children with SID and noted that as at 15 September 2018: (a) notwithstanding that there were 26 students waiting for seven-day boarding service, there were 40 vacant places for five-day boarding service; and (b) under the existing mechanism, applicants could only apply for either five-day boarding places or seven-day boarding places. Applicants awaiting seven-day boarding places would not be allocated five-day boarding places as a stopgap measure to partially meet their boarding needs before seven-day boarding places were available for them (para. 2.19).

10. ***Need to further increase the supply of new boarding places.*** As at 15 June 2019, there were 132 students with MoID waiting for boarding places (28 for five-day boarding service and 104 for seven-day boarding service). Audit noted that 8 (29%) of the 28 students awaiting five-day boarding service had been waiting for

Executive Summary

more than 1 year (the longest was 5 years and 10 months) and 65 (63%) of the 104 students awaiting seven-day boarding service had been waiting for more than 1 year (the longest was 3 years and 9 months). According to EDB's latest projection on the supply and demand of boarding places for students with MoID: (a) a significant level of shortfall of boarding places would persist in 2019/20 and 2020/21. The projected numbers of shortfall of boarding places were 161 places in 2019/20 and 125 places in 2020/21; and (b) notwithstanding that the shortfall of boarding places would improve from 161 places in 2019/20 to 29 places in 2025/26, there would still be a shortfall of boarding places throughout the projection period of seven school years (paras. 2.21, 2.22 and 2.25).

11. ***Need to explore ways to make good use of boarding places in SSDs.*** Each SSD and its residential home only admit students of a single gender. The utilisation of boarding places in SSDs for girls decreased from 73% in 2014/15 to 43% in 2018/19, and the number of vacant boarding places for girls increased from 55 in 2014/15 to 153 in 2018/19 (para. 2.26).

12. ***Need to provide assistance to special schools in reviewing the boarding needs of existing boarders.*** EDB entrusted special schools to ensure that boarding places were released by students who no longer have boarding needs, making such boarding places available for students with the most genuine needs. While special schools had developed their own school-based guidelines for conducting regular reviews of boarding needs of existing boarders, the schools expressed difficulties in conducting the reviews. EDB did not have information on the number of boarding places that were made available as a result of the regular reviews conducted by schools (para. 2.29).

13. ***Need to consider adopting more flexibility in placement arrangements of seven-day boarding service for students with SID or PD.*** EDB maintains a central queue for seven-day boarding service. Parents are required to indicate their preference on schools. For parents of a student with SID or PD, if they specify a particular school, they can only specify a school whose catchment area covers their residence. However, if they have no preference on a particular school, the student will be offered a boarding place as soon as it is available from any school regardless of the student's residential address. EDB needs to consider adopting more flexibility in the placement arrangements of seven-day boarding service for students with SID and students with PD (paras. 2.30 and 2.31).

Staffing of special schools

14. ***Need to closely monitor wastage rate of special school teachers.*** EDB defines the wastage rate of teachers in special schools as the number of drop-out teachers as a percentage of the total number of teachers in special schools in the preceding school year. Audit found that in the period from 2014/15 to 2018/19: (a) the wastage rate of teachers in special schools was higher than that for teachers in ordinary schools; and (b) the wastage rate of teachers in special schools had increased significantly from 6.8% in 2014/15 to 8.5% in 2018/19 (paras. 3.2 and 3.3).

15. ***Difficulties in filling posts of occupational therapists and physiotherapists.*** In 2018/19, the establishment of specialist staff for the 60 special schools was 1,181 staff. Among the various types of specialist staff, it was particularly difficult to have all occupational therapist (OT) and physiotherapist (PT) posts filled. To alleviate the recruitment difficulties, EDB allows special schools to freeze the unfilled posts of OTs and PTs in return for cash grants for hiring short-term or part-time occupational therapy and physiotherapy services. Audit found that the vacancy situation of OTs and PTs in the period from 2014/15 to 2018/19 remained serious after some of the posts had been frozen: (a) the average number of unfilled posts as a percentage of the establishment was 37% (ranging from 22% to 49%) for OTs and 44% (ranging from 39% to 48%) for PTs; and (b) after freezing some unfilled posts, the average percentage of vacant posts remained as high as 13% (ranging from 8% to 17%) for OTs and 15% (ranging from 10% to 22%) for PTs (paras. 3.8 and 3.9).

