

LCQ13: Internet devices at home for students from grass-roots families

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

Question:

To cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, schools suspended classes and implemented online teaching and learning on a number of occasions in recent months. While classes have now been resumed in schools, quite a number of schools still use online teaching and learning on a supplementary basis. Some parents from grass-roots families have relayed that this mode of learning is more demanding on the Internet devices at home, which has increased their financial burden. However, they are ineligible to apply for the "Provision of Subsidy to Needy Primary and Secondary Students for Purchasing Mobile Computer Devices to Facilitate the Practice of e-Learning" under the Community Care Fund (the subsidy scheme) because the schools in which their children study have not participated in the programme. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the Education Bureau (EDB) has, in view of the epidemic, flexibly handled applications under the subsidy scheme submitted by schools for their eligible students, whether it has assessed if this arrangement has resulted in an increase in the numbers of schools participating in the programme and students benefitting from the programme; if so, of the details;

(2) of the respective current numbers of (i) schools participating in the subsidy scheme and (ii) schools which are eligible but have not participated in the programme; respective tabulated breakdowns of such numbers by schools' (a) type (i.e. secondary school, primary school and special school) and (b) funding mode (i.e. government, aided, caput, and Direct Subsidy Scheme); if such figures are not available, whether it will compile the statistics;

(3) given that the EDB indicated last month that it expected around 100 000 students from some 800 schools would benefit from the subsidy scheme in the following school year, of a breakdown of such number of schools by type and funding mode (as above); the basis on which such projected numbers were derived; and

(4) whether it will examine relaxing the eligibility criteria and streamlining the vetting and approval procedure of the subsidy scheme, so as to encourage schools to participate in the programme and enable more students from grass-roots families to benefit from the programme?

Reply:

President,

Through the Community Care Fund (CCF), the Education Bureau (EDB) has been implementing since the 2018/19 school year a three-year assistance programme on provision of subsidy to needy primary and secondary students for purchasing mobile computer devices (Assistance Programme), so as to relieve the financial burden on students from low-income families caused by the development of the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy on campus. The target beneficiaries are students receiving subsidies under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme or the School Textbook Assistance Scheme in public sector schools (including government, aided, caput and Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) primary and secondary schools) that implement the BYOD policy.

Face-to-face classes in schools were once suspended due to the COVID-19 epidemic. As many students need to use mobile computer devices for e-learning at home during the period, the EDB flexibly handles applications for the Assistance Programme and accepts those from all public sector primary and secondary schools implementing e-learning for their eligible students before the full resumption of classes. The EDB has also explained to schools such flexible arrangements and encouraged them to submit applications for needy students through various channels, including a letter dated March 23, 2020 and a circular memorandum dated May 28, 2020.

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Wu Chi-wai is as follows:

(1) to (3) Application period for the 2020/21 school year is from May 2020 to end of January 2021. The EDB issued a letter on August 3 this year to remind schools of the relevant flexible arrangements again and requested them to provide information relating to supporting students' e-learning at home. The response from schools was positive, with more than 75% indicating that they would participate in the Assistance Programme this school year and the rest replying that they have put in place school-based measures to support needy students, such as lending mobile computer devices to students for use at home, or applying for other assistance programmes for them. In addition, the schools have provided the initial estimated number of student beneficiaries for the EDB's reference when submitting their applications. As at early November this year, about 800 schools have submitted applications, which is a substantial increase as compared with the previous two school years. The estimated number of student beneficiaries in the 2020/21 school year is about 100 000, which triples the total number of student beneficiaries in the 2018/19 and 2019/20 school years. The actual number of student beneficiaries will only be known after schools have submitted a report to the EDB upon completion of the procurement procedures. The relevant statistics are set out below:

Type of schools	2018/19 school year		2019/20 school year		2020/21 school year (Note 2)	
	Government schools	Aided schools (Note 1)	Government schools	Aided schools (Note 1)	Government schools	Aided schools (Note 1)

Primary schools	1	88	2	138	31	375
Secondary schools	3	85	5	121	24	332
Special schools	Not applicable	11	Not applicable	15	Not applicable	39
Total	4	184	7	274	55	746

Note 1: The figures include local schools under DSS and caput schools.

Note 2: As at early November 2020.

All public sector primary and secondary schools implementing e-learning can apply for the Assistance Programme for their eligible students. Schools may formulate their own learning support strategies during class suspension according to students' needs and the school context including whether e-learning is suitable for young pupils in junior primary classes or students with special educational needs. The Assistance Programme is only one of the options to support financially needy students. Other options include lending schools' mobile computer devices to students for use, or assisting students in applying for or receiving mobile computer devices donated by charitable organisations. Meanwhile, if schools do not have any eligible student beneficiaries, they do not need to participate in the Assistance Programme. In sum, schools should take into consideration the needs of their students and the school context, the direction of implementing e-learning and other support measures in deciding whether to apply for the Assistance Programme. The EDB has been actively promoting the Assistance Programme to schools and providing relevant professional training for teachers and technical support, and will also keep in view the support needs of schools in respect of e-learning.

(4) The EDB has streamlined the administrative arrangements for schools to participate in the Assistance Programme. At present, schools are only required to submit an application form in order to purchase suitable mobile computer devices for eligible students in accordance with their procurement procedures. After completing the procurement procedures, schools need to submit a report to the EDB for working out the subsidy required. The EDB is closely monitoring the implementation of the Programme, and will review its operation and effectiveness and consolidate the relevant experience with a view to enhancing the measures in support of e-learning.