



International Congress for School Effectiveness

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In Pursuit of Excellence: Challenges and Changes for
the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Presented by

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Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour for me to address this distinguished audience of scholars and educators from around the world. As the Director of Education of Hong Kong, who has been in post for less than two months, I had a steep learning curve in order to be able to stand up before you today.

My license to speak among you stems from the knowledge that as the 21st Century holds challenges for all, education is high on the agenda of many nations, and the commonality of problems we face has brought us together to share experience and good practices. In a spirit of collaboration, it is right that I should pay my due, as a newcomer to ICSEI, by sharing with you the Hong Kong experience. Furthermore, as Hong Kong will play host to ICSEI in 2000, it falls upon me to provide the backdrop for this exciting event.

Hong Kong : Some Facts

Area

For those of you who have not been to Hong Kong, I would like, first of all, to give you some basic facts about the territory. Hong Kong, located at the tip of the Pearl River delta of southern China, has an area of just about 1,000 square kilometres of which half are islands and hills, which are uninhabitable. Apart from its geographically strategic location and a deep natural harbour, Hong Kong lacks other natural resources. People are our most valuable assets. It is not surprising, therefore, that education has always been an important agenda for the Government.

Demographics

Hong Kong has a relatively young population, about one-third of whom are under the age of 25. Of a total population of 6.7 million, 1.6 million fall within the schooling ages of 3 to 22. Within this age group, the primary school population (ages 6-11) is about 470,000 in 1998 and is projected to fall by about 4% over the next ten years, whereas the secondary school population (ages 12-18) is projected to rise by about the same order.

Education system

The education system in Hong Kong has evolved under predominant British influence characterised by the 6-5-2 school system, i.e. 6-year primary, 5-year secondary and 2-year matriculation.

Pre-primary education is not compulsory but most families send their children to kindergartens at the age of 3. The gross enrollment ratio is 76% in 1997/98. Kindergartens are operated privately, but receive government subsidies through refund of rent and rates. Low-income families who cannot afford the fees can apply for fee remission from the Government.

Since 1978, we have provided nine years of free and universal education for all children between the ages of 6 and 14. At Secondary 4 level school places are provided for about 85% of the 15-year old cohort, with another 10% being provided with technical and vocational education.

Beyond this level, one out of three Secondary 5 graduates can go on to a two-year sixth form course, and about a quarter of our 17-20 age group have access to first-degree and sub-degree studies, including teacher preparation courses.

Hong Kong has a long tradition of community participation in education. Out of 1,231 publicly funded primary and secondary schools, only 82 are directly operated by the Education Department. The rest are run by churches, private organisations and trusts. There are a small private school sector with 144 private schools only, including 42 international schools. Nine tertiary institutions offer degree and sub-degree programmes, including an open university.

Firm in the belief that a well-educated community supported by highly qualified professionals is essential for maintaining Hong Kong's competitiveness in the global market, we have been investing heavily in education. In 1998/99, education continues to be the single biggest item of public expenditure, which amounts to US\$6,800 million, or 18.4%, of the budget. Compared to two years ago, the expenditure has increased 40%. This reflects a strong commitment on the part of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) to invest in people, as we brace ourselves for new challenges in the 21st Century.

Education indicators

Let me take you through some indicators of the performance of our education system before coming onto the main theme of my presentation.

In terms of educational attainment, in the ten-year period between 1986 and 1996, the

proportion of the population, aged 15 and above, with secondary or higher education increased from 57% to 68%. The biggest increase is in respect of tertiary education which rose from 9% to 15% over the same period. This is the direct result of a rapid expansion of tertiary education in mid-1980s, which was a response to the so-called "brain drain", as educated people emigrated overseas due to uncertainties over the future of Hong Kong. Now the situation is reversed with many emigrants returning to work in Hong Kong.

There has been a steady decline in the illiteracy rate from 28% in 1961 to 9% in 1996. Most of those who are illiterate are elderly persons, who have past the school age when universal education was introduced in 1978, or who have come from the mainland of China to join their families in Hong Kong.

