

**Community Care Fund Programme
Enhancing the Flat Rate Grant under
the “School Textbook Assistance Scheme”
Evaluation Report**

Background

The Community Care Fund (CCF) Task Force agreed at its meeting on 4 July 2013 to launch a new assistance programme in the 2013/14 school year to enhance the assistance for each primary and secondary student eligible under the School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS)(the programme), so as to strengthen the support for the needy parents of primary and secondary students for meeting their various school-related expenses. In addition, the CCF Task Force agreed that the enhancement should also cover primary and secondary students receiving the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA).

2. The programme was endorsed by the Commission on Poverty (CoP) on 22 July 2013. With funding provided by the CCF, the programme is to be jointly implemented by the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) and the Social Welfare Department (SWD). The programme is targeted at primary and secondary students eligible for full grant and half grant under the STAS¹ in the 2013/14 school year and students up to senior secondary level who are CSSA recipients². Students eligible for full grant and receiving CSSA will each be provided with an additional flat rate grant of \$1,000, while those eligible for half grant will each be provided with an additional flat rate grant of \$500.

3. The programme was implemented by the SFAA and SWD in October 2013. The expenditure for the 2013/14 school year is estimated

¹ The STAS provides means-tested assistance for needy Primary 1 to Secondary 6 students in government, aided, per caput grant schools and schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme for covering the costs of essential textbooks and miscellaneous school-related expenses. The full level of assistance for the 2013/14 school year ranges from \$2,050 to \$4,194, depending on the student's level of study.

² Eligible students under the CSSA Scheme include primary and secondary students, as well as students pursuing full-time Yi Jin Diploma programme and full-time Vocational Training Council programmes at Secondary 6 level or below.

to be \$292.47 million (including administrative cost of \$0.47 million)³, and it is expected that about 348 000 students will benefit from the programme.

Implementation in the 2013/14 school year

Student Financial Assistance Agency

4. The SFAA started to disburse the subsidy to eligible applicants in October 2013. No separate application for the additional flat rate grant is required. The additional flat rate grant is disbursed to the eligible applicants together with the textbook assistance automatically and credited to their bank accounts through auto-transfer. To inform applicants of details about the additional flat rate grant, the SFAA uploads relevant information onto its website and notifies the applicants in writing of the related transaction after disbursement. As at May 2014, the SFAA has provided additional flat rate grant for 235 042 primary and secondary students (136 874 receiving full grant and 98 168 receiving half grant) and the amount of subsidy involved is about \$185.96 million (see Appendix I).

Social Welfare Department

5. Based on the data of its Computerised Social Security System, the SWD also started to disburse an additional flat rate grant of \$1,000 to eligible CSSA students in October 2013. Likewise, it is not necessary for CSSA recipients to apply for the flat rate grant separately and the subsidy will be disbursed through auto-transfer. As at May 2014, the SWD has disbursed additional flat rate grant to 76 693 CSSA students and the amount of subsidy involved is more than \$76.64 million (see Appendix I). To inform CSSA recipients of details about this programme, the SWD uploads relevant information onto the website on government news of the Information Services Department and its departmental website, and posts notices at various Social Security Field Units.

³ The CoP gave approval to increase the administrative costs for this programme on 23 December 2013 (a rise from \$0.36 million to \$0.47 million) to cover the handling fees charged by the bank for making disbursement through auto-transfer.

Evaluation of programme effectiveness

6. The SFAA and SWD have evaluated the effectiveness of the programme. The details and findings of the evaluation are as follows:

(i) Additional flat rate grant as support for low-income families

7. At present, on top of textbook expenses, parents of primary and secondary students also need to meet miscellaneous school-rated expenses each year, such as school uniforms, stationery, club fees, “Tong Fai” and air conditioning charges. Besides, to cater for the needs of students and facilitate students’ participation in co-curricular/extra-curricular activities, many schools have made available outfits other than school uniform and sports suit for parents to purchase for their children. Such expenses have certainly added to the financial burden of low-income families. There are views in the community that the current flat rate grant under the STAS is insufficient to cover various expenses. The launch of the new programme by the SFAA and SWD in the 2013/14 school year has nearly doubled the amount of the flat rate grant for each student eligible for full grant under the STAS, and CSSA students receiving a flat rate grant for selected items of school-related expenses are also provided with additional flat rate grant. The programme certainly can strengthen the support for low-income families.

