

LCQ17: Gift Book Pilot Scheme

Following is a question by the Hon Ip Kin-yuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (July 15):

Question:

The Education Bureau (EDB) announced on June 18 this year the launching of a Gift Book Pilot Scheme (the Pilot Scheme), under which all participating public-sector schools (including special schools) and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools will be allocated a one-off grant, calculated according to the number of students in each school (about \$100 per student), for the procurement of printed books to be given to students for free. Under the Pilot Scheme, schools were required to complete the procurement procedure (including selecting books on the designated book lists provided by the EDB, inviting quotations and placing orders for the books) within the period from June 18 to July 9 this year. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) why the EDB set the requirement that schools and students participating in the Pilot Scheme may only select and buy books on the designated book lists, instead of following the approach for book procurement applicable to the Promotion of Reading Grant, i.e. schools selecting on their own those books which match the needs and abilities of their students;

(2) as quite a number of members of the education sector have relayed that the schedule for schools to complete the procurement procedure within 13 school days was too tight, whether the EDB had consulted the education sector when it set the deadline; of the respective current numbers and percentages of primary and secondary schools which completed the procurement procedure by July 9 (including the completion of book selection, invitation for quotations and placement of orders for books within the relevant deadlines); whether it has assessed the impacts on schools' class resumption work after the outbreak of the epidemic brought about by schools having to complete the procurement procedure in a hasty manner;

(3) as some members of the education sector have criticised that the number of books published by a certain publishing group accounts for over 70% of the total number of books on the designated book lists, which has aroused suspicion of transferal of benefits, of the details of the compilation of the designated book lists, including (i) the rank of the officer-in-charge, (ii) the criteria for book selection and (iii) the time spent on compiling the lists; whether the EDB had consulted teachers, teacher-librarians and members of the publishing industry on the book lists; the measures in place to ensure that the books on the book lists can be delivered to participating schools in July before the commencement of the summer vacation;

(4) as the EDB has indicated that the Pilot Scheme has the support from the Hong Kong Publishing Federation (the Federation), of the reasons for and the

details of the EDB's decision to cooperate with the Federation (including the role of the Federation in the Pilot Scheme, as well as whether the Federation participated in the relevant work such as compiling the book lists, assisting schools in book procurement and supplying the books);

(5) of the detailed estimated expenditure of the Pilot Scheme;

(6) as some schools were unable to complete the procurement procedure within the aforesaid deadline, of the detailed arrangements for the late participation in the Pilot Scheme by such schools, including whether the level of the grant to be received by such schools will remain unchanged; if not, of the reasons for that; whether it has assessed if the situation where schools, due to different reasons, were unable to participate in the Pilot Scheme causing their students not being given any free books is unfair to the students concerned;

(7) as some booksellers have indicated that it was difficult for them to cope with the surge in quotation requests from schools within a short span of time, and that they were unable to obtain the publishers' guarantee of supply of all the books being ordered and even unable to have any supply of the books from the publishers, which made such booksellers unable to provide quotations, whether the EDB has approached schools to gain an understanding of the difficulties they encountered in procuring books, and whether it has assessed if monopolisation has occurred; and

(8) whether the EDB will consider making changes to the Pilot Scheme as follows: (i) abolishing the requirement that schools and students may only select books on the designated book lists, and (ii) extending the deadline for completion of the procurement procedure to the end of this year or the beginning of the coming year, so that teacher-librarians and teachers will have ample time to select suitable books for their students?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) is committed to promoting "Reading to Learn" and has been supporting schools to organise diversified reading activities which are in line with the curriculum through various measures, thereby developing students' reading interest and habits from a young age to enhance their reading skills and learning capabilities. The EDB has long been providing recommended book lists to schools with a view to promoting reading. For example, the previous Chinese and English Extensive Reading Schemes were also provided with recommended book lists. Since the 2018/19 school year, to align with the disbursement of the Promotion of Reading Grant to all public sector schools, the EDB has suggested four themes for reading, namely Chinese History and Culture, Healthy Living, Moral Education, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education. Professional staff from the relevant Key Learning Areas of the EDB have provided schools with theme-related recommended book lists with reference to the curriculum and students' learning needs. For details, please refer to www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/4-key-tasks/reading-to-learn/contrib

