

Relocation of Secondary Schools from the Urban Area: The Hong Kong Experience

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The development of new towns around a city will lead to reduction of population density in the city which will in turn lead to the over-supply of school places inside the city. Besides closure of schools, little has been reported in research literature about how to handle the problem. To deal with this problem, the Hong Kong Government has developed a program to relocate the secondary schools from the urban area. There are a total of 49 secondary schools involved in this program. These schools have been or will be moving their own school from the old campus which is located in a district that has an over-supply of school places to a new campus which is located in a district that has not enough school places. Besides the traditional practice of school relocation, the Hong Kong Government introduces another way by phasing out the old campus and phasing in the new campus in several years' time. This article discusses the background of the school relocation and the problems generated in detail. It would be a good lesson for ministries of education in other countries if they encounter similar problems in the future.

Fast and unrestricted growth of large cities in the twentieth century has given rise to excessive overcrowding in inner city areas, producing serious economic, social, and physical problems. To solve these slum problems, the garden city concept of Ebenezer Howard, a nineteenth-century scholar, has received much attention by town planners in developing the new towns concept in this century (Osborn, 1965). The development of new towns around a city will lead to the reduction of population density in the city due to migration or aging, which will in turn lead to the over-supply of school places

inside the city. This phenomenon first happened to schools in the developed nations in the seventies when the population growth trend came to an end after the Second World War (Fleming, 1980; Rideout, 1978; Shaw, 1990; Wachtel & Powers, 1979).

Besides that, the student population is not a constant but fluctuates due to various reasons, and the amplitude can be as great as 30%. For example, the number of secondary students in England dropped from 3.9 million in 1979 to 2.8 million in 1991, but then is expected to rise to 3.1 million by 2000 (Meredith, 1992).

A temporary way to solve the problem is to provide school buses to carry students from districts that have not enough school places to districts that have more than enough school places. However, this will create many problems like high recurrent costs, student fatigue, traffic jam, etc., which are not desirable in the long run. The standard way is to close down the schools inside the city and to open new schools in or near the new towns which are in need of school places. This practice has been carried out naturally in history and taken into consideration by legislation (Harris, 1990).

Another way of equalizing the provision of school places is to build boarding schools away from the city centre. The Ministry of Education in Taiwan

Author's Note. The author is the former principal of a relocated school in Hong Kong. The school completed the relocation period in 2 years (Sept. 1989 - August 1991). This paper is the first hand experience of the author with additional information on other relocated schools (Lau 1991, Lau 1992, and Wong 1993). Evidence from the Education Department in Hong Kong can only be found from official reports and documents shown in the references. It is difficult to ask government officers to criticise their own plans. Besides the Hong Kong experience, little has been reported in literature about school relocation.

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has been studying the establishment of boarding schools in the suburb area in order to reduce the pressure for more school places in the city centre (Ming Tak, 1991). They found that the capital cost in building a boarding school far away from the city was cheaper since a large piece of land could be obtained at a much lower price. Even though the operating cost of a boarding school is higher, this can always be covered by the students since they have to pay for their room and board. Of course, whether the parents could afford or would like to put their children in the boarding school is another matter that needs further investigation, but the demand appears to exceed the supply throughout these years (Lambert, 1966; Cole, 1986).

Besides the above common sense approaches of providing school buses, closing or opening schools and running more boarding schools to equalize the provision of school places in different districts, little has been reported in the literature about this problem. The purpose of this article is to introduce the large scale relocation of secondary schools in Hong Kong recently, which may be an alternative solution to the above problem.

The Hong Kong Experience

Background

In 1961, more than 83 percent of the 3.13 million population of Hong Kong lived in the twin cities of Victoria and Kowloon. The maximum population density was recorded at 238,000 per square kilometer in the Sheung Wan area of Hong Kong Island. Since then, the Hong Kong Government has been developing new towns as a corrective and alternative measure to cope with the rapid urban growth in the last few decades. Nowhere else in the world has such a large scale of development, incorporating the infra-structural, social and physical standards planned in Hong Kong, been accomplished in the last 20 years (Leung, 1986). The present population capacity designed for the new towns is 3.65 million and the new towns are now accommodating 2.3 million people or about 40% of the 5.75 million population of the territory (Witt, 1993).

