

LCQ19: Measures to cope with the decline in student population

Following is a question by the Hon Tang Fei and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (January 26):

Question:

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic has persisted for more than two years and normal traveller clearance between the Mainland and Hong Kong has not yet been resumed, seriously affecting cross-boundary students on the Mainland coming to Hong Kong for school. Quite a number of local schools have relayed that due to the dropping out of some cross-boundary students affected by the epidemic, a decrease in the number of students applying for admission to local schools, the persistently low local fertility rate, as well as the ageing population and an insufficient number of school-age children in individual districts, many primary and secondary schools have been facing the crisis of "class reduction and school closure" in recent years. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the measures the Education Bureau (EDB) has put in place to assist the education sector in confronting the crisis of a new round of class reduction and school closure, so as to stabilise the education ecology in Hong Kong and resolve the urgent issues faced by the education sector;

(2) of the learning support currently provided by the EDB for Mainland students who are unable to come to Hong Kong for school; the EDB's plans to arrange as soon as possible for such students to come to Hong Kong for school and resume normal school life; and

(3) whether the EDB will consider opening up the school places of local non-public sector primary and secondary schools to applicants from the Mainland and other countries, so as to ease the problem of the declining number of local school-age primary and secondary students?

Reply:

President,

According to the projections of the Education Bureau (EDB), it is anticipated that the gradual decrease in future school-age population will be structural rather than transient. It remains uncertain whether and when the birth rate in Hong Kong will rebound. The well-being of students has always been the prime consideration of the EDB. We will make long-term planning for the future in light of the latest development, and maintain communication with the local school sector to prepare ahead for the necessary follow-up arrangements.

Our reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(1) When formulating future plans, our policy objective will certainly be based on the interests of students, considering how to optimise resources for continuous improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. Schools are established to nurture the whole person development of students. It is essential for schools to maintain an optimal size of student population for creating a conducive teaching and learning environment and providing opportunities for learning in groups, so as to meet the different learning and development needs of students while ensuring the quality of education. Taking secondary schools as an example, a small total number of students will limit the choices of senior secondary elective subjects that can be offered in a school. This goes against the principle of the New Senior Secondary academic structure, that is, to provide students with a broad and balanced curriculum and that they can select different elective subjects in different combinations to meet their different learning needs and interests. The number of students in a school has an effect on how students can learn to socialise in a community, get along with other people and develop their values of mutual respect. On the other hand, the EDB has to make good use of the limited public resources to ensure that education expenditure is used effectively in a targeted manner to provide quality education for students. We believe that, as the future school-age population will continue to drop, it is unavoidable to adjust the overall number of primary and secondary classes correspondingly.

The EDB will adopt multi-pronged measures to address the challenges arising from the structural changes in student population in the long term so as to stabilise the learning environment and maintain the quality of teaching and learning. The measures include:

(a) the EDB, being the school sponsoring body of Government schools, will lead by example and formulate long-term development plans for individual Government schools, taking into account various factors including Government policies, demographic changes, demand and supply of school places, overall development needs of Government schools and utilisation of Government resources. For example, with a view to reducing the long-term surplus of school places in certain districts, the EDB may cease the operation of schools with persistent under-enrolment, merge Government schools as necessary or relocate schools in districts with a relatively sizeable surplus of school places to districts with excessive demand for school places or New Development Areas which are expected to have a greater demand for school places in the future. In this connection, the EDB has already made arrangements to cease the operation of the Island Road Government Primary School in an orderly and gradual manner from the 2021/22 school year, merge the Lung Cheung Government Secondary School with the Kowloon Technical School starting from the 2022/23 school year, and relocate the Canton Road Government Primary School and Shau Kei Wan East Government Secondary School to the new school premises at the Anderson Road Quarry site in Sai Kung District in the 2025/26 and 2026/27 school years respectively with a view to minimising the impact of declining demand for school places in related school

nets on schools in the area. We hope that such endeavours could become examples for other school sponsoring bodies' reference;

(b) the four time-limited primary schools operated to cope with the transient increase in Primary One student population in the past will cease operation gradually as originally planned;

(c) our school premises allocation exercises in the future will accord priority to re-provisioning of schools or expansion of school premises, especially those schools which are far below the prevalent building standards, so as to improve the quality of school premises;

(d) at present, small class teaching (SCT) has been implemented in about 80 per cent of public sector primary schools in Hong Kong. Arrangements have been made by the EDB for 11 schools to start implementing SCT in the 2022/23 school year. We will continue to review the demand and supply of school places in individual school nets, whether there are sufficient vacant classrooms in the school nets for operating additional classes to facilitate full implementation of SCT within the nets, and the additional resources involved. We will also continue to maintain liaison with the public sector primary schools which have yet to implement SCT and their respective school sponsoring bodies, and encourage them to get prepared for early implementation of SCT in public sector primary schools where the conditions permit; and

(e) as for secondary schools, we will timely review the number of students allocated to each Secondary One (S1) class in 2025 and subsequent school years, the criteria for approving classes and other related arrangements to address the structural situation of a long-term persistent decrease in demand for S1 places while ensuring the quality of education and the appropriate use of resources.