Largely as a result of demographic changes, we have been able to reduce the average size of primary classes from 36 in 1987 to 33 in 1997. The situation of secondary schools is less satisfactory with the average class size from Secondary 1-5 remaining relatively stable at about 39 over the last 10 years. We have not been able to make any significant headway in reducing class sizes because of resource constraints, notably, a shortage of land to meet the competing development needs of Hong Kong.

However, we have provided schools with additional teachers over the years and the pupil to teacher ratios for both primary and secondary schools improved progressively as a result. In 1997/98, the number of pupils per teacher is 22.7 in primary schools and 19.5 in secondary schools. The trend of improvement will continue.

As regards student behavior, over the past three years, the non-attendance cases has remained well below 0.1% in primary schools and about 0.5% in junior secondary schools. Young offenders account for less than 1% of the population aged below 16.

Our education system has evolved in a pragmatic and incremental way. We have borrowed good practices from overseas and adapted them to the situation in Hong Kong. For example, we have made reference to UK's National Curriculum in our design of the target-oriented curriculum and borrowed the experience of Australia on school-based management. There are lessons to be learned in replicating international practices, which has not been very successful so far.

The education system has served us well and has contributed significantly to the economic success of Hong Kong. However, years of prosperity and the transition of Hong Kong from a manufacturing into a services economy have eroded the attractiveness of teaching as a career and have raised concern about the quality of teaching. The introduction of universal education some twenty years ago has created strains in the education system and led to a general perception that academic standards have declined.

As Hong Kong moved into a new historic era and became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China in July 1997, the Government has therefore taken a fresh look at where we are and where we should go from here. The focus is on the quality of education.

HK's new identity as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China

Founded on the innovative concept of "one country, two systems", the Basic Law provides the constitutional framework for the Hong Kong SAR. It firmly guarantees that the previously existed legal, social and economic systems will continue, and empowers the people of Hong Kong to manage our own affairs.

In the area of education, the Basic Law specifically

- empowers the SAR Government on its own "to formulate policies on the development and improvement of education";
- provides that "community organisations and individuals may, in accordance with the law, run educational undertakings of various kinds";
- assures tertiary institutions of their continued "autonomy and academic freedom"; and
- maintains that "students shall enjoy freedom of choice of educational institutions and freedom to pursue their education outside of Hong Kong".

Experience over the past 18 months shows that China has lived up to the promises in the Basic Law. Business is as usual. The difference, if any, is the fact that Hong Kong people now enjoy a higher degree of autonomy in making decisions on internal affairs.

A glaring example is the SAR Government's decision to intervene and trade in the financial market after successive speculative attacks on the Hong Kong dollar. The SAR Government took full responsibility for the bold decision which, prior to the transition, could not possibly have been taken without prior consultation with the Foreign Office in London.

Since the transition in July 1997, political confidence among the people of Hong Kong has risen. As the graph shows, the index on political confidence rises from 100 in April 1996 to over 150 in December 1998. On the contrary, the index on economic confidence fell by 18 percentage points over the same period. The primary concern in Hong Kong now, as in many other Asian countries, is with the economy.

Hong Kong has its share of the economic pinch from the financial crisis in Asia. Retrenchment in public expenditure would normally be a prudent option, but the Government has decided steadfastly that expenditure on education will continue to grow. This is made possible by the huge reserves which we have accumulated through prudent financial management in the good years.

The SAR Challenge on Education

The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR, the Hon. C H Tung, in his 1998 Policy Address entitled "In times of Adversity", has said, "the starting point for the development of an enlightened, knowledge-based society is good education. To take Hong Kong forward in an increasingly competitive world, we must give education top priority." Put simply, no plan for manpower today means no manpower for plans tomorrow.

In developing a blueprint on education for the next generation, we begin by asking ourselves how do we see the world evolving and what are the skills and orientations that our children will need in order to lead a meaningful life in the 21st Century?