(ii) Survey among beneficiaries

8. To gauge stakeholders’ views on the effectiveness of the programme, the SFAA and SWD conducted a telephone survey among parents of 856 primary and secondary student beneficiaries between November 2013 and January 2014. The findings showed that about 90% of the respondents agreed that the programme could help relieve their pressure in meeting the school-related expenses of their children, and over 95% were satisfied with the operational arrangements of the programme. In the survey, some respondents mentioned that the grant provided them with genuine assistance and should be provided on a continuous basis, while a small number expressed hope that the date of disbursement could be advanced. More details are given at Appendix II.

(iii) Programme-related support and information for the public

9. During the implementation of the programme, the SFAA and SWD set up telephone hotlines and posted notices at various Social Security Field Units respectively to provide relevant information and support to the interested public. Between November 2013 and January 2014, the SFAA received a total of about 150 enquiries about the programme, most of which were related to disbursement arrangement and the level of subsidy. More details are given at Appendix III.

(iv) Implementation mode of the assistance programme

10. The programme operates under the existing mechanism to disburse the subsidy to needy students through the SFAA and SWD. Apart from minimising cost and administrative work, such an arrangement can enable the disbursement of additional flat rate grant to eligible persons within the shortest span of time. Moreover, separate applications are not required for the convenience of applicants. The SFAA and SWD are of the view that the mode of operation has generally worked well and they do not need to engage additional manpower for implementation.

Conclusion

11. According to the findings of the above evaluation and survey, we note that as at May 2014, the programme has benefited over 310 000 primary and secondary students. The vast majority of the parents surveyed agreed that the programme could, to a certain extent, relieve their pressure in meeting the school-related expenses of their children and found the operational arrangements satisfactory. Some respondents indicated that the additional flat rate grant provided them with genuine assistance and should be implemented on a continuous basis. They also expressed that it was appropriate for the programme to be implemented by the SFAA and SWD. This shows that the programme can meet the objective for which it was launched as well as the objective of the CCF to render appropriate assistance to people facing economic difficulties.

Regularisation of the programme

12. In light of the effectiveness of the programme and the beneficiaries' expectation of its continued implementation, the Government announced in the 2014 Policy Address that starting from the 2014/15 school year, the programme would be incorporated into its regular assistance programme and provision for regularisation has already been earmarked in the 2014-15 estimates.

13. Upon regularisation, subsidy of the programme will be disbursed to needy students through the STAS of the SFAA and the CSSA Scheme of the SWD. Subsidy will be disbursed to parents of eligible students before the commencement of each school year in July/August the earliest to provide them with appropriate support. Since the programme will be implemented under the existing mechanism, the SFAA and SWD do not need to augment their existing manpower.

14. Upon regularisation of the programme in the 2014/15 school year, it is estimated that about 260 000 full-grant and half-grant primary and secondary students and 80 000 CSSA students will benefit through the Government's subvention mechanism.

Education Bureau
May 2014

Appendix I

**Number of student beneficiaries of additional flat rate grant and
amount of grant disbursed**
(as at May 2014)

| | No. of beneficiaries | Amount disbursed |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Primary and secondary students receiving school textbook assistance | 235 042 | \$185.96 million |
| Primary and secondary students receiving CSSA | 76 693 | \$76.64 million |
| Total | 311 735 | \$262.60 million |

Appendix II

Survey among beneficiaries of additional flat rate grant

Respondents' satisfaction level and views about the assistance programme

| Questions and views | No. of responding beneficiaries | Percentage |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Do you agree that this assistance programme has relieved your pressure in meeting the school-related expenses of your children? - Agree - Disagree - No comment | 775 70 11 | 90.5% 8.2% 1.3% |
| 2. Generally speaking, are you satisfied with the arrangements of this assistance programme? - Satisfied - Not satisfied - No comment | 820 35 1 | 95.8% 4.1% 0.1% |
| 3. Do you have any other comments on this assistance programme? - No - Yes (can comment on more than one aspect ^{Note 1}) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Level of assistance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - raise the level (112) - standardise the level (7) - adequate (2) ● Timing of disbursement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - appropriate (5) - should be disbursed at an earlier date (3) ● Others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The grant can help beneficiaries and should be provided on a continuous basis (33) - Other special subsidy should be provided (15) | 684 121 8 48 | 79.9% 14.1% 0.9% 5.6% |

Note 1: The total of 856 respondents is used as the base for deriving the percentages for different items.

For item 3, the corresponding percentages do not add up to 100% as some respondents chose to comment on more than one aspect.

Appendix III

Category and number of enquiries about this programme received by the SFAA ^{Note 2}

| Category of enquiries | No. of cases |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Eligibility | 18 |
| Application procedures | 12 |
| Disbursement arrangements | 66 |
| Level of subsidy | 49 |
| Others | 6 |
| Total | 151 |

Note 2: If a single enquiry involves questions touching on more than one topic, each topical question will be counted once in its respective category.