

I. Background

1. Introduction

1.1 In October 2007, the Chief Executive in his Policy Address announced the appointment of the Secretary for Justice, the incumbent Deputy Chairman of the Fight Crime Committee, to lead a high level inter-departmental task force (“Task Force”) to tackle the youth drug abuse problem. The Task Force summed up its work and recommendations in its Report on Youth Drug Abuse in November 2008.

1.2 Considering the degree of seriousness of the youth drug abuse problem, and recognizing that proper school-based drug testing scheme may serve to deter and prevent drug abuse as well as facilitate early intervention of drug abusers so that they would be motivated and guided towards counselling or treatment at an early stage, the Task Force recommended that a research project be commissioned to devise possible school-based drug testing schemes for voluntary adoption by schools in Hong Kong.

1.3 In July 2009, the Chief Executive set out directions to tackle youth drug abuse problems. One of the key strategies is the carrying out of the Trial Scheme on School Drug Testing in Tai Po District in the school year 2009/10 (“Scheme”). The Scheme was launched in December 2009.

2. The Trial Scheme on School Drug Testing in Tai Po District

2.1 The Scheme is a joint initiative of the Government (led by the Narcotics Division (ND), Security Bureau (SB) and Education Bureau (EDB)) and 23 public sector secondary schools in the Tai Po District, supported by parties in the social welfare, healthcare and related sectors. Development of the Scheme is guided by the following principles:

- a) Helping students in their best interest;
- b) Voluntary participation;
- c) Keeping personal information strictly confidential; and
- d) Professional testing and support services for students.

2.2 As noted by the Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse, drug testing may serve the objectives of monitoring and deterrence, early identification, preventing drug abuse and crime investigation and prevention.¹ At the early planning stage of the Scheme, there were expectations in the community that drug testing could serve as a tool for identifying student drug abusers early so that they might be motivated and guided towards counselling or treatment. At the same time, however, there were also many expressing grave concerns about the privacy and human rights issues of students. After taking into account views expressed by the community, it was finally decided that the Scheme would be run on an entirely voluntary basis with consent to participation to be given by both students and their parents. Specifically, the purposes and imperatives of the Scheme are as follows:

- a) For prevention – it will enhance the resolve of those students who have not taken any drugs to continue to stay away from drugs. They will be in a better position to say “no” to their peers when they are tempted to try drugs and this will help prevent the spread of drugs in schools; and
- b) For rendering assistance to students – the Scheme will trigger the motivation of those students abusing drugs to quit drugs and seek help, especially those who are trying drugs at an early stage. The Scheme will also provide appropriate support services to those students who wish to pull themselves out of the drug trap. The Scheme could also shed light on the effectiveness of cross-sector and multi-disciplinary downstream support service to student drug abusers.

Most often, young drug abusers have little motivation to seek help. Added to the hidden nature of psychotropic substance abuse, they may remain hidden from the usual help networks for quite some time until they are trawled by social workers or arrested by the police after they have abused drugs for a number of years when serious damage has already been done to their body and spirit. Apart from enhancing the resolve of those students who have not taken any drugs to continue to stay away from drugs, it is believed that by triggering the motivation of those students who have abused drugs to seek help, school drug testing would facilitate their early identification and guide them towards counselling or treatment.

¹ *Report of the Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse* (November 2008), p.81.

2.3 Each month, approximately 5% of participating students from a school will be randomly selected and tested by the Student Drug Testing (SDT) team. Each school may be visited twice a month and some 32 to 40 students may be randomly selected and tested during the two visits. Students will not be informed in advance the date and time of visits. It is noted that in the initial months, a lower proportion of students has been tested, as both schools and the SDT have to familiarize themselves with the testing procedures. The role of project officer is observing the SDT team on school visits and offering comments, advising participating schools on the data privacy requirements, relaying concerns identified to relevant authorities, handling complaints and compiling reports.