[ution-of-book-titles/index.html](#). Schools may use the grant to procure reading materials or organise different types of school-based reading activities to create a favourable environment for reading. Moreover, the EDB has collaborated with the publishing sector and professional organisations to organise large-scale reading promotion activities such as the Joyful Reading Carnival 2019 for encouraging parent-child reading. Furthermore, to provide more diversified opportunities to promote reading among students, reading award schemes and competitions will be held on a need basis at irregular intervals for certain curricula and subjects. The EDB originally planned to organise another Joyful Reading Carnival in early 2020, but the event had to be cancelled because of the epidemic. In view of the benefits and importance of reading to students and the need to make up for the lack of reading activities in this school year, despite the very limited time for preparation, the EDB launches the Gift Book Pilot Scheme (2020) (hereafter the Pilot Scheme) and provides schools with details for ease of implementation so as to benefit students.

Our reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Ip Kin-yuen regarding the Pilot Scheme is as follows:

(1) to (3) and (6) to (8) On top of the existing diversified reading activities, the Pilot Scheme is a token of goodwill from the EDB to encourage students to read, with an aim to offer free printed books to about 600 000 primary and secondary school students before the summer holiday through schools' procurement. Launching the Scheme on a trial basis, the EDB hopes to encourage students to enjoy leisure reading during the summer holiday and nurture good reading habits. Schools can make effective use of the books offered by the EDB to enhance the reading promotion activities in the next school year, such as arranging sharing sessions to encourage students to exchange their views on the books and to cultivate their reading interest and habits. Schools may also organise, for example, class-based/level-based book crossing activities for sharing reading resources, which can help students develop a sense of gratitude and learn to cherish what they have, thereby nurturing positive values in them.

Primary and secondary schools resumed classes by level from late May to mid-June respectively. We announced the above Pilot Scheme in mid-June to allow primary and secondary schools to duly undertake the book procurement procedures after class resumption. According to the EDB's understanding from the publishers, there is only a limited stock of printed books currently. When there are a large amount of orders, it is very likely that publishers have to reprint or increase the printing of books. In addition, taking into consideration that logistic arrangements and book distribution will take time, it is necessary to complete the procedures of book selection and procurement within a short period of time, so that students can receive the books before the summer holiday. When procurement of English books from overseas publishers is required, it is quite impossible to complete the procurement procedures in a short time. Therefore, a pragmatic approach is adopted to include only local Chinese books in the Pilot Scheme. As regards the arrangement for obtaining written quotations, the special measure to allow schools to shorten the period for quotations from two or three weeks to

one week will enable schools to complete their book procurement procedures as early as possible, so that students can receive the books before the summer holiday. If schools are not able to complete the procurement procedures within one week due to preoccupation with heavy administrative work, they can choose to proceed with procurement in accordance with their established procedures and complete it within two to three weeks. However, the delivery of books to the schools concerned before late July may not be guaranteed.

The EDB has all along been recommending books based on the professional considerations of the quality of the books with reference to the school curriculum for students at different key stages of primary and secondary schools. The publishers of the books have never been a consideration. Therefore, there is no question of giving preferential treatment to a particular bookstore or books from a certain publisher.

Based on the aforementioned recommended book lists on the four themes, the EDB's professional staff have updated and consolidated within a very short period of time the designated book lists, which consist of a certain amount of quality books from different publishers, to provide schools with sufficient choices to facilitate the participation of the scheme. Schools can exercise discretion on book selection according to their own contexts and actual operational needs. For example, schools can appoint suitable staff to select books from the EDB's designated book lists for students with reference to students' abilities and interests, or let students choose from the book lists. Schools can also choose to place a bulk order for a few book titles, or select books together with parent-teacher associations. It was reported that to increase students' interest in reading, some schools let students choose the books they liked from the designated book lists.