The expansion of educational services in Hong Kong has also synchronized with the development of the new towns in the last 20 years since schools are one of the important cultural and social services in the new towns. In particular, the Hong Kong Government launched nine years' of compulsory education in 1978 and planned to build a total of 116 secondary schools in the territory in order to cope

with the increasing need for school places (Hong Kong Government, 1978). Of course, most of these schools are in the new towns. In the mid-eighties, the Government noticed that the scheduled number of secondary schools would not be enough to upgrade the quality of education and adjusted the number to 160 (Education Commission, 1984).

School Relocation

1. Rationale for the Present Method of School Relocation

The total area of Hong Kong is 1071 square km. Hong Kong can be divided into three territories: Hong Kong Island (80 sq.km.), Kowloon (42 sq.km.), and the New Territories (949 sq.km., including all other islands). Almost all the land in the Kowloon area has been developed, while many parts of the New Territories are still under-developed. Concerning Hong Kong Island, even though many parts can still be developed, the geographic feature makes it too expensive for any further development. Table 1 presents the population distribution of the three territories in the last 15 years.

One can easily notice that the New Territories has been developing rapidly in the last 15 years while the population density of Kowloon has been decreasing steadily. Even though the population in Hong Kong has increased by 25%, the relative percentage distribution of population in Hong Kong Island has almost remained the same in the last 15 years. Table 2 is a distribution of the aided and government secondary schools in the three territories in the last fifteen years.

After the introduction of nine years' compulsory education in 1978, the Education Department (the government department that looks after education below tertiary level) has had to keep a close watch on the distribution of schools in conjunction with the population distribution in different territories. For example, the elementary schools should be close to the pupils' homes so that a majority of the pupils can walk to the school within 3 km. Even though secondary school students are older, it is unreasonable to ask them to walk more

Table 1
Population Distribution in Hong Kong

	Hong Kong Island	Kowloon	New Territories	Total
1977	973,500(23%)	2,271,500(56%)	831,000(20%)	4,076,000
1987	1,181,900(23%)	2,193,600(42%)	1,817,900(35%)	5,193,400
1992	1,256,500(23%)	1,892,400(34%)	2,412,800(43%)	5,561,000

Table 2
Secondary Schools Distribution in Hong Kong

	Hong Kong Island	Kowloon	New Territories	Total
1977	76(32%)	106(45%)	54(23%)	236
1987	78(24%)	129(39%)	121(37%)	328
1992	74(21%)	117(32%)	169(47%)	360

than 5 km to their school if schooling is compulsory (Nice, 1986). When this walking distance is converted to distance travelled by a vehicle, one could say a student should not be travelling on a school bus or other equivalent devices for more than half an hour. The physical distance would be around 15 km.

In 1985, after checking the trend of population distribution in the coming years, the Education Department noticed that the plan of building secondary schools had to be modified. In particular, if they did not speed up the building of secondary schools in the new towns in the New Territories, there might be a serious shortage of school places in these new towns during the period 1986-1996. At the same time, there would be an over-supply of secondary school places in the city due to aging of the population there and the moving of people to the new towns. Furthermore, many aided and government schools in the city had sub-standard school buildings due to the lack of land in the city and high costs of rebuilding a school at the same site.

However, the closing down of these secondary schools would be a waste of human resource since many of these secondary schools were good schools. The board members, teachers and administrative staff were all experienced educational workers and they had already worked together as a group well for quite a while. The Government, therefore, proposed the scheme of 'Reprovisioning' as a solution to this problem. The reprovisioning of a school is the closing down of a sub-standard school and starting it up again in a new school site (probably in the new towns) with standard school premises run by the original school board and probably a majority of the existing staff. The standard school premises are based on a pre-determined model designed by the government in order to facilitate efficient and economical building of secondary schools in Hong Kong. There are two types of standard school premises: old and new ones. The old ones are of 24 classrooms, 12 special rooms and the new ones are of 26 classrooms, 14 special rooms. The premises of each school also include a hall and at least a

basketball court. The total area of a standard campus is around 5000 square metres (Education Commission, 1992).

Hence the Education Department introduced a large scale relocation plan to solve this problem; that is, the moving of more than 49 schools away from their old school buildings to the new school buildings elsewhere (usually in the new towns). Between the period 1987-1991, even though there was only an increase of 21 aided and government schools in total, the number of schools in the New Territories had increased by 36. In fact, 29 schools started or completed their moving process during this period. At present, the scheduled number of relocated schools is 49, and the latest relocation period will be scheduled between 1996-2000.

