

## LCQ14: Under-enrolled schools

Following is a question by the Hon Tang Fei and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (May 24):

Question:

It is learnt that in the 2023/24 school year, several primary schools will not be granted subsidies for Primary One classes, thus facing "school closure". There are views that in response to the trend of declining school-age children population, consolidation of education resources is beyond reproach, but the Education Bureau (EDB) has been lacking transparency in the relevant work, which has seriously affected the development of schools and the planning of parents. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of secondary schools and primary schools which will face under-enrolment (i.e. not meeting the threshold requirement for operating a class), and the respective numbers of schools which will operate only one class and two classes, in the 2023/24 school year;

(2) as some frontline staff of schools have complained that some staff of EDB's Regional Education Offices have advised parents not to enrol their children in primary or secondary schools teetering on the edge of under-enrolment, resulting in these schools being closed down due to genuine under-enrolment, whether it has gained an understanding of the reasons why the EDB's staff concerned have given such advice; and

(3) of the specific measures put in place by the EDB to support the parents and students affected by school closure?

Reply:

President,

The continuous decline in school-age population brings certain impact and challenges to schools. Noting that the decline is not transient but structural, the Education Bureau (EDB) will adopt long-term measures in planning for public sector primary and secondary school places to ensure a healthy and sustainable education ecosystem. With top priority accorded to the interests of students and aiming for a "soft landing", the number of schools will be adjusted in a gradual and orderly manner to ensure education quality and optimal use of public resources.

Our reply to the Hon Tang Fei's question is as follows:

(1) According to the existing criteria for operation of classes, a public sector primary school with a total intake of less than 16 students under the Primary One Admission (POA) System may not be allowed to operate subsidised

Primary 1(P1) classes if there are still unfilled P1 places in other schools of the same school net. The EDB will provide various options for schools not being able to operate subsidised P1 classes, including operating P1 classes with private funding, merging with other schools, undergoing special review, and ceasing the operation of classes of all or certain levels early, so that the schools can adjust their future development directions where practicable. For schools where small class teaching has not yet been fully implemented in their respective school nets, they may apply for re-participation in the POA System in the following school year. In the 2023/24 school year, a total of five primary schools are not approved to operate subsidised P1 classes.

As regards public sector secondary schools, they are required to operate at least two classes in each level to ensure that students are provided with a broad, balanced and diversified senior secondary curriculum. For schools that are only able to operate one Secondary One (S1) class, the school sponsoring bodies and schools may still apply for different development options to continue operation. If a school does not apply for any development option or its application is not approved, it may still operate S1 to Secondary Three (S3) classes on the "per capita subvention mode".

The number of approved classes for schools in the 2023/24 school year is subject to the actual student enrolment in the student headcount in September 2023. Therefore, the number of schools operating one class or two classes at P1 and S1 levels is not available.

(2) Regarding P1 and S1 placement, under the existing mechanism, parents may apply for P1 or S1 places for their children through the POA System and the Secondary School Places Allocation System. The EDB will allocate P1 and S1 places to eligible school-age children in Hong Kong in accordance with the mechanism. Frontline staff will never interfere in parents' choices or advise parents "not to apply for a place".

As for the placement of other class levels, staff of the Regional Education Offices of the EDB are committed to providing assistance to parents upon receipt of their related enquiries, including answering parents' questions, providing lists of schools in the districts for parents' reference, and arranging interviews for students in schools as and when necessary. The EDB staff will never advise parents not to apply for a place for their children in particular schools.

(3) The EDB has kept reminding parents through different channels that when choosing a school for their children, they should first identify children's characteristics, personalities, abilities and interests, and then consider various factors such as the sponsoring body, history, location and religion of a school. Parents may obtain information of schools and be updated on the latest school news through the school websites and the Primary School Profiles or Secondary School Profiles in order to help them choose a suitable school for their children.

In respect of primary schools not being able to operate subsidised P1 classes in the 2023/24 school year, the EDB has already taken the initiative

to contact the parents whose children have been offered a P1 place by these schools at the Discretionary Places Admission Stage to explain the situation and arrange an alternative P1 place for their children. Parents may select another school from the school lists provided by the EDB or participate in the Central Allocation for their children. During the process, the EDB has been maintaining close communication with the parents concerned and providing appropriate and timely assistance to cater for the special circumstances and needs of individual parents as far as practicable. At present, most of the students concerned have been offered an alternative P1 place in other schools or participated in Central Allocation.

When a public sector school ceases operation, the EDB will also provide placement service for current students to let them complete their primary or secondary education in other public sector schools. Students who have completed S3 could pursue senior secondary education in other subvented schools through participating in Central Placement.