

LCQ15: Decline in population of school-aged Primary One students

Following is a question by Dr Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (May 9):

Question:

According to the latest projected figures of the Education Bureau, the population of school-aged Primary One (P1) students will decline by 10 000 from 65 700 in the 2018-2019 school year to 55 700 in the 2020-2021 school year. Some members of the education sector are worried that primary schools may by then face another exercise of "reduction of classes and closure of schools", which will affect the teaching posts of more than 800 primary school teachers on contract terms. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will, in the light of the actual situation in each district, allow individual schools to exercise a certain degree of flexibility regarding the minimum student intake for allocation of classes, and encourage the injection of diversity into the modes of school operation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will make the best use of the situation by implementing small class teaching across the board in primary schools during the decline in the population of school-aged P1 students with a view to enhancing teaching quality; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will provide the affected teachers with professional training in relation to Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics (STEAM) education and integrated education, so as to assist them in mastering the necessary skills to dovetail with the education manpower demand in future; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

According to the current projections of school-aged P1 students, the Education Bureau (EDB) anticipates that the overall demand for P1 places will reach its peak in the 2018/19 school year, begin to drop starting from the 2019/20 school year and then rebound slightly and temporarily for a few years from the 2021/22 school year onwards. Since the P1 student population has been increasing in recent years, the overall student population in public sector primary schools will generally remain stable despite the drop in P1 student population starting from the 2019/20 school year as the number of students in other levels will remain large. Moreover, the EDB has implemented the flexible measures to meet the transient increase in demand for P1 places

in recent years in accordance with the consensus reached with the school sector. These measures will be progressively withdrawn in view of the decline in the actual demand. This will relieve the pressure on class reduction arising from the diminishing demand for P1 places. There may be a decrease in the number of classes and teaching posts in individual schools in the next few years as a result of declining P1 student population. Yet, there will not be a substantial and immediate reduction in the overall number of classes and teaching posts in public sector primary schools as anticipated.

For schools which have adopted a "partly-enlarged class structure" in response to the increase in demand for P1 places in the past few years, there may be surplus teachers because of class reduction upon the graduation of the respective cohort of students. In this connection, the EDB is proactively considering targeted relief measures to help schools tackle this problem and stabilise the teaching force. To address the impact of the diminishing demand for P1 places from the 2019/20 school year and afterwards, the EDB met with representatives of the Subsidised Primary Schools Council and Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association on January 17 this year to explain the future demographic change in respect of primary school student population and gauge their views on the issue, including the concerns and suggestions of schools in various districts, for formulation of corresponding measures. School heads present agreed that the progressive withdrawal of the temporary flexible measures to increase the supply of P1 places could effectively mitigate the impact of the decline in P1 student population. They also generally agreed with the preliminary suggestion for addressing the problem of surplus teachers arising from the "partly-enlarged class structure", which allows schools to retain surplus teachers for a short period of time to stabilise the teaching force. The EDB will continue to liaise with the school sector to keep in view the situation for the formulation of appropriate strategies.

My reply to the questions raised by Dr Hon Chiang Lai-wan is as follows:

(1) To optimise the use of public resources, the EDB has established the criteria for operation of classes since the implementation of the Primary One Admission System. In accordance with the principle of fairness, the criteria are applicable to all schools participating in the system. The EDB has, where circumstances permit, implemented small class teaching in public sector primary schools in phases starting from P1 in the 2009/10 school year. Since the allocation of P1 places is basically based on 25 students per class for schools implementing small class teaching (30 students per class for other schools), the threshold for operation of a P1 class has been lowered to 16 students. The number of P1 classes in each school net each school year is determined taking into account the anticipated demand for P1 places, the number of classrooms available, the class structure and parental choices, etc. Under the existing mechanism, a school having an intake of less than 16 students in a P1 class may not be allowed to operate a P1 class if there are still unfilled P1 places in other schools of the same school net. In such cases, the EDB will consider special factors, such as whether the school is located in a remote area where there is no appropriate alternative school, to determine whether there is a need to operate a P1 class. On the other hand,

the EDB conducts student headcount every September to verify the actual student enrolment of aided schools so as to determine the number of approved classes of the schools. If the number of classes has to be reduced because of decreasing student intake, then 25 students per class will be adopted as the basis for determining the number of approved classes. In other words, a school is allowed to operate two classes if it has an actual intake of 26 students.

Besides, the Government has all along encouraged diversity in school operation which goes beyond class sizes. Currently, among the public sector schools (including government and aided schools), most are aided schools managed by sponsoring bodies of various backgrounds (generally religious or charitable organisations), according to their missions. These schools are well-managed and have their unique characteristics. In addition to the public sector schools, there are Direct Subsidy Scheme schools, and private schools which offer local or non-local curricula to cater for the different needs of students and provide parents with more choices.

(2) Small class teaching is a teaching strategy. During the consultations in the past, most stakeholders considered it not desirable to rigidly implement small class teaching for all schools across-the-board. The EDB will continue to be pragmatic and flexible with the implementation of small class teaching, taking into account the expectations of schools, parents and students, the availability of classrooms to meet the demand for school places in individual districts, as well as the development needs of schools. At present, the EDB anticipates that the overall demand for P1 places will reach its peak in the 2018/19 school year and then progressively decline to a stable level. Depending on the supply and demand of school places in individual districts, and whether the schools have fulfilled the conditions for implementing small class teaching, the EDB will contact the schools concerned in due course.

(3) All along, the EDB has been organising a wide variety of professional development programmes and activities of different themes in response to various education policies, curriculum development and the needs of teachers and students. Serving teachers are encouraged to participate in these programmes and activities based on both their individual and school development needs. This would not only broaden teachers' professional knowledge but also professionally equip them to meet their needs. For example, the EDB regularly organises professional development programmes for teachers, including seminars and workshops, etc., in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education (STEM education)/ Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics education (STEAM education) and integrated education (IE), to enhance their professional knowledge and teaching skills in these two areas. Moreover, the EDB has also commissioned teacher education universities to organise relevant training programmes. An example is the Certificate in Professional Development Programme on Curriculum Design, Pedagogy and Assessment for STEM Education in Primary Schools offered by the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK). This programme covers not only the basic knowledge and pedagogy of STEM education, but also the latest developments of STEAM education. For IE, apart from the commissioned Certificate in Professional Development Programme for Teachers

(Catering for Diverse Learning Needs), EdUHK also offers structured training courses pitched at Basic, Advanced and Thematic levels to enhance the professional capacity of teachers in the implementation of IE.