One of the purposes of school relocation is to up-grade the quality of education, and in particular, to provide a better campus to the schools concerned. But due to the shortage of school places in the new towns and the over-supply of school places in the city center, the Education Department has set relocation priority to schools concerned. Namely, schools in the city center are given higher relocation priority if they choose to move to the new towns. In fact, among the 29 schools that had started or completed their relocation between the period 1987-91, only 3 schools moved to a site which was in the same territory as the old site. Among these three schools, two of the schools had to bear almost all of the moving expenses, which was unusual among the relocated schools. However, when the difference of school places between the new towns and the city center was not so great (e.g., after 1991), the Education Department would allow more schools to move to a site within the same territory. For example, among the 19 schools that have been scheduled to relocate after 1992, 13 of them would move to a site in the same territory.

2. *How to Relocate a School*

The traditional practice of school relocation is usually carried out by first constructing buildings in the new site. After the new buildings have been completed, the school will move into the new campus at a scheduled time and then vacate the old campus. Of course, all the students, teachers and workers related with the school will go to the new campus then. However, less than 16 of the 49 relocated schools would use this method to move their schools. One would wonder then how Hong Kong people relocate their schools.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Education Department will give higher relocation

priority to those schools in the city center to move to the new towns which would in general be more than 15 km from the original campus. How can the students attend school in the new campus then? Of course, arrangement of school buses is a standard solution to this problem. But the recurrent expense will be quite high and the students may object to relocation if the new campus is too far away. However, the Education Department has found another way to solve the problem: phasing out the old campus and phasing in the new campus in two to four years time.

Phasing out the old campus means the school will not admit any more new students in the old campus. The students there will eventually graduate and hence the old campus will be vacated after two to four years' time. Phasing in the new campus means that the school will start to admit new students in the new campus while the old campus is phasing out. During this phasing in and out process, the manpower, serviceable furniture and equipment will be gradually transferred from the old to the new campus. The interesting thing is the students in the old campus will not have the chance to meet the new students if the school does not arrange so. In fact, each government school under relocation is actually two schools that have no connection at all, except for the school name. In some cases, even the school name had been changed and outsiders could not find any trace of that school indicating it was in fact relocated from some other place.

Of course, one would clearly notice that the Education Department wants to break down the relocation of a school from one site to another into two separate processes: the winding up of the old campus and the starting of a new school. This will help the officers in charge clearly define their duty. The school name is just a veil to distract the public. However, when the winding up of the old campus and the starting of a new school are under the same school name and operated by the same school board, the picture may not be so simple as the Education Department originally thought. Many unexpected things happened in the last few years that made the people involved realize that relocation was much more complicated than just winding up an old school and opening a new school.

One would wonder: if the relocation process is so complicated, how come the schools would accept the proposal offered by the Education Department? The answer is very simple: the proposal is too attractive to reject. Even though each proposal may not be identical, the major idea is about the same. The school will be offered a new campus with

completed buildings in an area which has been estimated by the Education Department to have a greater need of school places than the original area. The major cost of moving and purchasing new furniture will be paid by the Government. The school board will usually be offered the right to use the old campus for their own purposes of redevelopment. As the old campus is usually located in the city, the school board will never be able to purchase a similar piece of land for development if not for the relocation of the school. Even though there may be some restrictions governing the redevelopment of the vacant old school premises, the attraction of relocation is great to the school board. Furthermore, the school board would also realize the decrease of residents in the city where the school is located. This will lead to falling enrolment and the final closing down of the school in the future. Since most of the school boards do not have representatives from the parents or teachers, it is quite common that the school boards will accept the offer from the Education Department without any consultation with the parents and teachers concerned, which is incredible in the western world.

Concerning the school administrators and the teachers, i.e., those who actually encounter the process of relocation, their views will often be different. Of course, they will definitely welcome the exchange of a sub-standard school building for a standard one. But how far away the new campus will be is a very important factor to them. They notice if the school moves too far away from its original district, they are going to have a totally different intake of new students and the intake is often of lower quality (Lau, 1991). Whether the school will re-establish its status as at the old site is not guaranteed. Either way it will involve a lot of hard work. Besides that, the additional workload during the two to four years period of phasing in and out will be tremendous. It is a process that no one else has experienced before.