This is a million-dollar question as the future abounds with imponderables. What we know for sure is that the only constant is change itself. The challenge to education, therefore, is how to equip our young people with the versatility and ability to deal with the unknown and cope with change.

Education aims

The Education Commission, which advises the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR on all aspects of education policies, has just completed a review of education aims for each level of education. The review points to the need for change in five areas, with implications for the pedagogy, curriculum and student assessment.

First, our children should have an all-round education, encompassing moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic aspects. This may sound like a cliché, as our curriculum design has always been based on a firm belief in balanced education. Sadly, the reality is: the importance the community attaches to academic achievement as a measure of success, has skewed teaching and learning towards meeting examination requirements, at the expense of other areas of development. Schools built in the 50s and 60s also do not provide sufficient space for the full range of school activities necessary for all-round development. The situation will have to be redressed.

Second, to succeed in a knowledge-based society, our children must develop the capacity and aptitude for life-long learning. They must have a good mastery of information technology skills, and the creativity and resourcefulness to harness, share and synergise information and ideas in the global village of the 21st Century. This will require investment in information technology in education and a shift in pedagogy from the traditional textbook-based, teacher-centred approach to a more interactive, thought-provoking and learner-centred approach.

Third, to uphold Hong Kong's position as a modern international city in the global economy of the 21st Century, our young people must develop a global outlook, a good understanding of other cultures and the ability to live in harmony in a multi-cultural society. Our aim is to develop our young people to be good international citizens, who respect the rule of law and have a strong sense of responsibility to the family, society, country and the world.

Following on from this, our young people must also possess the language skills to communicate effectively in a global community. Today, English is still largely the business language in Hong Kong and over 90% of the population speak a local Chinese dialect. We want our students to be "bilingual and trilingual", i.e. to speak English, Putonghua (the official Chinese language) and Cantonese (the everyday dialect in Hong Kong).

Finally, as Hong Kong becomes a Special Administrative Region of China, our young people have to adjust to a newly found identity. They have to learn more about China e.g. the meaning of the national flag and the national anthem, which previously were not taught in the school. Civic education also has to be updated to incorporate aspects of the Basic Law, including the constitutional arrangements for Hong Kong, and the relationship between the Hong Kong SAR and the central government of China. Learning of Putonghua, the official language of China has now become a part of the formal curriculum.

Guiding Values

In our approach to education, we are guided by a set of principles and beliefs :

- We focus on the interests of students in developing policies and determining priorities. The quality of teaching and learning in the classroom is our primary concern.
- We are committed to the wholesome development of our young people through formal and non-formal education. We bring together professionals of various disciplines, e.g. psychologists, linguists, and social workers, to work as a team, and we mobilise community resources in providing extra-curricular activities that will contribute to the all-round development of our young people.
- The Hong Kong society values and rewards educational achievements. Parents have high expectations and provide good support to their children in general. We shall uphold this learning culture and maintain the rigor and discipline of school life.
- We believe that everyone should have access to education. We shall ensure equal opportunities for all.
- We appreciate not everyone is born with the same abilities. We shall cater for individual differences and provide for those with special education needs. Our aim is to maximize the potential of every individual.
- To suit individual needs and expectations, we shall provide for diversity and transparency in our education system to allow for choices for parents and students.

A Framework for Quality Education

To realise the education aims, we have embarked on an ambitious programme of initiatives, which broadly falls into six areas, namely, quality of the teaching profession; language proficiency; information technology; curriculum and assessment; the learning environment and quality assurance. Together, they provide a framework for quality education.

All the efforts are directed at enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom. It is in the classroom that students learn and acquire the knowledge, skills and attitude for their adult life. It is here that policy makers, educators, parents and the community should focus their efforts.

Quality of the teaching profession

There is general consensus that a dedicated and professional teaching force is crucial for effective teaching and learning in the classroom. Upgrading the quality of the teaching profession is, therefore, the single most important element in our framework for quality education.

(a) "All graduate, all trained"

The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR has envisioned the development of an "all graduate, all trained" teaching profession in the long-term. This is a major challenge, which have significant financial implications.

