

# LCQ13: Promoting students' physical and mental health

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (October 30):

Question:

Last year, the Ministry of Education issued the Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving the Mental Health Education for Students in the New Era (2023-2025), pointing out that promoting the physical and mental health and all-round development of students is an important issue. However, there are views pointing out that a number of student suicide cases were reported in Hong Kong at the beginning of the school year in September this year, highlighting the critical situation of students' mental health and the need for the Government to strengthen the co-operation among schools, families and the community in order to establish a more comprehensive support system. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will review afresh the Three-Tier School-based Emergency Mechanism implemented in December last year in order to strengthen the assistance to schools in early identifying students with higher suicidal risk and providing them with appropriate support expeditiously;

(2) whether it will formulate quantifiable guidelines (e.g. setting maximum daily homework load) based on the four elements (i.e. Rest, Relaxation, Relationship and Resilience) and the objectives for promoting mental health covered in the Education Bureau's 4Rs Mental Health Charter to enable schools to take practical actions to reduce student stress;

(3) whether it will further implement small class teaching and improve the teacher-student ratios so as to increase the level of student participation and the opportunities for teacher-student interaction, so that teachers can better understand the individual needs and challenges of each student, thereby enhancing the care and counselling for individual students;

(4) whether it will improve the resources for life-wide learning so that schools can be more flexible in applying them to help students achieve the aims of whole-person development;

(5) whether it will strengthen the comprehensive implementation of positive education and the establishment of a caring school culture, so as to enhance the sense of well-being in schools; and

(6) as some studies have pointed out that the emotional stress of teachers and parents positively correlates with the depression level of students,

whether the authorities will introduce various activities and measures (e.g. streamlining the administrative work of schools) at the level of teachers and parents to relieve their emotional stress, so as to prevent their negative emotions from affecting students?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) attaches great importance to physical and psychological well-being and whole-person development of students, and has been assisting schools in adopting the Whole School Approach at three levels, namely Universal, Selective and Indicated, to promote students' mental health.

Our reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee is as follows:

(1) The Government has implemented the Three-tier School-based Emergency Mechanism in all secondary schools in Hong Kong since December 2023 through cross-departmental collaboration among the EDB, the Social Welfare Department and the Health Bureau, working with the schools' multidisciplinary teams, the off-campus support network and medical services for early identification and support of students with high risk. The 2024 Policy Address has announced to extend the Mechanism to the end of 2025 and that enhancement would be made to strengthen collaboration. The Government will continue to review the operation of the Mechanism.

(2) The EDB implements the 4Rs Mental Health Charter in 2024 to foster the mental health of students, staff and parents in a more holistic manner. It is pleased to see that over 500 schools have joined the Charter. In the relevant circular memorandum, the EDB has set out the action pledges that participating schools have to achieve in relation to the four elements for promoting mental health (i.e. rest, relaxation, relationship and resilience). Schools are also required to implement various measures and organise activities for the promotion of students' mental health starting from this school year to help students develop healthy living habits and positive interpersonal relationships, provide them with more opportunities to relax and reduce stress, and enhance their sense of well-being and resilience. In particular, schools should formulate an appropriate school-based assignment policy and co-ordinate the workload across different subjects to strike a balance between the quality and quantity of assignments.

(3) It is an established government policy to implement small class teaching (SCT) in public sector primary schools. SCT is a teaching strategy that provides teachers with an environment conducive to greater flexibility in adopting different teaching strategies for diversified educational activities and promoting teacher-student and student-student interactions. Currently, over 90 per cent of public sector primary schools in Hong Kong have implemented SCT, achieving the target set in the 2022 Policy Address one year ahead of schedule. The EDB has also arranged nine schools to start

implementing SCT in the 2025/26 school year. By then, the percentage of public sector primary schools implementing SCT will increase to nearly 95 per cent. The EDB will continue to prudently assess the circumstances of individual districts/school nets and maintain communication with schools to pragmatically and flexibly advance SCT in public sector primary schools as soon as possible.

The current standard class size of 25 for primary schools implementing SCT is smaller when compared to the average class size in some advanced places. For secondary schools, the current allocation class size of public sector secondary schools ranges from 31 to 34, while the actual average class size is just 27.1, which is comparable to those in other developed countries. With the implementation of various measures, the overall teacher-to-student ratios in public sector primary and secondary schools have been improving from 1:14.4 and 1:14.5 respectively in the 2012/13 school year to 1:11.9 and 1:11.1 respectively in the 2023/24 school year, which are better than those in most other regions, providing teachers with greater flexibility to nurture students' whole-person development.

