

LCQ16: Alleviating the financial burden on parents of students

Following is a question by the Hon Alice Mak and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (February 20):

Question:

According to the results of a survey conducted in 2017, 90 per cent of the parents surveyed indicated that the expenses on kindergarten (KG) education had posed a heavy financial burden on their families. In addition, some parents of primary and secondary students (particularly those belonging to the sandwich class) have pointed out that the expenses on textbooks and transportation for their children are costly, and they are unable to benefit from the School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS) and the Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) implemented by the Government because the application thresholds of those Schemes are too high. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) among the pupils currently studying in KGs which have joined the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme, of the number and percentage of those who are required to pay school fees; whether the Education Bureau (EDB) will consider enhancing the Scheme by providing KGs with subsidies that are sufficient to meet all operating expenses, so that all pupils in half-day, whole-day and long whole-day KGs are not required to pay school fees, thereby offering genuinely free KG education;

(2) whether the EDB has regularly reviewed and compiled statistics on the items and levels of miscellaneous fees collected by KGs; if so, of the total amount of miscellaneous fees collected on average from each pupil by KGs in each of the past three years; whether the EDB will cap the miscellaneous fees that KGs may collect from pupils;

(3) among primary and secondary students in each of the past three years, of the respective numbers and percentages of those who benefited from STAS and STSS; whether the EDB will lower the application thresholds for those Schemes, including revising the "Adjusted Family Income" Formula and adding tiers of assistance, so that more students can benefit; and

(4) as quite a number of parents have pointed out that the existing subsidy schemes have failed to alleviate their financial burden, whether the EDB will grant an allowance annually to each of the KG pupils as well as primary and secondary students for meeting the expenses arising from the commencement of a new school year, with a view to alleviating their families' financial burden; if not, of the EDB's ways to alleviate the financial burden on parents?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by the Hon Alice Mak is as follows:

(1) The Government has implemented the new kindergarten (KG) education policy starting from the 2017/18 school year. The objectives of the policy are to provide good quality and highly affordable KG education, enhance the accessibility of students to different modes of services that suit their specific needs and, in tandem, maintain a high level of flexibility, diversity and vibrancy in KG operation. Under the new policy, in principle, government subsidies should be sufficient for KGs joining the kindergarten education scheme (Scheme) to provide quality half-day (HD) services. Individual KGs may need to charge school fees mainly to defray rental expenses that are not fully covered by rental subsidy.

For whole-day (WD) KGs, existing evidence from researches and studies preclude drawing conclusions that WD programmes are more favourable to young children than HD programmes. Although many countries offer WD services for parents as an option, it is not a common practice internationally to provide free WD KG service for all children from three to six years of age. On the basis of co-payment of the Government and parents, WD pupils need to pay part of the cost. Notwithstanding this, to unleash the potential of the local labour force under the population policy, we provide an additional subsidy for WD and Long WD (LWD) services. Parents only need to pay part of the cost. Needy families can be granted fee remission for HD or WD services.

In the 2018/19 school year, 753 KGs have joined the Scheme. Among them, about 520 KGs are offering HD programmes and about 90 per cent of them are free. In terms of the number of pupils, among the about 84 400 eligible HD pupils studying in KGs which have joined the Scheme (Scheme-KGs), around 8 600 (10 per cent) need to pay school fees (provisional figures for September 2018). Separately, about 630 Scheme-KGs are offering WD/LWD programmes. The median school fee per instalment is around \$790 and the overall school fees are at a low level. In terms of the number of pupils, among the about 47 500 eligible WD/LWD pupils studying in Scheme-KGs, around 33 700 (71 per cent) need to pay school fees (provisional figures for September 2018).

(2) KGs selling or providing paid items/services (such as textbooks, exercise books, school uniforms, schoolbags, tea and snacks, stationery, etc., which are generally referred as "miscellaneous charges") must observe the guiding principles set out in relevant Education Bureau (EDB) circulars, including that the purchase of such items or services is entirely voluntary; schools should avoid charging parents in one lump-sum for the whole package of items or services required for the whole school term; the items or services should be directly related to teaching and learning activities; return/refund arrangements should be set out; no profit should be made from the sale of textbooks; and profit for other items, if any, should not exceed the profit limit of 15 per cent of the cost price, etc. KGs should also state clearly in relevant school circulars or letters that the purchase of educational items

or services is entirely voluntary and that parents can select the items according to their individual needs.