According to a survey in 1997, 57% of teachers in both primary and secondary schools hold a degree. At present, 70% of the teaching posts in secondary schools, and about 12% in primary schools, are designated as graduate posts.

Teacher training is not at present an entry requirement for graduate teachers but a pre-requisite for promotion. Non-graduate teachers, however, must have received teacher training before they can teach. According to the same survey mentioned above, 82% of all teachers have received teacher training, and 76% of graduate teachers have also received teacher training.

A pragmatic approach towards an ‘‘all graduate, all trained’’ teaching profession is to start with new teachers, requiring them to be graduates with teacher training. To achieve this, we have expanded teacher training and introduced degree courses on primary education. The short-term target is to increase the graduate posts in primary schools from 12% to 35% by 2001.

(b) Continuing professional development

Professional development of serving teachers is another major challenge. As we seek to develop in our children higher order thinking, teachers will have to adjust their teaching strategy. Past experience of in-service training shows that it is not enough simply to pass on information on new pedagogical principles and practice. The challenge lies in bringing about a paradigm shift among serving teachers, and motivating them to keep up with the changing demands on the teaching profession. Teachers must be lifelong learners themselves and be role models for students.

At present, our training programmes for serving teachers are voluntary and topic-based. We see the need for a more systematic and integrated approach, which addresses the training needs of teachers throughout their career and which will enable us to reach out to the less motivated teachers. Only then can we hope to uplift the teaching profession as a whole. Ideally, serving teachers should be required to undergo refresher training at specified intervals. It has suggested in some quarters that teacher registration should be renewed periodically based on evidence of professional development. Unions will not like this, but the idea of providing incentives to encourage continuing professional development is well worth exploring, be it in the form of re-registration, or as a requirement for promotion or salary progression.

(c) General Teaching Council

To enhance the professional status of the teaching profession, we are planning for the establishment of a General Teaching Council (GTC). The GTC will be a statutory body with powers of registration and enforcement of professional conduct, and the responsibility to advise on teacher education programmes and promote continuing professional development among teachers. The governing council of the GTC will consist of a balanced mix of teachers and other

stakeholders, including school sponsors, teacher education providers, employers, and parents.

In November, we published a consultation document on the proposed GTC and invited comments from teachers and other interested parties. Our aim is to set up the GTC within two years.

(d) Reward and recognition

To give special recognition to the contribution of teachers, the Chief Executive has declared 10 September each year to be "Teachers' Day". It is also an annual reminder to teachers of their immense responsibility towards our children who will shape the future of Hong Kong.

Various community organisations have devised reward schemes to give recognition to outstanding teachers. These schemes have been well received and have helped to motivate teachers and propagate good teaching practices. There is scope for more similar rewards.

Language proficiency

Let me now turn to language proficiency. In recent years, the community has expressed serious concern about the language proficiency of our children. The reasons are complex. Students today do not read as much as before. The quality of language teachers also has an impact. To redress the situation, we have introduced a range of measures. Our objective is to educate our young people to be biliterate and trilingual.

To begin with, more schools have turned to the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction. This is a perfectly logical move as I am sure you would agree that children learn better in their mother-tongue. Indeed, schools which have used Chinese as the medium of instruction have reported encouraging signs of more active discussions in class, a quicker pace of learning, and improved examination results.

If I may digress slightly here, I wish to clarify what you may have read earlier in the year about the decision to require the majority of secondary schools to switch from the use of English to Chinese as the medium of instruction in junior secondary levels. In normal circumstances, this would not have raised an eyebrow. However, the decision was made soon after the transition, and given our colonial history, many parents still think that using English as the medium of instruction is the only way to master the English language. Speaking English well is seen as the stepping stone to a good job.

Parents therefore reacted angrily to the decision to coerce schools to change to the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction. This became a highly emotive issue which got into the international press. However, I can assure you that the decision was based purely on educational grounds and after careful assessment of the students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach effectively using English as the medium of instruction. There is no hidden agenda; no political motive.

