

LCQ12: Developing a hub for primary and secondary education

Following is a question by Professor the Hon William Wong and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (July 17):

Question:

It has been reported that, with the worsening situation of low birth rate in Hong Kong, primary and secondary schools are facing "class reduction and school closure" one after another. On the other hand, the Chief Executive has proposed in the 2023 Policy Address to build Hong Kong into an international hub for post-secondary education. There are views that Hong Kong's primary and secondary basic education also have significant advantages in developing international education (including teachers having all undergone high-quality and systematic training, and the curriculum being taught in both languages of Chinese and English, etc.), and the Government should make good use of such advantages and introduce policies to alleviate the impact of low birth rate, replenish the sources of students and nurture talents for the long-term development of Hong Kong. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective numbers of Mainland and overseas students currently enrolled in international schools at primary and secondary levels;
- (2) whether it will consider constructing new school premises or converting the premises of some primary and secondary schools which have been closed or are likely to be closed, as well as providing additional supporting facilities (e.g. hostels), so as to operate primary and secondary schools dedicated to absorb Mainland and overseas students;
- (3) whether it has plans to promote and admit students to local primary and secondary schools (including international schools and schools dedicated to offering Mainland curriculum) in the Mainland, neighbouring Chinese-populated regions and overseas, so as to increase the sources of students for various types of schools in Hong Kong; and
- (4) whether it has plans to, while building Hong Kong into an international hub for post-secondary education, build Hong Kong into an international hub for primary and secondary education; if so, of the details; if not, whether it will consider the plans concerned?

Reply:

President,

The Chief Executive's 2023 Policy Address outlined the direction to

develop Hong Kong into an international post-secondary education hub and a cradle of future talents. This policy is based on the fact that Hong Kong has world-renowned universities and outstanding research talents, thus focusing only on post-secondary education. Regarding primary and secondary education, parents are provided with diverse and quality choices under the education system of Hong Kong.

The Government provides 12 years' free primary and secondary education to eligible children through public sector schools. Non-local students who come to live in Hong Kong with their parents (including those who come to Hong Kong under various talent admission schemes) may also choose to enrol in any local public sector schools, Direct Subsidy Scheme schools or private schools (including international schools) that suit them, provided they meet the relevant eligibility requirements. We are glad to see that Hong Kong's diverse and quality education is also one of the factors attracting talents to Hong Kong.

Faced with a structural decline in school-age population, the Government accords top priority to the interests of students when planning for the future development of education. Aiming for a "soft landing", we review the policies and effectiveness of utilisation of public resources, and adjust the number of schools in a gradual and orderly manner to ensure a healthy and sustainable education ecosystem and optimal use of public resources. As to non-public sector schools, they may also admit overseas students in accordance with prevailing policies, should they provide adequate supporting arrangements.

Our reply to the questions raised by Professor the Hon William Wong is as follows:

(1) The numbers of non-local students in international schools in the 2023/24 school year are tabulated as follows:

Level	Non-local students		
	Mainland students	Other non-local students	Total
Primary	1 209	13 497	14 706
Secondary	1 008	11 676	12 684
Total	2 217	25 173	27 390

Notes:

- (i) Figures refer to the position as at mid-September 2023.
- (ii) Figures include students in international schools, but not those in special schools.
- (iii) Local students refer to those who are Hong Kong permanent residents and

do not have any valid passport other than the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Passport. Students not covered by this definition are all regarded as non-local students.

(iv) Mainland students refer to those with Chinese nationality (including those from Mainland China, Macao and Taiwan).

(2) The Education Bureau (EDB) has all along upheld the principle of optimising the use of public resources, and handles vacant school premises (VSP) in accordance with Central Clearing House mechanism. The EDB conducts reviews on whether the vacant or to-be-vacant school premises are suitable to be retained for school use (primary and secondary school), having regard to factors such as the size, location and physical conditions of the premises, as well as the educational needs and relevant policy measures. Upon confirming that such premises are not required to be retained for school use, the EDB should, in accordance with the said mechanism, release the relevant sites for the Planning Department (PlanD)'s consideration of suitable long-term alternative uses. Since the establishment of the prevailing mechanism in 2011, the EDB already released over 250 vacant or to-be-vacant school premises sites. For details, please refer to the list of VSP sites updated by PlanD regularly on their webpage

(www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/resources/vsp/vsp_list.html).

(3) and (4) As mentioned above, the policy of developing Hong Kong into an international post-secondary education hub focuses on post-secondary education, and the Government has no plan to extend the policy to primary and secondary schools at this stage. Public sector primary and secondary schools would continue to focus on the learning needs of eligible students in Hong Kong. At the same time, the Government is committed to developing a vibrant international school sector to meet the demand for international school places from non-local families living in Hong Kong and families coming to Hong Kong for work or investment. In addition, with the vibrant development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and Hong Kong's commitment in promoting the interflow of talent with the Mainland and creating strong impetus for growth, it is considered that there would be demand for Mainland curriculum from Mainland families in Hong Kong. Hence, we have allocated, via the School Allocation Exercise mechanism, the greenfield site at Tin Shui Wai for the establishment of the very first non-profit-making private school offering the Mainland curriculum in Hong Kong.

Non-public sector schools with adequate supporting arrangements may admit overseas students in accordance with prevailing policies. Schools admitting underage overseas students who come to Hong Kong to study on their own without parental accompaniment should, in the interest of students' well-being, consider the relevant supporting arrangements and services required, including the provision of adequate support, proper care and sound protection (e.g. arrangements for accommodation, guardianship, counselling, etc.) to cater for the needs of the students in respect of their learning, daily life, personal growth and mental health etc., so as to ensure students' healthy development.

In terms of publicity and promotion, the EDB works closely with the Hong

Kong Talent Engage (HKTE) to provide non-local families who are interested in coming to Hong Kong with clear information on future studies in Hong Kong via the dedicated online platform. The HKTE actively collaborates with several working partners to introduce information about education in Hong Kong, which enables incoming talents to have a better understanding of the education system in Hong Kong. In addition to providing school profiles of public sector schools, the EDB has also launched a new thematic website to introduce international schools in Hong Kong.

On the other hand, local school councils also organise joint exhibitions and talks in the Mainland to provide information to and answer enquiries from the Mainland parents and students who are interested in studying in local schools. Some schools have even arranged school visits, class observations and experiential learning sessions for newly-arrived families and/or those intending to apply to come to Hong Kong with a view to allowing them to directly experience the learning environment and conditions in Hong Kong.

To conclude, we would continue to develop a diverse and quality education system and tell the good stories of Hong Kong's education through various channels.