

Changes cramp schools' style

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Some are launching fund-raising drives to build new teaching blocks, others are partitioning covered playgrounds into study areas or converting changing rooms into classrooms. Schools are scrambling to create extra space by September to accommodate a sharp swell in the student body for the coming academic year, when youngsters under old and new academic systems will study alongside each other.

"It will be a nightmare," says Jonathan Lai Ping-wah, principal of Lee Kau Yan Memorial School in Wong Tai Sin.

The space crunch stems from the transition to the 3-3-4 educational system introduced in 2009. In the past, about half of its students would leave after Form Five due to poor results in public exams while the rest would stay for another two years to take A-Level exams that might provide admission to a three-year degree programme. Under the new set-up, all Form Five students this year will progress to Form Six before sitting for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education and deciding whether to go on to a local university. That means secondary schools will be dealing with many more Form Six students than before. Moreover, the new curriculum offers

a wide range of electives and dozens of subject combinations that will require additional classrooms. Yet, schools still have to house the last batch of teenagers sitting for A-levels.

So, even as schools prepare to break for the summer, principals such as Lai are busy trying to transform available space into classrooms.

"A locker room in the auditorium is being converted into a classroom," says Lai. "As there are no windows in the room, we have to install air conditioning. The student activity room will be partitioned off into two classrooms."

"It's not an ideal learning environment, but there are no other ways to deal with the crisis."

His school houses 28 classes now, and must fit in two more when the new term starts, but Lai says the Education Bureau hasn't been giving them sufficient support to deal with the lack of space.

"The government suggested that we use libraries and teachers' rest areas to conduct lessons. But those places are not registered classrooms. There will be legal concerns if accidents like fires break out."

At CNEC Christian College in Kwai Tsing, where the number of classes will swell to 33 in September from the current 31, a covered play area is being converted into three makeshift classrooms by introducing soundproof partitions.

A one-off grant from the bureau for renovations to ease the classroom shortage is far from sufficient, says principal Ngai Shu-chiu. "We received a grant of around HK\$100,000 two years ago, but the partitions cost HK\$600,000."

The wide-ranging senior secondary curriculum has exacerbated the shortage, Ngai says.

In the past when classes were divided into science and arts streams, they needed only five classrooms if there were five classes in a form.

The new system doesn't segregate students into different streams. They may also schedule two to three elective courses besides the four compulsory subjects.



A covered playground at CNEC Christian College, Kwai Chung, is converted into three classrooms. Photos: Edward Wong

It's not an ideal learning environment, but there are no other ways

JONATHAN LAI PING-WAH

As a result, Ngai says, they need extra classrooms for split classes and have requisitioned a host of special rooms such as the student activity centre and geography room for use as classrooms.

Po Leung Kuk No 1 W.H. Cheung College in Wong Tai Sin, however, is taking the opportunity to expand the school complex: it plans to build a new teaching block to accommodate the increase in students.

Principal Chau Chor-shing has launched a major fund-raising drive to help pay for the construction of the HK\$12.5 million building.

"Any parent or alumnus who donates HK\$100,000 can have a classroom named after him. Anyone who donates HK\$3,000 or above can get their names inscribed on the plaque to be erected in the new teaching block. We have raised HK\$1 million so far."

Meanwhile, the bureau has identified three vacant school buildings that secondary schools may use to cope with overcrowding.

Chan Hon-ling, principal of Kiangsu-Chekiang College in Sha Tin, says the school has applied to use seven classrooms in a vacated primary school nearby.

"We have only 25 rooms. And with students in 29 classes now, four are floating classes," Chan said. "Students in a floating class have to endure a lot of inconvenience as

they do not have a permanent classroom."

And when the student population hits its peak in September, Chan says 31 classes will have to fit into the space.

An Education Bureau spokeswoman says teaching space need not be confined to traditional classrooms. The bureau has already allocated grants to allow secondary schools to carry out renovations to create additional teaching space.

"An additional subsidy of not more than HK\$300,000 was also provided to schools with genuine needs for alteration works on application," she says.

"Schools should use the available resources flexibly to create more teaching space to support implementation of the senior secondary curriculum. Flexible time-tabling should be adopted to provide students with reasonable choices of subjects and diversified learning experiences."



CNEC Christian College principal Ngai Shu-chiu says building soundproof partitions cost HK\$600,000

INSIGHT

Boom blurs boundary between private and public universities

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Higher education is expanding on a global basis. A big reason for this is the rise of private universities. Worldwide, more than one in three university-level students now studies in a private institution. But what are the implications of this trend? And are public universities now so very different from private ones?

The Hong Kong government wants to create more private universities in addition to the territory's eight publicly funded institutions. At present, Shue Yan is the only private university along with three other self-funded

institutions. This balance reflects the colonial past. In Britain there is also just one private university, the University of Buckingham. By contrast, in the US and Japan there are many more, often highly-regarded private universities such as MIT, Harvard and Keio.

Some private universities are "not-for-profit" and embrace civic or religious missions while others, such as the University of Phoenix, are "for-profits" working on a purely commercial basis. Private universities get their money from tuition fees, investments, alumni giving, research grants, consulting and exploiting their intellectual property. Public universities do these things too, but also receive state funding.

Private universities have the chance to do things differently. The University of Buckingham has compressed the three-year undergraduate degree into just two through a four-term teaching year. This means students accumulate less debt and can get onto the jobs market more quickly.

In future, the expansion of private universities might lead to private and public universities competing directly for public funds through a student voucher scheme, such as the one operated in Colorado. But this will inevitably mean public universities getting less of the pie. Public universities are being pushed to become more commercial and business-minded. As a result, many "public"

universities are more like private ones in the way they generate income. Hong Kong University gets only about 60 per cent of its income from the government. The other 40 per cent comes from tuition fees, grants and investments. King's College in London is typical among the elite British public universities in getting less than half its income from the government.

The distinction between public and private is eroding in practice, if not in image. But this blurring means public universities are having an identity crisis. By trying to diversify their income, public universities are caught between trying to be wheeler-dealers and upholding high standards of public and ethical conduct. In recent years

this has produced a series of scandals. The London School of Economics, for example, accepted a pledge by a charity run by a son of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The Vice-Chancellor resigned as a result.

If we are to see an expansion of private universities, the heat will also be on publicly-funded institutions. Universities cannot be all things to all people. As public universities morph into private ones, the standards and principles we expect will come under increasing pressure.

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