The Government remains committed to strengthening the learning of English as a second

language. We have launched a world-wide recruitment of native English teachers to teach in local schools, encouraged the development of reading habits through extensive reading schemes, and provided additional resources for promoting the learning of English, such as multi-media learning centres and additional grants for English books and other activities.

We have also set up a Language Fund to help promote innovation and school-based initiatives that would raise proficiency in both Chinese and English. So far, the Fund has supported a balanced mix of research, teaching and learning resource materials, teacher training, curriculum and student activity projects. They represent the concerted efforts of the private and public sectors, academics and professionals alike, and we are harvesting best practices for propagation to the school community at large.

Information technology

Another major initiative of the SAR Government is the use of information technology in education. We have drawn up a five-year strategy which aims to

- turn our schools into dynamic and innovative learning institutions where students can become more motivated, inquisitive and creative learners;
- enable our students to acquire a broad knowledge base and a global outlook by tapping into the vast reservoir of knowledge on the information superhighway;
- develop in our students the capability to process information effectively and efficiently; and
- inculcate in them the attitude and capability for independent life-long learning.

The IT strategy consists of four key components, namely, access and connectivity, teacher enablement, curriculum and resource support, and fostering of a community-wide IT culture.

We have already invested over US\$330 million to provide schools with IT facilities and services, and are developing network infrastructures to facilitate sharing of educational resources and communications among schools, teachers, students and parents.

We expect all teachers to have acquired the basic level of IT competency by the year 2000. By sourcing and encouraging the production of software for teaching, we aim to have 25% of the school curriculum delivered with IT support within 5 years. The SAR Government has also set up a new policy bureau to steer and facilitate the development of information technology in the public and private sectors. These measures should help to raise the awareness and the enthusiasm for IT application in the community. This in turn provides the enabling environment for raising the IT literacy among the younger generation.

Curriculum and assessment

Other than languages and information technology, we are also committed to a holistic review of the school curriculum in 1999 to support the education aims set down by the Education Commission. The thrust will be to offer a more balanced curriculum with the grouping of subjects into broad learning areas so as to enhance curriculum coherence and

facilitate all-round development of students, particularly in creativity, critical thinking, independent learning and inter-personal communication.

In line with the curriculum reform, there will be corresponding adjustment to the public examination system. At present, students have to undergo assessments for school place allocation and certification purposes at P6, S3, S5 and S7 respectively. To alleviate the pressure of examinations, we are considering the feasibility of incorporating course work performance at schools alongside with the public examination results. Tertiary institutions are also requested to review their admission criteria to give recognition to students' achievement in non-academic areas, so as to encourage schools to carry out more comprehensive assessment of a student's capabilities.

Learning environment

Earlier on, I mentioned the inadequacy of some of our school premises. Indeed, the provision of adequate school facilities has always been a challenge for Hong Kong in view of the high population density and a shortage of land.

To meet the needs of an all-round education, we have revised the designs of primary and secondary schools to provide additional special purpose rooms for IT and language teaching, and more open space for physical education. The new schools will come on stream in mid-2000. To upgrade existing schools, many of which were built to previous design standards, we have embarked on an ambitious School Improvement Programme, covering all public sector schools in eight phases.

At a time when our primary concern was to provide education for all, we introduced half-day primary schools, so that two schools could share the same building. To improve the quality of education, the Chief Executive has pledged to provide whole day primary schooling. The purpose is to increase the contact hours between the teachers and students so as to increase the amount of personal attention and understanding; to reduce the pressure on timetabling to enable more in-depth treatment of the subject matter for better understanding. It also allows more time for all-round development of students. Today, only about 20% of pupils attend whole day primary schools. We have set a target of having 60% of our primary school children in whole-day schools by September 2002. To meet this target, we have to build 73 additional primary schools within 45 months. This is a major challenge.

Quality Assurance

Finally, to safeguard the quality of education and ensure that our investment in education produces the desired results, we have developed a framework of quality assurance which encourages self-improvement and accountability through school-based management and whole-school inspections.