When the news of relocation comes to the ears of the existing students, their reaction will also be different from that of the school board. From the users' point of view, the students will be too happy to know that the sub-standard school building will be replaced by a standard one since they would think that they need not bear with the poor facilities in the old school premises any more. But they will be disappointed when they realize that the new campus is so far away that it is difficult to commute to or that they are not even allowed to study in the new campus. The Education Department thought that the students would be satisfied if they would be offered

the chance of completing their studies in the old campus. The Education Department had underestimated the reaction of the students and their parents (Ho, 1989). It was found that more than 90% of the students would follow the school to the new site if they could do so. The Education Department forgot that the sense of belonging was also an important factor to the students' attachment to their own school. It is difficult for the students in the old campus to accept the fact that they cannot have the chance to study in the new campus.

3. *Problems Generated by School Relocation*

Even though the school relocation plan in Hong Kong might be a pioneer project in the world, one would expect the Education Department should have a well-prepared plan to carry out this idea. However the answer was probably negative. It appeared that the Education Department just followed their traditional routine of work-writing up their relocation plan behind their closed door without consulting the public, especially the schools concerned (Wong, 1987). After several years of trial and error, the Education Department came up with guidelines on the relocation of aided secondary schools under great pressure from the relocated schools (Education Department, 1990). The guidelines are a brief outline telling the schools what to do once they are in the process of negotiation about relocation with the Education Department. During that several years of trial and error, the execution of the relocation plan became a disaster to the people involved — not only school administrators, teachers, students and parents of the relocated schools, but also the education officers concerned with the matter. Some parents brought the relocation matter to the public and the Legislative Council. Eventually, these parents forced the Education Department to change their original plans in several schools. Actual experience of relocation can be found in detail from some unpublished term papers and thesis (Lau, 1991; Lau, 1992; Wong, 1993) written by some principals involved in the event.

A) Choice of School Site. The phasing out and phasing in program for relocation would not be better than the traditional method of moving the whole school at once if the old and new campus of the relocated school were close together. The traditional method would not only save the extra financial expenses in phasing out and in, but also could reduce the time, effort and energy of the school administrators, teachers, education officers

and others concerned. It could even take care of the sense of belonging of the students involved. Since the public transportation system in Hong Kong is excellent when compared with other cities in the world, it is not difficult for secondary students to go to schools which are up to 15 km away from their home. Under the present scheme of relocation, only 21 out of the 49 relocated schools could be moved to a new campus within 15 km from the old campus. If we are allowed to reassemble all the relocated schools and the available new school sites together again for the process of pairing up new and old school sites which are close together, it is not difficult to get an addition of 15 relocated schools that could move to a site within 15 km from their old campus.

However, the Education Department did not pay attention to the protest of parents and the teachers in the schools. They probably expected the school board would accept the relocating conditions offered by them. So they intentionally neglected the traditional method of relocation and gave away the school sites according to their own plan which might probably depend on their relationship with the individual school board. Hence, some schools had a choice of relocation sites while others would probably be offered a site in the remote area which might be far away from the original campus. This is probably the most serious mistake committed by the Education Department in the relocation of schools.

B) Borrowed School Premises. There are many ways to increase school places. One method is to ask the new secondary schools to lend part of their premises to another new guest school during the first year of completion so that the school places in Secondary One could be doubled in that year. This method is feasible since a standard school building usually has 24 or more classrooms and that host school cannot fill up all the classrooms in the first two years after completion. After the guest school moves back to its own premises, it will become the host school and can again lend out part of its classrooms to another new guest school. The Education Department has scheduled to build more than 160 schools from 1978 to the end of this century. It is not uncommon to see an average of 8 schools completed in a year. This host-guest school plan will definitely help to increase the school places one year in advance.

However, it is understandable that the host-guest school administration will be complicated. During the phasing out and phasing in process of a relocated school, if its phasing-in new campus is adopting this host-guest school policy, one can

visualize how complicated the situation is. And this in fact has happened to almost half of the relocated schools. It is difficult for the administrators and teachers to keep the school running smoothly during the phasing out and phasing in period with the additional host-guest school complication (Lau, 1991; Lau, 1992; Wong, 1993).

Furthermore, if the new school premises cannot be completed in time (and this is quite common in Hong Kong since the building schedule is very tight and the weather is not predictable), the guest school may have to borrow another school for its opening in advance. This is the reason why we had the interesting phenomenon of one school moving in and out of four different campuses and four schools operating in one campus during their period of relocation.

