

# LCQ19: Policy on development of international schools

Following is a question by the Hon Tang Fei and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Education, Dr Sze Chun-fai, in the Legislative Council today (November 27):

Question:

There are views that Hong Kong is facing a demographic problem brought by a low birth rate and the persistent under-enrolment in schools on the one hand, while the number of applications for late admission of dependent children of arrivals under various talent admission schemes has increased sharply on the other, posing new challenges to the supply and demand of school places. Meanwhile, the policy of allocating vacant school premises/school sites for the development of international schools has further affected the allocation of local education resources. Regarding the policy on the development of international schools, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective numbers of applications received and approved by the authorities from school sponsoring bodies of international schools applying for operation in Hong Kong in each of the past five years; the factors on which the authorities based in approving the applications from international schools for operation;
- (2) under the policy of allocating vacant school premises/school sites for the development of international schools, of the criteria by which the Government allocates sites for the development of international schools; how it ensures that the provision of sites for the development of international schools does not undermine local education resources at the same time; and
- (3) whether it knows the respective requirements for local and non-local students under the enrolment policies of international schools and private schools newly applying for operation; how the Government ensures that, after the conversion of aided schools to private schools, sufficient aided school places can still be maintained in Hong Kong to uphold educational equity?

Reply:

President,

The education system in Hong Kong provides parents with diversified and high-quality choices. The Government's policy objective is to provide 12 years' free primary and secondary education to all children through public sector schools. Apart from publicly-funded schools, private schools in Hong Kong have been playing a unique role in offering local and non-local curricula according to their mission. International schools belong to the

private school sector and operate on a self-financing and market-driven basis. In general, they are not subsidised by public funds for capital costs and daily operation.

The Government is committed to supporting the development of a vibrant international school sector, mainly to meet the demand for school places from non-local families living in Hong Kong and families coming to Hong Kong for work or investment. This policy objective is crucial in attracting and retaining talent in support of Hong Kong's development as an international centre on finance, business, innovation and technology, education and culture, and reinforcing Hong Kong's role as an international cosmopolitan with global connectivity.

Regarding the question asked by Hon Tang Fei, the reply is as follows:

(1) and (2) There are 54 international schools (including one special school) in Hong Kong. There is no newly established international school in the past five years. In the 2023/24 school year, international schools admitted about 42 100 students, accounting for 6.4 per cent of primary and secondary students in Hong Kong. There are two ways to set up an international school in Hong Kong:

(i) Application for registration as a private school first and seek recognition as an international school: School sponsoring body may identify private land and/or school premises in Hong Kong for operation of school and apply to the Education Bureau (EDB) for registration as private school. After the private school has been in operation for a certain period of time, the school operator may then seek the EDB's recognition of the school as an international school subject to its fulfillment of relevant requirements. The start-up requirements include at least 70 per cent of the school places allocated to non-local students (Note), a proven track record of school operation and full accreditation from an established accreditation body, a sustainable financial plan.

(ii) Participation in the School Allocation Exercise (SAE): The supply of international school places is planned on a territory-wide basis. The EDB commissions a consultancy study from time to time on the provision of international school places at primary and secondary levels in Hong Kong. When there is a projected shortfall of international school places, the Government will allocate greenfield sites or vacant school premises (VSPs) for international school use through an open and competitive bidding mechanism as appropriate, to increase the number of international school places. It has been 10 years since the last allocation of greenfield sites and VSPs to international schools (in 2014). In the light of the overwhelming response to various talent admission schemes in the past two years, the EDB is conducting an SAE to allocate two VSPs offering some school places in meeting any short-term surge in education needs of dependant children of incoming talent from both the Mainland and overseas.

All along, the vast majority of education expenditure and land resources have been allocated to publicly-funded schools. For example, since the

implementation of the existing SAE mechanism in 1999, the Government has allocated 156 school sites or VSPs for public sector primary and secondary schools. During the same period, the Government allocated only 16 school sites or VSPs for international school development. Since 2017, the EDB has sought funding approval from the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council and completed a total of 37 school building projects during the period, all of which are public sector school projects except one was an international school redevelopment project.

(3) Private schools, which operate on a self-financing and market-driven basis, may set their own school-based admission requirements and procedures for admitting students (including non-local students who have been approved to study or reside in Hong Kong). The requirement on the percentage of non-local students to be admitted applies to the international schools operated by the English Schools Foundation and the new campuses of international schools which entered into a service agreement with the EDB upon allocation of school premises or sites since 2007. These schools/campuses were required to enrol no less than 50 per cent of non-local students, and the percentage has been raised to 70 per cent by the EDB since 2009, in accordance with the terms of the service agreements. As Hong Kong has returned to normalcy and has been actively attracting more foreign investment and talent to the territory, the EDB expects that the number of non-local students, including those from the Mainland and overseas, to be admitted by international schools will increase gradually.

The EDB will continue to closely monitor the number of newly-arrived children and the demand for school places of the dependants of various talent schemes, and to conduct dynamic assessment of the demand for and supply of school places, as well as reserve sufficient school places in public sector schools for eligible school-age children. Should an existing publicly-funded school wish to cease operation and convert into a private school, it has to apply to the EDB for change of its mode of operation and for registration. The EDB will consider a basket of factors, including the lease conditions and restrictions on the use of the land of the school, curriculum planning, class structure, staff establishment, etc, to ensure that the school is capable of providing quality education.

Note: Local students refer to those who are Hong Kong permanent residents (with the right of abode in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR)) and do not have any valid passport other than HKSAR Passport. Students not covered by this definition are all regarded as non-local students.