This Pilot Scheme has its own inherent aims, including to enable students to enjoy leisure reading during the summer holiday and to align with the suggested themes for reading since the 2018/19 school year. Moreover, as these books are special gifts to students from the EDB, they are different from those purchased through the prevailing school-based book procurement practices. We do not see the need to change the implementation details of the scheme. We will not cancel the requirement on the selection of books from the designated book lists, or extend the procurement period to the end of this year or early next year. According to our preliminary understanding, many schools have placed orders according to the designated measures and the process is smooth in general. Despite the EDB's announcement of early commencement of summer holiday due to the epidemic, schools may consider giving students the books in an appropriate way with due consideration given to the public health or using the books as extra-curricular reading materials in the new school year.

Regarding the comment that the scheme involves transfer of benefits, it is totally unfounded and has politicised the promotion of reading in schools, which is against the interest of students. Since printed book publishers have different market share and the types of their publications vary, it is not difficult to understand that the proportions of their books on the designated book lists are different.

We have to point out clearly that apart from the Pilot Scheme for this summer, schools are provided with the recurrent Promotion of Reading Grant (about \$20,000 – \$40,000 and \$50,000 – \$70,000 per year for primary and secondary schools respectively). Even though classes were suspended for four months this year, schools can still enjoy the full amount of the grant. Same as the previous year, schools can procure varied kinds of books of different languages according to their school-based needs and established book procurement procedures to enrich the collection of their school libraries. Schools can even procure e-books as there is no procurement restriction in this regard.

Schools will receive the one-off grant by the end of July this year and should use it for the procurement of books for students by the end of August this year. Upon the deduction of the actual amount spent on the purchase of printed books, schools should return the unspent balance to the EDB by the end of November this year. Our staff have provided to schools relevant information and explanation about the procurement procedures and other related arrangements. As mentioned before, the procurement process is smooth in general. Schools may choose whether to join the Pilot Scheme or not. As pointed out by the EDB at the briefing session of the Pilot Scheme for school principal representatives of school councils, if schools consider not joining the Pilot Scheme, they may still enjoy the free use of the Hong Kong Education City's eRead Scheme until the end of this year, allowing students to read both Chinese and English e-books.

With regard to the number and percentage of schools that have completed the procurement procedures on or before July 9, since schools place order with book suppliers directly and do not need approval from the EDB beforehand, we do not have relevant information.

(4) The EDB works in collaboration with the publishing sector and professional organisations to create a reading atmosphere at all fronts. Being an important stakeholder in the publishing sector, the Hong Kong Publishing Federation has supported and participated in the reading promotion activities organised by the EDB, such as the Joyful Reading Carnival 2019. The Federation is also the supporting organisation of the Pilot Scheme. It is not involved in the compilation of the designated book lists of the Pilot Scheme. Nevertheless, the Federation provides assistance in disseminating the information of the Pilot Scheme to its members and the sector as well as enlisting the support of book stores and publishers in the supply of books and related logistics so that the ordered books can be delivered to schools in a timely manner.

(5) The total expenditure for the Pilot Scheme is about \$60 million and the actual amount will depend on the number of schools/students participating in the scheme. A review will be conducted upon completion of the Pilot Scheme to consider whether it will be launched again in the future. The relaunching of the Scheme is also subject to the priority in resource allocation of the EDB every year. In response to the misunderstanding and unfounded criticisms expressed by some people, the EDB issued a clarification on the Summer Reading Programme – Gift Book Pilot Scheme on June 19, 2020 to ensure a correct understanding of the facts. For details, please refer to

www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202006/20/P2020062000069.htm.