C) Different School Climates in the Old and New Campuses. Once the relocation starts, the two campuses will gradually build up different climates. In the old campus, the "sun-set" feeling among teachers and students intensifies gradually. The school would be covered with the "die down" atmosphere. Some students and teachers who cannot face up to this gloomy future would rather choose to transfer elsewhere before the school phases out.

In the new campus, the school climate will be totally different. However, the school culture is difficult to maintain without the help of senior students. In addition, if there are too many new teachers in the new campus, those teachers transferred from the old campus in the subsequent years may find that they are actually working in a different school.

As teachers in the two campuses see things very differently, it is easy to have conflict between the two parties during the relocation period and the subsequent years. It is extremely difficult for the school principal to resolve the conflict which is an additional burden on top of those mentioned in the previous paragraphs (Lau, 1992).

Implications for Other Countries

When the ministries of education of the developed countries first encountered the problem of enrolment decline in some school districts in the nineteen seventies, their general policy was to close down schools in the districts concerned. At the same time, they might have to open some new schools in other districts that were not too far away but in need of school places. If they could put into consideration the concept of a whole territory (ten or twenty school districts close together) at the same time, they might be able to work out some relocation plans similar to

the Hong Kong situation. The hardship of parent demonstrations, court disputes or other unpleasant events in that period could probably be greatly reduced then. Even though cities in the developing nations are usually facing the influx of migrants at present, the decline of population may come gradually or suddenly due to better planning of city development or unexpected change in the future. The recent experience of school relocation in Hong Kong should be taken into consideration when they meet similar problems.

As a whole, the Hong Kong experience in school relocation is a valuable one and is worth consideration for other countries that have similar problems in population migrating away from the city centre or aging. Of course, one must be aware of the pitfall that the Hong Kong Education Department has got into. The Education Department was probably too confident of their new plan of phasing out and phasing in that they overlooked the fact that the distance between the old and new school sites would still be the most important factor in school relocation. Since they did not take distance as the first priority but followed their own plan, this not only doubled the expenditure in relocation (assuming the building cost of the new campus did not count), but also had more than 20 schools suffering from the unnecessary phasing out and phasing in process. This kind of disaster could be avoided if the Education Department had planned in greater detail and consulted the affected schools carefully. Of course, this would be difficult since officers concerned have a tendency to defend their own position and turn a deaf ear to the public.

The restructure of the school board is also a factor that is worth considering. The members of a school board in Hong Kong are usually successful businessmen or professionals. Besides the legal responsibility, they may have very little contact with the school. It is possible that some board members have not even visited the school, met with the teachers or students for more than ten years. The school is just one of their public services which will earn prestige and fame for them. Few board members have real concern for the future of the school.

It was natural that the Education Department just contacted the school board to discuss relocation since they owned the school legally. However, it was the responsibility of the school board to consult the parents or teachers to see if they would accept the relocation offer. But very few school boards did this during the relocation period.

Fortunately, the recent School Reform Acts in U.K. (Morris, 1993) has had some kind of influence

on the education sector of Hong Kong. The Education Department has been earnestly promoting the School Management Initiative since 1991. One of the important features is the restructuring of the school board: representatives of parents, teachers and alumni should be members of the board also. If this movement could come to Hong Kong ten years earlier, the whole picture of relocation would be different.

If the ministry of education of a country likes to try out this kind of school relocation program, the most important thing is to list out all the possible new school sites and try to pair them up with those schools that need relocation. The key point is to come up with the largest number of pairs so that the distance between each new site and a school that needs relocation is within 15 km and can be linked by direct public transportation if possible.

In this way, the relocated school can be moved into the new campus all at once without suffering from the troublesome phasing out and phasing in process. In case the district where the new campus is situated has a great need of school places before the completion of the new campus of the relocated school, students in that district can study in the old campus first, waiting for the completion of the new campus. During the transitional period, the government can arrange school buses to solve the problem of transportation if public transit is not convenient. Hence, we can transfer the over-supply of school places in the district near the old campus to the district near the new campus that has not enough school places at least one or two years in advance.

Lastly, it is not necessary for a country to be rich in order to consider the adoption of the relocation plan. Hong Kong was also in a less wealthy stage several decades ago and had introduced the nine years' compulsory education in 1978. What is important is the provision of school places for students in different districts. If Hong Kong has been pushed to consider the school relocation program in order to equalize the provision of school places in different districts ten years after the introduction of nine years' compulsory education, maybe it is worthwhile for other ministries of education to reconsider their planning in this area.

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