

LCQ19: Support provided for children with special educational needs

Following is a question by the Hon Dennis Kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (June 24):

Question:

In view of the coronavirus disease 2019 (commonly known as "Wuhan pneumonia") epidemic, classes of primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong were suspended for almost four months, and it was only until last month that the schools started to resume classes by phases. Some parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) have relayed that their children were not provided with the necessary support and regular training during the period of class suspension, and that their children have demonstrated anxiety over class resumption. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Government provided support services for SEN children during the period of class suspension; if so, of the details, including (i) a breakdown, by service type, of the number of children who received such services, (ii) content of the services, (iii) the government department(s) and the number of personnel involved, as well as (iv) the amount of expenditure incurred; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has formulated measures to assist SEN children in adapting to learning and school life upon class resumption; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) given that while the Education Bureau (EDB) wrote to all schools in Hong Kong on April 3 this year indicating that Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) at schools should review afresh and adjust the content of the plans for supporting SEN children as well as provide them with support through various means, there have been comments that quite a number of schools have just created the position of SENCO in this school year, and that the training received by SENCOs is insufficient for them to cope with the special circumstances that the schools currently face, whether EDB has taken measures to assist SENCOs in carrying out the relevant work; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) whether it knows if all on-site training services (including services provided under "On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services") were suspended during the period of class suspension; if the services were not all suspended, of the types of services affected; of the number of service organisations whose service contracts were terminated due to prolonged class suspension, and whether the Government will provide support for these organisations; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) whether it knows the number of organisations mentioned in (4) which have decided that they will no longer provide on-site training services for schools in the next school year?

Reply:

President,

In light of the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and to safeguard the health of students, all students have not been able to return to schools to take classes from the Chinese New Year holidays till late May. During class suspension, the Education Bureau (EDB) has maintained contact with schools to understand their operation and needs, joined hands with them to tackle related problems, of which include the support provided in accordance with the situation of students with special educational needs (SEN). After class resumption, the EDB has continued to remind schools to suitably adjust their teaching and support arrangements, and provide support services for students with SEN according to school-specific circumstances and students' needs. Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Dennis Kwok is as follows:

(1), (4) and (5) The EDB, on top of regular subvention, has been providing public sector ordinary schools with additional resources, professional support and teacher training to help them implement the Whole School Approach (WSA) to integrated education (IE). Schools may deploy internal resources flexibly to employ additional teachers and teaching assistants or procure professional services, with a view to adopting the school-based mode of support to cater for students with SEN.

During class suspension, some students (including those with SEN) may feel disturbed. The EDB has been maintaining communication with the Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) of the schools, suggesting that they should lead the Student Support Teams (SSTs) to review and adjust the support strategies and content of support plans for students with SEN as circumstances arise. Furthermore, the EDB has reminded SENCOs to keep regular communication with parents to understand the students' learning and emotional needs and changes, so as to provide appropriate learning materials, adapt the learning tasks for students and review their performance in learning and emotion jointly with their parents. During class suspension, SENCOs also collaborate with professionals (such as school-based educational psychologists (EPs), school-based speech therapists (STs) and school social workers) to provide targeted support for individual students with special difficulties and their parents.

In addition, the EDB has developed teaching resources to support students with SEN, namely the anti-epidemic tips for students with autism spectrum disorders in adjusting to class suspension and resumption, tips for parents of students with attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder, and tips for parents of students with specific learning difficulties, for reference and use of school-based EPs, teachers and parents. A series of psychoeducational videos titled "Suspending Classes without Suspending Love in the Epidemic" have also been produced in collaboration with a non-

government organisation. These videos, which were uploaded to the EDB YouTube channel in April and May this year, explain to teachers and parents how to help their students and children cope with emotions and mental stress, so that they can maintain their mental well-being during the outbreak of the epidemic and class suspension and stay positive when facing class resumption.

