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Editorial **We Need Only Two Bands for Our Secondary Schools**

July 17 2001 was another mournful day for Hong Kong. On the television screen we saw parents and their children weeping together because the latter were assigned into band 3 schools. One wonders why Hong Kong is so slow to learn, and why Hong Kong can tolerate imposing such psychological pain on parents, students, and schools. All this psychological pain was for no good purpose. Rather, with all the pain, the competitiveness and resilience of Hong Kong's younger generation go down the drain.

There is reason to believe that as long as there is a bottom band (or bottom bands) of schools the pain will persist and the process of education will be distorted. Each primary school will want to drill its students so they will "succeed" in escaping the ill fate of being assigned into undesirable schools. With heavy homework and drilling all the talk about fostering the motivation to learn is empty talk. Before long, students will have lost their interest in study and with that loss of interest so also goes their ability. The assignment of students to secondary schools based on five bands of abilities had been the single most damaging in our education system. Other problems—and there are many of them—fade in its face.

Rather than dealing with the problem at the head the government is proposing setting up through-train schools. That just brings the pressures and frustrations six years earlier. Kids aged four and five will from now on have to go to training sessions to allow them to outperform other contenders to get a place in the preferred schools.

Our recommended formula is to allow only the truly outstanding students opt for schools of their choice. The rest—perhaps 80 per cent—should be assigned randomly to schools in the locality. The Education Department should make sure that each school is adequately funded and staffed by qualified teachers, and leave the schools alone so they can compete for excellence freely and on a level playing field.

Some of the truly outstanding students may still be disappointed because there may be too few places in their preferred schools. But although they may not get into the most preferred school, they still enjoy the privilege of going to their second or third choice. Even those who do not do well enough to enjoy this privilege will never have to be put into a bottom band and allocated into schools that are believed to be "bottom band schools".

We should reintroduce examinations for writing, reading, and arithmetic, and perhaps general knowledge, so students in primary schools know clearly that these are the important subjects in which they are expected to do well. Without the banding, however, the pressures from examinations will be much smaller. And parents with kids to promote into secondary schools will no longer have to weep like they have been doing this year and in many of the past years.