As the same items for sale (such as tea and snacks, summer uniforms, winter uniforms, exercise books, etc.) may vary widely in ingredients/materials, quantities, etc. among different schools and the items chosen to buy by individual parents may also be different, it is not appropriate to consolidate the data or present the situation in terms of the average fees, or to set a cap on the fees of the items concerned. Since such items are sold by schools or acquired by schools on behalf of students, the premise is whether parents may purchase them on a purely voluntary basis. To allow parents a better understanding of the situation of individual schools on selling such items or services or purchasing them on behalf of students, all Scheme-KGs are required to list the reference prices of the major items for sale or paid items on their schools' websites and in the Profile of Kindergartens and Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centres.

(3) and (4) The School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS) provides assistance for financially needy primary and secondary students in government, aided, per caput grant schools and local schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme to cover the costs of essential textbooks and miscellaneous school-related expenses. The Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) provides travel subsidy for financially needy students receiving formal primary, secondary education or attending a full-time course up to first degree level in an acceptable institution, residing beyond 10-minute walking distance from school and travelling to school by public transport. We encourage parents to send their children (in particular pre-primary children) to schools near their places of residence so as to minimise the time and energy spent by children in commuting. This can also reduce students' travelling expenses. For the school years from 2016/17 to 2018/19 (as at January 31, 2019), the numbers of primary and secondary students benefitting from the above schemes are as follows –

	2016/17 School Year	2017/18 School Year	2018/19 School Year (as at January 31, 2019)
STAS (percentage of the overall population of primary and secondary students (Note 1))	208 316 (34 per cent)	203 521 (33 per cent)	198 015 (32 per cent)
STSS (percentage of the overall population of primary and secondary students (Note 2))	144 424 (21 per cent)	142 896 (20 per cent)	139 128 (19 per cent)

Notes:

(1) The total numbers of primary and secondary students for the school years from 2016/17 to 2018/19 are 620 525, 624 048 and 626 684 respectively (the figures showing the position as at mid-September of the respective school years). The figures cover government, aided, per caput grant schools, local schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme and special schools.

(2) The total numbers of primary and secondary students for the school years from 2016/17 to 2018/19 are 702 664, 708 645 and 713 979 respectively (the figures showing the position as at mid-September of the respective school years). The figures cover government, aided, per caput grant schools, local schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme, local private schools, international schools and special schools.

The Government's policy on student finance is to ensure that no student is denied access to education due to a lack of means. The various financial assistance schemes provide support to students and the Government reviews the various student financial assistance schemes from time to time. For instance, the Government reviewed in the 2011/12 school year the income test mechanism for the various student financial assistance schemes and relaxed the income ceiling for full level of student financial assistance under the income test mechanism. Consequent upon the implementation of the improvement measure, the percentage of students receiving full level of assistance increased significantly from about 30 per cent of the beneficiaries in previous academic years to about 60 per cent. The Government also keeps the various student financial assistance schemes under review and will expand the scope of subsidies to enhance support for students from needy families where necessary. For example, the assistance programme "Enhancement of the flat rate grant under the School Textbook Assistance Scheme" under the Community Care Fund has been incorporated into the Government's regular assistance programme starting from the 2014/15 school year; and a "Grant for School-related Expenses for Kindergarten Students" has been provided to eligible KG students to defray school-related expenses incurred from the students' KG education starting from the 2017/18 school year.

On textbook expenses, there are no specified teaching contents for the KG Education curriculum. All along, the EDB emphasises that KG teachers may apply their professional knowledge to design or select different types of learning and teaching resources so as to cater for the physical and psychological development needs of children at different stages and their daily life. As for primary and secondary schools, teachers are also encouraged to develop or select other teaching materials to meet the learning needs of students. The EDB has provided different types of free learning and teaching resources for teachers, such as learning and teaching resource packages for different subjects, the Web-based Resource Platform for Liberal Studies, and the e-learning resources uploaded onto EDB One-stop Portal for Learning and Teaching Resources, so that teachers could select from a wide range of other learning and teaching resources apart from textbooks.