Since 1991, we have been encouraging schools to practise school-based management. The idea is to give school authorities greater autonomy in managing their affairs, and more flexibility in deploying their resources to meet the specific needs of the school and the students. As a quid pro quo, schools are required to formulate their vision and mission, publish annual development plans, set performance targets, and evaluate their own performance at the end of the year. Annual school reports are published to increase

transparency and accountability, and to facilitate public scrutiny of the schools' performance.

To link school-based management to learning outcomes, school plans have to include teaching and learning targets and professional development programmes for teachers. More specifically, for the 1999/2000 school plan, we shall require all schools to include plans to enhance the language proficiency of students, make learning more pleasurable and stimulate creativity. These are the three priorities for the year.

For a variety of reasons, many schools are unwilling to practise school-based management. Some are concerned about the additional workload involved in preparing school plans. Some school sponsors are reluctant to open up the School Management Committee to parents, teachers and community leaders. Some lack the confidence and the skill to manage the change process. All these point to the need for better explanation of the spirit of school-based management and its link with learning outcomes, and training for principals to take on the leadership role for a self-managing school.

We are convinced that the success of school-based management, to a large extent, depends on the leadership of the principal, teamwork within the school and the participation of parents, teachers and other stakeholders in the school management. The desired outcome is a learning organization.

To pave the way for full implementation of school-based management in all public schools by the year 2000, we are actively working on a leadership programme for principals, to prepare them for the challenge and to help them in building the internal capacity necessary for sustained change and improvement.

To complement and reinforce self-improvement under school-based management, last year we instituted a system of "whole-school" inspections which is an external catalyst to drive change and increase accountability. The inspections cover the school management and organisation, teaching and learning, support for pupils and school ethos, student attainment and achievement. The inspection reports highlight both the strengths and areas for improvement. They are distributed to parents and freely available on the internet. As a follow-up to the inspections, schools are required to develop and carry out improvement plans.

School-based management and whole-school inspections combine self-evaluation with external assessment. The inspectors are meant to be "critical friends". However, schools tend to look upon them with suspicion because they are staff of Education Department. The question arises as to whether the quality control and quality assurance functions should be separated, and the latter contracted out to an independent third party. Whichever system we may adopt in the end, the objective remains, that is, to nurture a quality culture in the school, and create a learning organisation. I must admit, though, we are still a long way from achieving this goal.

Quality Education Fund

As a further measure to promote quality education, we have set up a US\$640 million Quality Education Fund. This is to encourage "bottom up" initiatives on innovative

projects and activities to promote quality education. We believe schools and teachers in the front-line are in the best position to judge the individual needs of students and decide on what is most practical and best for them.

The response to the Fund has been most encouraging. In the first call, over 2,500 proposals were received, and over 500 projects approved. The second call again attracted over 2,000 proposals, which are now being processed.

The approved projects include research studies (e.g. development of value-added indicators on school performance), measures to improve teaching and learning (e.g. a pilot scheme on native English teachers in primary schools), and activities to promote all-round development (e.g. setting up an orchestra and a Chinese lion dance team). A monitoring team will evaluate the impact of the approved projects. Good practices will be publicised and propagated.

Conclusion

I have briefly outlined the main thrust of the Hong Kong SAR's initiatives on education. It is a tall order by any standard. Being an open economy and one of the freest markets in the world, Hong Kong is sensitive to competition in the global community. The recent economic downturn has steeled the SAR Government's resolve to upgrade our human capital, and ignited the fervour of many educators to join in the effort.

Change is at the heart of the challenges facing Hong Kong; and effective change depends on PEOPLE – principals, teachers, parents, students, the Government and the community at large must collaborate to make it work.

H G Wells once wrote, "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe". The scenario Wells portrayed adds a sense of urgency to the education cause. We are optimistic that in cooperation, education leaders across nations will drive the next phase of human development to scale new heights.

I look forward to welcoming you to Hong Kong at the beginning of the next millennium to establish global networking for quality education. I hope to be able to report on the outcome of some of our initiatives by then.

Thank you.

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