

## LCQ10: Impacts of the epidemic on schools and parents of students

Following is a question by the Hon Hui Chi-fung and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (March 18):

Question:

In view of the rampant novel coronavirus epidemic, the Education Bureau (EDB) earlier on has extended for several times the class suspension arrangements for all primary and secondary schools, kindergartens and special schools in Hong Kong, and classes will resume on April 20 this year at the earliest. Regarding the impacts of the epidemic on schools and parents of students, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as some parents of kindergarten students hold the view that since their children have not been able to go to school for the whole months of February and March, it will only be reasonable that they are not required to pay for these two months' tuition fees, whether the EDB will consider paying the tuition fees for February and March on behalf of the parents of all kindergarten students in Hong Kong; if not, of the measures in place to assist parents with financial difficulties;

(2) of the details of the various support provided by the EDB for schools since the outbreak of the epidemic, and whether the EDB will provide subsidies to schools in need for paying expenses such as rents and salaries; and

(3) given that there are nearly 28 000 cross-boundary students in Hong Kong, how the EDB ensures that the epidemic on the Mainland will not spread to the schools in Hong Kong through such students upon class resumption, in order to safeguard the health of all students and teachers?

Reply:

President,

Under the novel coronavirus epidemic, to minimise the risk of the spread of the virus, and to ensure students' health and well-being by reducing social contacts, the Education Bureau (EDB) has announced that all classes in Hong Kong have been temporarily suspended and classes will not resume before April 20. The exact date of class resumption is subject to further assessment. During the period of class suspension, the EDB has maintained contacts with schools to better understand their operation and needs, join hands with them to tackle related problems and provide support as necessary.

My reply to the Hon Hui Chi-fung's question is as follows:

(1) At present, about 90 per cent of the kindergartens (KGs) joining the kindergarten education scheme (Scheme-KGs) and offering half-day programmes are free. For whole-day and long whole-day programmes, their tuition fees are at a low level, with the median tuition fees per instalment at about \$820 in the 2019/20 school year. For parents whose children are attending these KGs, tuition fee should not be a heavy burden. Families with financial needs may apply for fee remission through the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme (KCFRS) under the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency. Under KCFRS, although students are required to have attended school in the month concerned to be eligible for fee remission in that month, in view of the fact that the number of school days may be affected during the school suspension period, the EDB and the Student Finance Office will handle the cases with flexibility so that students will continue to receive the subsidy. During the period of class suspension, KGs remain open to take care of students in need and maintain contacts with parents to provide information and support as necessary to support students' learning at home. As such, schools are in practice still providing services.

Overall speaking, to reduce parents' burden on educational expenses, a funding of about \$900 million is allocated from the Anti-epidemic Fund newly set up by the Government to provide an additional \$1,000 for each recipient of the Student Grant, i.e. an increase from \$2,500 to \$3,500 for the 2019/20 school year, benefitting some 900,000 students, including KG students studying in both Scheme-KGs and non Scheme-KGs.

In addition, to assist KGs in tackling operational difficulties and additional expenses caused by the epidemic, the EDB has implemented the following measures:

(a) using the number of students in January this year as the basis for calculation of monthly subsidy for each Scheme-KG during the class suspension period to ensure that there will be no reduction of government subsidies due to absence or withdrawal of individual students during the period;

(b) providing an additional grant for all KGs (including Scheme-KGs and non-Scheme KGs); the one-off subsidy for each KG ranges from \$60,000 to \$160,000, incurring an additional expenditure of about \$120 million;

(c) providing a one-off Special Anti-epidemic Grant for all KGs. Please refer to Part (2) of the reply for details.

These measures have alleviated the pressure on operational expenditure faced by KGs, and have indirectly supported parents.

The cost structure of non-Scheme KGs is not monitored by the EDB, some of these KGs are even not non-profit making in nature. Payment of tuition fees by the EDB on behalf of parents does not conform to the principles governing the use of public money. Nevertheless, if individual KGs, in particular those without government subsidies, need to reduce their tuition fees, the EDB will expedite the processing of the applications to cater for

the needs of the KGs and parents.

(2) In order to help schools replenish their epidemic prevention equipment, clean their school premises and pay for other expenses related to epidemic prevention, the EDB will deploy the existing resources to provide a one-off Special Anti-epidemic Grant to all schools offering full and formal curriculum (including KGs, public sector schools, Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools, English Schools Foundation schools, international schools, Private Independent Schools, private primary schools and private secondary day schools). The subsidy rate, ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 per school, depends on the type and size of the school. This will involve an additional expenditure of about \$42 million, benefitting some 2 200 schools.

Apart from that, the boarding sections of aided special schools have been operating to cater for students in need of boarding service during class suspension. To enhance the support for the boarding sections to guard against the epidemic and to reduce the risk of the spread of the novel coronavirus, the EDB has already provided separately a one-off additional grant for 21 special schools with a boarding section. The amount of the special grant is determined by their approved boarding capacity, ranging from \$50,000 to \$150,000, incurring an additional expenditure estimated to be around \$2.25 million.

During the period of class suspension, both primary and secondary schools are making use of different modes of learning (including e-learning) to maintain students' motivation and interest in learning and achieve the goal of "suspending classes without suspending learning", with a view to helping students continue learning at home. In accordance with the established mechanism and criteria, the EDB will continue to provide public sector schools and DSS schools with subsidies, the amount of which will not be reduced because of the suspension of classes. As for private schools, which are market-driven, their operating expenses (such as salaries, rentals of school premises, etc.) are generally included in calculating their annual budgets and tuition fees. As far as we understand, the number of students in private schools during the period of class suspension has remained fairly stable. If individual schools wish to adjust their tuition fees due to the impact of the epidemic, we will process their applications as soon as possible.

As for KGs, the support measures launched by the EDB have already been detailed at Part (1) of my reply.

(3) As the epidemic is still evolving, the date of class resumption is subject to further assessment. The EDB will act on medical advice and take into account the readiness of schools and the supply of protective equipment in the community in making further assessment. The EDB will decide on the date of class resumption when there are sufficient conditions to do so, so as to safeguard students' health. As regards cross-boundary students, we will take into account the anti-epidemic measures at that time (including the immigration control measures and quarantine arrangements, etc.), epidemic situation in neighbouring regions and medical advice when formulating the

arrangements. We will continue to closely liaise with the relevant Government departments, including the Centre for Health Protection, and make reference to the views of the representatives from the school sector, so as to draw up the anti-epidemic measures when classes resume.