16. ***High vacancy of some types of non-specialist staff.*** In 2018/19, the establishment of non-specialist staff was 792 staff. High vacancy rates existed in four types of non-specialist staff, namely teacher assistants (18%), cooks (16%), workshop attendants (15%) and watchmen (12%). Audit analysed the vacancy rates of these four types of non-specialist staff for the period from 2014/15 to 2018/19 and found that the vacancy rates of three of the four types of non-specialist staff (i.e. except watchmen) had shown an increasing trend since 2016/17 (paras. 3.11 to 3.13).

17. ***Need to monitor the attainment of teacher training target.*** In 2018/19, after consulting the special school sector, EDB set a teacher training target for all special schools, namely by the end of 2022/23, each special school should have 85% to 100% of its teachers having completed specified special education training (SET).

Executive Summary

Audit found that: (a) EDB recognised teachers in special schools who had completed structured training courses that were equivalent to the Training Course for Special School Teachers (TCSST) as teachers who had completed SET. However, EDB had not promulgated the recognition criteria to help teachers and principals understand whether the courses attended by teachers were equivalent to TCSST; and (b) individual schools did not know the percentage of their teachers who had completed SET (paras. 3.18 and 3.19).

18. ***Need to increase the number of training places of TCSST.*** In view of the different educational needs of students enrolled in special schools, TCSST specifically offered to special school teachers has been launched since 2012/13 and 40 training places have been provided by EDB each year. The feedback on TCSST from the special school sector was good and positive, and all the 40 training places were fully enrolled in 2018/19. To facilitate special schools in achieving the teacher training target of 85% to 100% by 2022/23, EDB needs to keep in view the adequacy of TCSST training places and increase the number of places where necessary (paras. 3.17, 3.20 and 3.21).

19. ***Decreasing percentage of special school teachers with special education training qualification.*** The percentage of teachers in special schools with special education training qualification is one of the key performance measures in EDB's Controlling Officer's Report. Audit found that: (a) the percentage increased from 73.4% in 2014/15 to 75% in 2016/17 and then decreased to 70.5% in 2018/19; and (b) of the 60 special schools in 2018/19, 7 (11.6%) schools had less than half of the teachers with special education training qualification (paras. 3.22 and 3.23).

Grants and support for special education

20. ***Need to encourage participation in sharing sessions.*** Since 2009/10, EDB has adopted the Tripartite Model of Support (TMS) to enhance the communication and collaboration with special schools as well as strengthen professional development of teachers. Since 2016/17, EDB has arranged a sharing session for special schools after conducting theme-based visits to schools. In the period from 2016/17 to 2018/19, four sharing sessions were held. Audit found that the percentage of special schools participating in the sharing sessions was not high, ranging from 45.9% to 70.0% and averaging 54.4% (paras. 4.2 and 4.3).

Executive Summary

21. ***Need to ensure that the amount of support grant is adequate to meet the needs of special schools.*** The Additional Support Grant for Day Students and Day Students cum Boarders with Medical Complexity (hereinafter referred to as Day MC Grant) was launched in 2017/18. Special schools can use the Day MC Grant for employing additional staff such as health care workers, procuring health care services or arranging staff training. The suspected students with medical complexity (MC) are put up by special schools. The medical assessment for paediatric cases of suspected students with MC is conducted by the Hospital Authority (HA) and arranged through EDB. Audit found that: (a) not all the suspected cases initially reported by schools were assessed; and (b) the arrangement with HA for conducting medical assessments was a one-off ad hoc task. The processing of the Day MC Grant will be seriously affected should HA cease to conduct medical assessments on paediatric cases of suspected day students with MC (paras. 4.9 to 4.11 and 4.14).

22. ***Inconsistent provision of funding support for furniture and equipment (F&E) procured using different funding sources.*** Some F&E items such as ceiling hoist would greatly enhance the special schools' support provided to children with MC. Audit reviewed the funding support for ceiling hoist and noted inconsistent provision of funding support by EDB to existing special schools and a new special school for children with ID. While the new special school could use its block grant to fully cover the recurrent cost of ceiling hoists, the existing special schools could use the surplus of their block grant to cover no more than 25% of the recurrent cost of ceiling hoists that they acquired through their own funding sources (paras. 4.19 and 4.20).