As for the professional services procured by schools to support students with SEN, schools in general would discuss with the organisations concerned and continue to support these students through alternative modes (e.g. using electronic platforms or online video conferencing). Schools have also negotiated with the service providers the arrangements of providing support services to students after class resumption. According to the established practice, schools have to keep clear records of relevant contract terms and support arrangements relating to the outsourced services. At the end of the school year, schools should evaluate the effectiveness of the policy, measures and resource utilisation in support of students with SEN through the self-evaluation mechanism and submit a self-evaluation report on the implementation of the WSA to IE to the EDB. The EDB officers will look into their situation and offer professional advice accordingly during school visits. As schools have to face various challenges and pressure when dealing with the epidemic and class suspension, we have not specifically requested them to provide relevant figures on the above-mentioned matters, so as not to unnecessarily increase the workload and pressure on schools.

Regarding On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services, according to the information provided by the Social Welfare Department, although service organisations temporarily suspended the provision of on-site services during class suspension, they continued to provide support for children and parents in need through different modes of individual training services, such as centre-based training with appropriate social distancing measures in place, e-learning and home training. In response to class resumption in upper kindergarten from June 15, the service organisations have resumed on-site training services for service users.

(2) To assist schools to prepare for class resumption and provide support to students (including those with SEN) to adjust to school life after class resumption, the EDB issued the Guidelines to Schools on Class Resumption in May this year. The Guidelines on Emotional Support for Students on Class Resumption which has been attached therein helps schools assist students in managing emotions that may arise from the epidemic and reintegrating into school life. The Guidelines have been uploaded onto the EDB's website for school reference. We urge teachers to pay due attention to the learning, emotion and behaviour of students with SEN and maintain communication with their parents to understand their latest condition so that continued support can be provided where appropriate. SENCOs will also work with other professionals such as school-based EPs, school-based STs and school social workers to provide targeted support services to individual students in need and their parents.

(3) Starting from the 2017/18 school year, the EDB has, by phases, provided each public sector ordinary school with an additional teaching post to facilitate school's assignment of a designated teacher to take up the role of

SENCO to support IE. In the 2019/20 school year, all public sector ordinary schools have each been provided with a SENCO. When assigning a teacher to take up the role of SENCO, schools have to follow the EDB's requirements and give thorough consideration to teachers' experience in teaching and in promoting IE as well as their qualifications in special education. Basically, teachers assuming the role of SENCO should have at least three years' experience in teaching and in promoting IE respectively and should have completed the training courses pitched at basic, advanced and thematic levels (BAT Courses) on supporting students with SEN.

Over the years, the EDB has been encouraging ordinary schools to implement the WSA to IE and set up SSTs to motivate all teachers to adopt the 3-Tier Intervention Model to support students with SEN. Regarding teacher training, starting from the 2007/08 school year, the EDB has been providing serving teachers with BAT Courses and training targets have been set to equip more teachers with the professional capacity in catering for students with SEN, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the implementation of IE in schools. As such, all ordinary schools have aggregated a critical mass of teachers having received relevant training and acquired the knowledge of how to support students with SEN.

SENCO leads the SST and works in collaboration with other subject panels and functional groups to support students with SEN in different aspects. Under the principle of the WSA, the IE support in the school is not solely taken up by SENCO. All school staff should be responsible for supporting students with SEN, and SENCO and a significant number of teachers have already received relevant training.

Indeed, all teachers and the whole education sector do not have the experience of handling prolonged class suspension arising from an epidemic. During class suspension, the EDB issued a letter to schools in early April this year to appeal to school principals to continue supporting SENCOs by reviewing and adjusting the content of support plans as well as providing various kinds of support for students with SEN and their parents. Furthermore, the EDB has maintained close contact with SENCOs to better understand the situation in the flexible use of the Learning Support Grant, diversified modes of support, students' daily learning, adaptation of learning tasks, social and emotional needs of students, etc. The EDB has also provided SENCOs with professional advice according to the challenges faced by schools. Following class resumption, we will continue to organise professional network activities for experience sharing and professional exchanges (including how to provide different modes of support through diversified strategies during an epidemic or under other special circumstances) amongst SENCOs, with a view to continuously enhancing their professional competence in the co-ordination, promotion and development of support for students with SEN.