2.4 For screened negative cases, the project officer will inform the results to the school principal via the school visit report and the principal will inform the parents or guardians of the students concerned. For positive cases identified by the SDT team, the project officer will immediately inform the school principal and the principal will notify the identified students' parents or guardians and invite them to a meeting on the day. The SDT team will provide on-the-spot counselling to the identified students. In addition, various counselling measures will be provided to the identified students, including:

- a) The school principal will notify the designated teachers for assistance and counselling at school;
- b) The SDT team will make immediate arrangements for the attendance of a school social worker and a case manager from the designated Counselling Centre for Psychotropic Substance Abusers (CCPSA), who may provide counselling services and necessary support to the identified students and their parents or guardians;
- c) The case manager, school social worker and/or designated teachers will discuss with the parents or guardians on matters related to the immediate welfare of the identified students and preliminary suggestions on appropriate support programmes.

2.5 For screened positive cases, the urine specimens concerned will be sent to the Government Laboratory for a confirmatory test and the result of which will be available in about 5 working days. The identified students and/or their parents or guardians may also request to have another test to be conducted by an independent laboratory. It is noted that nevertheless, there has not been a confirmed positive

case identified in the Scheme.

2.6 When the cases are found to be false positive (i.e. when the result of the confirmatory testing by the Government Laboratory or the independent laboratory is found to be negative), relevant parties will be informed. The case manager will abort the support services. In case the students or parents/guardians concerned have emotional distress, the case manager will provide necessary counselling services to them, and the school social worker will also provide necessary backup, if required.

2.7 For confirmed cases, the case manager will inform the students and their parents or guardians and continue to coordinate the support services. The project officer will inform the principal about the result and the school principal will release the result to the designated teacher and school social worker. The case manager will also convene a multi-disciplinary case conference to formulate a support programme for the identified students. For experimental or non-dependent regular abusers, various services will be provided to them, including:

- a) Counselling and assistance from school social workers and designated teachers at school;
- b) Community-based support services outside school, such as counselling sessions in the designated CCPSA, thematic therapeutic groups, community service programmes, family or interpersonal relationship training and psychiatric or psychological intervention; and
- c) Basic medical support;
- d) Subject to the agreement of the identified students and/or their parents or guardians, they will participate in a mentoring scheme and each of them will be matched with a mentor;
- e) Cases with psychiatric and other medical complications may be referred to the Psychological Medicine Clinic of Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital or Substance Abuse Clinic at Prince of Wales Hospital for specialist medical treatment.

2.8 Addicted (dependent) abusers requiring voluntary residential programmes may be admitted to the 40 drug treatment and rehabilitation centres run by 17 non-governmental organizations (NGO). After completion of the

residential programme, the rehabilitated student may resume schooling in a mainstream or other school, with EDB providing placement assistance to facilitate social reintegration.

2.9 The support programme summarized above may last up to six months and will not go beyond 31 December 2010 upon completion of the Scheme. The identified students may continue to receive support services outside the Scheme from the designated CCPSA, school social workers, designated teachers, the mentoring scheme and related parties. Other services from relevant government departments (e.g. Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSC) of Social Welfare Department) and NGO may also be available to the identified students and/or their parents or guardians.

2.10 The arrangements summarized above are set out clearly and in detail in a Protocol released to parents and students in November 2009 to invite their participation.

2.11 A total of 2,495 students were randomly selected for the screening test. Of these, 1,975 students took the test and no confirmed positive case was found. Among the selected students, 459 students were assessed as being not suitable for the test in view of their physical condition or having taken medications. Fifty-five students could not provide a urine specimen for the test at the relevant time. Six students refused to take the test and the schools contacted their parents according to the protocol. Since the launch of the scheme, four false-positive cases were found following confirmatory testing by the Government Laboratory. The concerned students and parents were informed immediately of the results.²

2.12 Since the announcement of the participation rate last December, 68 more students and their parents have joined the scheme, while six students and their parents withdrew from the scheme. More than 12,400 students have joined the Scheme, representing some 61% of the student population.

² Press release “Update on Trial Scheme on School Drug Testing in Tai Po District”, accessed on 26 June 2010 from <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201005/25/P201005250242.htm>.

3. Objectives of the research³

3.1 The present research involves the following

- a) To conduct a comprehensive assessment of the Scheme focusing on both the process and outcome;
- b) To review other local and overseas experience of drug testing in schools; and
- c) To suggest refinements and revisions to the Scheme and map out a practical course of action for rolling out drug testing to other schools in the territory based on findings of a) and b) above.

³ Consultant Team Members, please see [Appendix 1](#).