

Hopes dashed as ESF subsidy remains frozen

More disappointment for parents

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The 10-year freeze on government subsidies for English Schools Foundation pupils will continue despite appeals from parents for it to be lifted in the face of sharply rising fees.

An Education Bureau spokesman said the subvention level of about HK\$283 million a year would remain the same for the 2011-12 school year despite rises for other subvented schools. He said this was pending a "mutually acceptable long-term agreement on the subvention arrangements" with management of the English Schools Foundation.

The bureau said in December it was "an appropriate time" to review the level of financial support given to the foundation, which was frozen in 2000 amid allegations of dysfunctional operational procedures and financial mismanagement.

The news was described as "very disappointing" by parents fighting to stop fee rises that have seen the cost of primary school education rise 29 per cent and secondary school fees by 19 per cent since the 2004-05 school year.

A new refundable levy of HK\$25,000 is also being introduced from September on all pupils entering ESF secondary schools, and a further fee increase of 1 to 4 per cent is expected to be announced shortly, taking secondary school costs to almost HK\$100,000 per pupil.

Asked about the continued subvention freeze, ESF communications manager Susanna Chiu said management had not been informed of the level for the coming school year.

However, in e-mailed answers, she pointed out that the subvention was under review. "We understand the subvention level has been frozen until the completion of the subvention review exercise," she said.

Ms Chiu added that the foundation's management did not intend to challenge the decision to freeze the subvention for the coming school year, and said it would not affect the anticipated fee rise to be imposed in September.

Hans Ladegaard of the Concerned ESF Parents group, which has been calling for a block on further fee rises, said: "This is very disappointing indeed. It's time the government and the ESF realise that if they want Hong Kong to be an educational hub in Southeast Asia, they need to provide affordable English-language education for children... Hong Kong's competitiveness is at stake here.

"It's incredibly disappointing that the ESF senior management, yet again, appears to have done nothing to push for more subvention. Parents have been urging [ESF chief executive Heather] Du Quesnay for years to renegotiate the subvention with the government, but nothing seems to have been done.

"What is even worse is that parents have asked again and again why nothing has been done and we cannot get an answer except that the time wasn't right."

Since the 2004-05 school year, fees for ESF primary schools have gone from HK\$47,300 to HK\$61,000, while secondary school fees have risen 19 per cent from HK\$78,600 to HK\$93,500. Parents have been told to expect a further fee rise of 1 to 4 per cent for the coming school year.

A spokesman for the Education Bureau said: "The Education Bureau has been working closely with the English Schools Foundation on the subvention arrangements.

"The issues to be discussed include ESF's role and positioning, its service targets, financial management and fee-related arrangements. We plan to report progress of the review to the Legislative Council panel on education by the end of the current legislative session.

"The level of subvention has been frozen pending a mutually acceptable long-term agreement on the subvention arrangements. The estimated subvention ... in 2011-12 reflects the above arrangement."