The EDB has been meeting with individual school sponsoring bodies to urge them to explore ways to consolidate their resources in an orderly manner. We will keep close communication with the sector and encourage them to plan ahead to cope with the impact of declining student population.

(2) Owing to the restrictions on cross-boundary travel at boundary control points, cross-boundary students (CBS) are at present not able to travel between Hong Kong and the Mainland every day as usual to attend face-to-face classes. Some CBS have decided to reside in Hong Kong temporarily for schooling, but some of them are still staying in the Mainland. The EDB has all along been concerned over the learning situation of CBS amid the epidemic and been providing them with appropriate support as necessary. Schools have flexibly adopted diversified learning and teaching strategies, including establishing e-learning platforms and conducting real-time online lessons, to support students' continuous learning at home, having regard to schools' own contexts and students' needs at different learning stages. Furthermore, under the agreements reached between individual schools and publishers, schools are authorised to upload relevant chapters of e-textbooks to e-learning platforms according to teaching and learning progress for use by those CBS who have

been unable to come to Hong Kong to attend face-to-face classes. If necessary, schools may also procure textbook delivery services to assist parents of CBS in delivering textbooks to their residences in the Mainland. On assessment of learning, the EDB has assisted schools in coping with the changes flexibly so that they can arrange examinations and assessments for CBS as far as practicable. The EDB has been encouraging schools to maintain contact with CBS and their parents through different means, and reminding parents to observe and pay attention to the emotion and behaviour of students.

To cater for the learning needs as well as physical and mental development needs of CBS amid the epidemic, the EDB commissioned a service provider to offer two programmes, namely "Learning Support" and "Psychosocial Support", in Luohu, Futian and Nanshan districts in Shenzhen from May to July 2021 for primary and secondary CBS residing in Shenzhen. Other than these, service providers were commissioned to set up general service points in Luohu, Futian and Nanshan districts in Shenzhen from June to August 2021 to provide CBS and their parents with various kinds of information and services such as lending of learning resources and recreational facilities. Networking activities and sharing sessions have also been organised to facilitate their communication with one another. In view of students' positive response towards the two programmes on "Learning Support" and "Psychosocial Support", the EDB organised the two programmes again from October 2021 to January 2022 with more places.

The EDB will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and ascertain the needs of CBS and readiness of schools, so as to work out various feasible options on the appropriate learning arrangements for CBS, taking into account the views of stakeholders. We will also maintain liaison and communication with all parties, and hope that that orderly arrangement can be made for CBS to attend classes in Hong Kong as soon as possible when cross-boundary travel is resumed.

(3) Under the prevailing policy of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), the HKSAR may favourably consider the application for a visa/entry permit from students of appropriate age from certain regions/countries, if these non-local persons of appropriate age who intend to study in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong are admitted to a private school or Direct Subsidy Scheme school registered under the Education Ordinance (Cap. 279) and are able to meet the fees for the course, the living expenses for his/her maintenance and accommodation. Detailed arrangements are available at www.immd.gov.hk/eng/services/visas/study.html.

However, there are a number of practical issues that need to be tackled when underage non-local students come to Hong Kong for education. If one or both of their parents come along to take up residence in Hong Kong, he/she/they can live with the students concerned to provide the necessary care and support. If these students come to Hong Kong for schooling on their own, then we have to consider how to take care of them and ensure that apart from learning, sufficient support, care and supervision are provided for their living and growth. This will involve supporting measures in various

aspects, such as the need to identify suitable non-kinship families who can act as their guardians to provide supervision, or the need for the schools concerned to offer boarding places to provide accommodation and meals for the students, etc. As these underage students have to live apart from their parents in another place, parents will also need to carefully consider various factors, including the children's adaptability and psychological well-being as well as their family's financial situations, etc. The arrangements of school choices for non-local students and the impact of the same on school choices for local students are also considerations. Currently, it appears that schools and families in Hong Kong may not have the necessary conditions and readiness to receive a large number of underage students to come to Hong Kong for schooling.