23. ***Need to provide more assistance to students in school leaving arrangements.*** Special school leavers mainly have the following school leaving arrangements: (a) employment in open market; (b) further studies; (c) vocational training; (d) vocational rehabilitation services; (e) day training or care services; and (f) other arrangements (e.g. staying at home). In the period from 2013/14 to 2017/18, significant percentages of special school leavers who had applied for vocational rehabilitation services and day training or care services were on the waiting lists (ranging from 13.2% to 38.0% and 13.3% to 64.7% respectively). Moreover, Audit examined the reasons for special school students to extend their years of study for the period from 2013/14 to 2017/18 and found that in each of the five years, 42.7% to 56.8% (averaging 48.6%) of students had their years of study extended by schools after their difficulties in school leaving arrangements were taken into account (paras. 4.23, 4.25 and 4.26).

Executive Summary

Audit recommendations

24. Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has *recommended* that the Secretary for Education should:

Provision and management of school places and boarding places

- (a) consider expanding the scope of target students of special schools as far as practicable so that children with PD in the Outlying Islands region and children with SID in the Sha Tin and Sai Kung region can be better catered for in their own regions (para. 2.14(b));
- (b) take measures to address the issue of low enrolment of students in SSDs (para. 2.14(c));
- (c) consider adopting more flexibility in the placement arrangements for school-age students with ID and students with PD (para. 2.14(d));
- (d) review the reasons why more than 40% of students, on average, stayed in SSDs beyond the expected timeframe (para. 2.14(e));
- (e) ascertain whether more guidance and advice should be given to referrers of SSDs so that they can better identify students suitable for the short-term adjustment programme (para. 2.14(f));
- (f) explore the feasibility of implementing measures with a view to making more efficient use of the boarding places and shortening the waiting time for seven-day boarding places in schools for children with SID (para. 2.33(a));
- (g) step up EDB's efforts in exploring effective measures to increase the supply of new boarding places with a view to shortening the waiting time of students with MoID for boarding services (para. 2.33(b));
- (h) provide assistance to special schools in reviewing the boarding needs of existing boarders (para. 2.33(c));

Executive Summary

- (i) consider adopting more flexibility in the placement arrangements of seven-day boarding service (para. 2.33(d));

Staffing of special schools

- (j) explore appropriate measures to address the relatively higher wastage rate of special school teachers (para. 3.5);
- (k) take measures to address the difficulties faced by special schools in filling OT and PT posts (para. 3.14(a));
- (l) monitor the vacancy situation of non-specialist staff in special schools (para. 3.14(b));
- (m) promulgate the recognition criteria of training courses that are equivalent to TCSST (para. 3.25(a));
- (n) regularly ascertain the percentage of teachers who have completed SET in each special school and monitor the progress of attaining the target of 85% to 100% by 2022/23, and increase the number of TCSST training places where necessary (para. 3.25(b) and (c));
- (o) take measures to increase the percentage of special school teachers with special education training qualification (para. 3.25(d));

Grants and support for special education

- (p) take appropriate measures to encourage special schools' participation in sharing sessions under Cross-Sector Communication of TMS (para. 4.6(a));
- (q) in collaboration with the Chief Executive of HA, take measures to ensure that special schools are provided with Day MC Grant that can adequately meet their needs (para. 4.15); and

Executive Summary

- (r) consider ways to support special schools which had acquired F&E items through their own funding sources that were not in the schools' F&E list but were subsequently included in the F&E list of new special schools (para. 4.21(b)).

25. Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Social Welfare should keep in view the utilisation of boarding places in residential homes of SSDs and continue to take measures to make good use of the vacant boarding places where appropriate (para. 2.34).

26. Audit has also *recommended* that the Secretary for Education and the Director of Social Welfare should, in collaboration with other stakeholders, provide more assistance to special school students in their school leaving arrangements (para. 4.28).

Response from the Government

27. The Secretary for Education and the Director of Social Welfare agree with the audit recommendations.