

Blueprint for Developing Quality Early Childhood Education

The Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association – Hong Kong (PECERA-HK) aims to provide a platform for all professionals, researchers and practitioners involved in Early Childhood Education (ECE) to collaborate and exchange ideas on research and best practices to improve the quality of education.

The importance of ECE is now being recognized internationally. The powerful work of renowned economist and Nobel Laureate, Professor James Joseph Heckman, is often cited, as he shows policymakers that investing in early childhood development produces long-term benefits for the whole of society. Heckman demonstrates that the highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth onwards, so investing in ECE is an efficient and effective strategy for governments to reduce social costs, thereby creating a fairer and more productive society. In short, investing in ECE is investing in the future of Hong Kong.

In response to the request from the Legislative Council Subcommittee to Study the Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education, we hereby submit the following recommendations:

1. *Give due recognition to Early Childhood Education by avoiding the use of non-standard terminology*

Early childhood is a unique and critical period of child development, and deserves due recognition. Through extensive activities and interactions with the environment, the foundation of children's cognitive development is laid. High quality ECE should therefore be a combination of both education and care, as the two cannot be separated. Hence, we urge the Government and community to avoid the use of non-standard terminology in reference to this distinctive stage of child development, such as "Pre-primary education", which is misleading and encourages the premature preparation for primary school entry.

2. *Respect Hong Kong's unique society and culture by recognising the value of Long Whole-day Early Childhood programmes*

Hong Kong has unique historical, social, and cultural characteristics that should be respected and upheld. We are proud of our population's universal access to ECE, as reflected in our

almost 100% enrolment of young children in Kindergartens, including 30% of whom attend Long Whole-day programmes at Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centres. The providers of these Long Whole-day programmes not only adhere to a holistic, developmentally-appropriate approach to ECE, earning the trust of many local parents, their high quality provision has also been recognized by the Education Bureau. Therefore, we recommend that the Government recognise this unique and necessary type of programme as an integral part of ECE provision in Hong Kong, and not just focus exclusively on 3-hour Half-day Kindergartens.

3. Recognise and value diversity in ECE provision by providing different funding models

Modern societies are increasingly made up of varied and complex family structures with differing needs, so governments often offer or encourage multiple forms of ECE provision. Hong Kong's primary and secondary education provision is consistent with this trend. There are half-day as well as whole-day programmes and multiple funding models, such as government funded, government aided, privately funded, etc. Similarly, the government should offer fair and equal funding support to all types of ECE provision, whether Half-day, Whole-day, or Long Whole-day programmes.

4. Enable the healthy and sustainable development of the ECE sector through government funding

Students' learning and wellbeing are at the core of education, and this must be strongly supported by stable and sustainable resources, both in financial and human capital terms. Therefore, to enable the healthy and sustainable development of the Hong Kong ECE sector, and in particular the ECE teaching profession, the government should offer a funding scheme similar to that enjoyed by local Primary and Secondary Aided Schools and Direct Subsidy Schools, and to provide full and direct funding to the non-profit-making Kindergartens. Some Kindergartens can remain private and independently run, thus maintaining a high degree of parental choice.

5. Recognise the importance of the environment to young children's learning and development, and undertake a comprehensive review of ECE campuses

With increasing focus and research on ECE around the world, we now understand that early childhood development is greatly influenced by many environmental factors: architecture, design, technology, health and nutrition, economics, language, culture and arts. We therefore urge the government to undertake a comprehensive and professional assessment of ECE learning environments in Hong Kong, and not focus exclusively on space and equipment availability. We would highly recommend the use of the internationally recognised *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales* (ECERS-R and ITERS-R), created by Thelma Harms, Richard Clifford, and Debby Cryer, as helpful assessment tools to objectively evaluate the quality of ECE environments. The standardized items and indicators can serve as aspirational benchmarks for the future improvement of ECE campuses in Hong Kong.

6. *Upgrade ECE teacher qualification requirements to Bachelor degree level and establish a professional development pathway for teachers*

Teacher quality is a key determinant of student achievement, and teacher qualifications are an important indicator of such quality. Children in the early childhood years deserve to have the best teachers, and we strongly recommend that the entry requirements for new ECE teachers should be upgraded to Bachelor degree level as soon as possible, or at least a concrete timeline and action plan should be laid out to this effect. Similarly, the Government should also establish a clear professional development pathway for teachers, enabling them to seek continued growth as educators.

7. *Support ECE centre-based professional development and learning communities*

Both parents and teachers play equally critical roles in children's learning and healthy development. It is therefore important to support the professional development of teachers within their ECE settings, as well as encourage home-school partnerships that reflect the unique local characteristics and meet the needs of the community. Hence, we urge the Government to provide annual funding directly to ECE centres to facilitate such worthwhile efforts, thereby ensuring the continued professional growth of practitioners and the involvement of parents as children's lifelong teachers.

8. *Recognize the importance of research and the collection of empirical data*

The Government should provide additional resources to both academia and industry for conducting local research, including the development of ECE curricula appropriate for the Hong Kong context. Such funding would strengthen the link between research and practice, not only enabling practitioners to pursue new knowledge in a systematic manner, but also allowing the government to efficiently and accurately obtain valuable data for policymaking purposes, e.g. planning for children's transition between different stages of schooling, improving teaching and learning effectiveness etc. We would further encourage the Government to establish a central empirical database on Hong Kong children's growth and development from birth to 18-years of age, tracking them longitudinally in a comprehensive manner. Such a powerful dataset would benefit current and future generations of young children by enabling evidence-based policy formulation on education, population growth, or social welfare etc.