(4) The EDB has been proactively encouraging schools to promote students' life-wide learning in and outside the classroom. Starting from the 2019/20 school year, the EDB has been providing a recurrent Life-wide Learning Grant (the Grant) to all public sector schools and schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme each year, with the aim of supporting schools in organising more out-of-classroom experiential learning activities and procuring the necessary equipment, so as to enrich the learning experiences of students. In view of the latest education development and students' needs, the EDB issued a circular in September this year to update the ambit and guidelines on the use of the Grant, related examples, etc, which includes encouraging schools to make good use of the Grant to organise activities relating to the promotion of students' mental health, or procure related services, materials and learning and teaching resources.

(5) The EDB has all along been encouraging schools to promote positive education and help students face challenges positively. In terms of curriculum, the EDB strives to nurture students with a positive and optimistic attitude towards life through values education. The Values Education Curriculum Framework (Pilot Version) released in 2021 has included "strengthening life education" as one of its emphases, with continuous support given to schools to foster students' positivity and a positive and optimistic attitude towards life through learning as well as life-wide learning activities within and beyond the classroom. In addition, diversified student activities have been organised to help create a caring and harmonious campus atmosphere. Examples of such include the launch of the "Active Students, Active People" Campaign" to support schools in promoting physical activities; the organisation of Understanding Adolescent Project in primary schools, the Enhanced Smart Teen Project in secondary schools in collaboration with disciplinary forces and uniform groups, and the Pupil Ambassador Scheme on Positive Living to enhance students' resilience through adventure-based, team-building and problem-solving training; and the "WE" Positive Dynamic Scheme and the "Gratitude, Forgiveness & Happiness Project"

to help students build a positive self-image. Besides, the EDB has been organising the "Caring School Award Scheme" annually to recognise schools that are dedicated to implementing caring school measures, and encourage them to establish a caring school culture.

(6) In parallel, the EDB also concern about the mental health of teachers and parents. In this regard, the EDB has set up the Teachers' Helpline to provide telephone counselling and follow-up services to help teachers cope with stress at work or emotional problems. There are also courses on stress management and promotion of physical and psychological well-being for teachers organised under the Teachers' Helpline initiative. Over the past few years, the Quality Education Fund has subsidised various projects relating to teachers' physical and psychological well-being, such as the Mindshift Educational Networking Programme launched by the University of Hong Kong to help teachers learn how to relieve stress. In the 2023/24 school year, the EDB organised a total of 48 workshops and courses for teachers, covering topics such as mental health, expressive arts, mindfulness and physical health. The EDB will continue to organise such workshops and courses for teachers.

The EDB has implemented various new initiatives in recent years to allocate additional manpower and resources to support teachers' work continuously. Examples of the related measures include increasing the teacher-to-class ratio for public sector schools by 0.1 across-the-board starting from the 2017/18 school year to enhance their teaching manpower; providing additional regular teaching posts for schools; providing cash grants for schools to hire additional teaching and non-teaching staff; and implementing the "One Executive Officer for Each School" policy starting from the 2019/20 school year so as to reduce the administrative work of teachers, thereby creating more room for them.

For parents, the EDB has been implementing the territory-wide Positive Parent Campaign since 2020 to foster parents' positive thinking and attitudes. The focus of the Positive Parent Campaign this year is to encourage parents and children to develop a healthy lifestyle together, and help parents take good care of the physical and psychological well-being of themselves and their children. In addition, the EDB has introduced the Curriculum Frameworks on Parent Education for kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools respectively, providing reference for schools and other organisations in designing parent education programmes or activities, and one of the four core strands of the Curriculum Frameworks is "Promotion of Parents' Physical and Psychological Well-being". Starting from the 2022/23 school year, the EDB has been organising parent education courses and talks for parents of kindergarten and primary school students based on the Curriculum Frameworks. The themes include how to help children cope with stress, and exercising empathy to help children understand, express and regulate their emotions. Meanwhile, the EDB has all along been making use of the one-stop parent education website "Smart Parent Net" to provide information on positive parenting, emotional management of parents, etc. In the 2024/25 school year, the EDB will organise more thematic parent education programmes, and promote positive parent education and enhance parents'

awareness of children's mental health through diversified modes such as district-based film gala presentations.