

LCQ10: Resumption of face-to-face classes of schools

Following is a question by the Hon Frankie Yick and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Education Bureau (EDB) has, on several occasions, announced suspension of face-to-face classes of schools along with a shift to online teaching and learning. After the schools' Chinese New Year holidays this year, schools may arrange for no more than one-third of the total number of students of the school to return to school to attend classes on a half-day basis. In addition, where a school can arrange all its teachers and staff to undergo regular virus testing once every 14 days, it may apply to the EDB for whole-school resumption of half-day face-to-face classes. It is learnt that the prolonged suspension of face-to-face classes has not only affected the learning progress of students, but also significantly affected the operation of support services related to school operation (e.g. school bus services provided by school private light buses, private school buses and non-franchised public buses). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective up-to-date numbers of applications from schools for whole-school resumption of half-day face-to-face classes received and approved by the EDB, with a breakdown by school type (i.e. kindergarten, primary school, secondary school and tutorial school); the measures in place to encourage more schools to make applications;

(2) as some school bus operators have relayed that since they still need to meet expenses such as salaries for drivers and escorts despite a substantial reduction of income due to a drastic drop of 90 per cent in the number of student passengers, and the subsidy provided by the Government is just a drop in the bucket, most of the operators have used up their savings and teetered on the brink of closing down their businesses, what measures the Government has put in place to assist school bus operators in tiding over the difficult times, so as to ensure that adequate school buses will be available for providing services in the next school year;

(3) given that following the implementation of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, the epidemic may hopefully be mitigated, of the circumstances under which the EDB will announce the full resumption of face-to-face classes of schools; and

(4) given that some school buses have been left idle for a long time, whether, in order to ensure that such vehicles can resume operation safely, the Government will provide school bus operators with a "business resumption

allowance " before the full resumption of face-to-face classes of schools, so that they can repair and maintain their vehicles to protect the safety of students, drivers and other road users; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been progressively increasing the time for face-to-face classes in a pragmatic, gradual and orderly manner, as far as the epidemic situation allows. We shall continue to follow this direction and strive to strike a balance between meeting the learning needs of students and preventing and fighting the epidemic, with a view to allowing more on-campus learning time for students. Regarding administrative arrangements such as school bus services, the EDB reminds schools, through various channels, to coordinate well with relevant operators and schools in the same district so as to properly arrange the schedules and routes of such services. Meanwhile, given that the class suspension arrangements arisen out of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) have affected the school bus sector, the Government has provided appropriate support, including financial assistance, to the affected trades.

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Frankie Yick is as follows:

(1) and (3) Starting from the period after schools' Chinese New Year holidays, schools are allowed to arrange students (capped at one-third of the total number of students of the schools) to return to campuses for resumption of face-to-face classes or examinations on a half-day basis. Besides, for an individual school that can arrange all its teachers and staff to take regular virus tests, there will be extra protection for the students and teachers and a safer learning environment will be created. The EDB will consider allowing these schools to arrange whole-school resumption of half-day face-to-face classes. Up to March 19, 2021, over 1 400 schools had submitted applications for whole-school resumption of half-day face-to-face classes. Among these schools, around 750 were kindergartens, around 500 were tutorial schools while around 160 were primary and secondary schools. The EDB has been encouraging schools to join the above scheme through different channels (including issuing letters to schools, releasing information via the media, and communicating directly with stakeholders). The EDB has also been providing facilitation to the schools joining the scheme, allowing their teachers and school staff to undergo free virus tests at the 21 Community Testing Centres of the Department of Health.

Apart from the above, the Government announced on March 8 this year the inclusion of teachers and school staff as priority groups in the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme. The EDB has issued a letter to schools to explain the details and encourage teachers and school staff to get vaccinated actively to protect themselves, their families and the Hong Kong community as a whole. The EDB will continuously monitor the development of the epidemic, take into account health experts' advice, and maintain liaison with the school sector.

When the epidemic situation has gradually shown signs of subsiding and schools are adequately prepared, we will consider further relaxation of face-to-face schooling arrangements.

(2) and (4) The Government understands that the continuous suspension has caused severe impact on the non-franchised bus student service and school private light bus trades. In response to the needs of the trades, the Transport and Housing Bureau and the Transport Department (TD) had previously introduced various one-off relief measures through the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) to help the public transport trades tide over the difficult time. In particular, to relieve the operating pressure caused to the trades, the TD provided a non-accountable subsidy of \$65,000 and \$55,000 in total to eligible owners of each non-franchised public bus and school private light bus respectively.

Moreover, to alleviate the financial difficulties of school bus drivers, school private light bus drivers and nannies due to the suspension of school bus services caused by the face-to-face class suspension, the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved allocation of funding to the AEF thrice in April, September and December 2020 to provide financial subsidies to each eligible serving school bus driver, school private light bus driver and nanny who provide student transport services.

In addition to the subsidies under the AEF, the Government has also waived the vehicle licence fees and vehicle examination fees payable for commercial vehicles from December 30, 2019 to December 29, 2021, as well as provided rental concession for short term tenancies of government land to the trades for parking use from October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2021, with a view to reducing the financial burden of the operators. Besides, the Government understands that a lot of non-franchised buses and school private light buses in the market are being idled due to insufficient operation and postponement of resuming face-to-face classes of schools. In response to the situation, after discussing with the Lands Department in early 2020, the TD has allowed idled non-franchised buses and school private light buses to be temporarily stored on a piece of land at Container Port Road South, Kwai Chung, while the Public Omnibus Operators Association has been commissioned to manage the temporary parking space. The temporary parking space allows for the storage of around 900 non-franchised buses and school private light buses in total, and its operation date has been extended to April 30, 2021. The TD will consider further extending the storage period in light of the situation of the epidemic.

The Government will closely monitor the development of the epidemic, and consider and implement policies and measures targeting the non-franchised bus and school private light bus trades as appropriate.