

LCQ20: School bullying

Following is a question by the Hon Lai Tung-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (April 10):

Question:

Some members of the public have noted that according to the guidelines on the handling of bullying incidents set out in the School Administration Guide published by the Education Bureau (EDB), the EDB advises schools to adopt a "Whole School Approach" (WSA) to formulate and implement anti-bullying strategies; the EDB requires schools to intervene and follow up bullying incidents as soon as possible only if such incidents occur; and the EDB should be notified only if the school bullying incidents are of a more severe nature (e.g. teachers being the bullies, and incidents involving brutal violence, injuries or deaths). There are views that as neither the adoption of WSA nor the reporting of school bullying incidents is mandatory, the handling of school bullying incidents has been ineffective for a prolonged period. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the number of student cases involving school bullying handled by schools, as well as the respective numbers of requests for assistance, complaints and reported cases in relation to school bullying received by the EDB, in each of the past three school years;
- (2) of the number of schools currently adopting WSA to formulate and implement anti-bullying strategies, as well as their proportion to the total number of schools;
- (3) whether it has grasped the primary reporting channels and handling procedures for school bullying adopted by schools under WSA; if so, of the details;
- (4) whether it has plans to change the current practice of not requiring schools to notify the EDB of all school bullying cases; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (5) given that the authorities have indicated the establishment of a one-stop hotline and the offering of online counselling services in the 2023-2024 school year to provide students and parents with advice on and support in handling school bullying, of the details of such hotline and services, and whether an assessment of their effectiveness has been conducted?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been adopting a "zero tolerance" policy on school bullying. Any bullying act, irrespective of the form or for whatever reasons, is totally unacceptable. School is a place where students learn to show care, concern, support and respect for one another. Creating a safe and harmonious school environment for students to learn and grow up happily is the fundamental responsibility of schools, as well as the common goal of the EDB and all educators. Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Lai Tung-kwok is as follows:

(1) According to the information collected from the EDB's annual questionnaire survey on guidance and discipline cases in public sector primary and secondary schools, the number of student cases handled by schools related to school bullying from the 2020/21 to 2022/23 school years was about 420 on average per year. Schools have all along been handling bullying incidents properly and explaining the incidents to parents in accordance with their school-based policy. Parents and other people may also seek assistance from the EDB as necessary. In the three school years, the EDB had received a total of 47 requests for assistance, complaints and reports in relation to school bullying, which mainly involved physical/ behavioural violence and verbal attack. The EDB had completed 45 cases, of which five complaints were found substantiated or partially substantiated upon investigation.

(2) to (4) The EDB has required all public sector schools in the territory, through issuance of circulars and guidelines, to take bullying incidents seriously, implement proactive measures and adopt the Whole School Approach in formulating and implementing anti-bullying policies. The School Administration Guide (SAG) and circular issued by the EDB lay down clearly and in details the principles of handling school bullying, as well as the relevant procedures, methods and follow-up actions, which should include a clear standpoint of "zero tolerance", reporting mechanism and handling procedures, and monitoring with high transparency. In addition, the EDB has also adopted a multi-pronged approach to help schools implement the policy on prevention and handling of school bullying, including raising anti-bullying awareness among students and school staff, nurturing students' proper values and cultivating in them a positive sense of mutual trust, inclusion and friendship through school curriculum, learning and teaching resources, student activities and teacher training.

Under the spirit of school-based management, the Incorporated Management Committees should lead schools in formulating their school-based mechanisms and procedures for administering school operation, including the policy on prevention and handling of school bullying, with a view to fostering of a harmonious school environment that enables student learning and growth. Schools should take a proactive approach to handle each school bullying incident seriously, while all school staff are required to report to the school management or the responsible team when any bullying case is known to them. If school bullying incidents occur, schools should take education, guidance and protection of their students as the prime concern, handle the cases in accordance with the "Flowchart for Handling Bullying Incidents in Schools" provided in the SAG and circular by the EDB and activate school-

based crisis management mechanism as the situation so warrants. Upon informed of a school bullying incident, action should be taken to stop the bullying immediately. The school should assess whether the student(s) concerned is/are injured or emotionally unstable, contact their parents as soon as possible and arrange for first aid or treatment as appropriate if there is any physical injury. Thereafter, the school should intervene and render an initial mediation, and arrange guidance personnel or relevant professional service outside school to provide in-depth follow-up for the student(s) involved in the school bullying incident. For school bullying incidents of a more serious nature (such as those involving serious violence or injury), the school should notify the respective regional education office of the EDB as soon as possible so that assistance could be rendered. If illegal acts are involved, schools should proactively contact the respective Police School Liaison Officer. For serious cases, schools should report the incidents to the Police immediately. The EDB will liaise with the schools, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and the Police for appropriate handling measures.

We believe that in the handling of bullying incidents, education, guidance and protection of students should be the prime concern. Schools are staffed with professionals (including guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists) to provide students in need with due support and mediation. In the process of handling these cases, schools should work with parents to help the students involved rectify their behaviours and better protect the students being bullied. Moreover, through professional consultation and school visits, the EDB's guidance professionals review with schools their anti-bullying work on an ongoing basis, and provide appropriate support according to schools' needs. To further enhance schools' capability of preventing and handling bullying in schools, the EDB will continue to provide professional training programmes, seminars and workshops for school personnel to keep them abreast of the latest information and strengthen their skills in handling bullying incidents, thereby enabling schools to implement their anti-bullying measures more effectively. The EDB will collaborate with other government departments such as the SWD and the Police to provide schools with assistance in various aspects to facilitate the cultivation of a harmonious and caring school environment. The EDB will continue to monitor the situation of schools and provide timely support to prevent school bullying and protect the well-being of students.

(5) The EDB will set up a one-stop hotline and offer online counselling services in the 2023/24 school year to provide students and parents with advice on and support in handling conflicts among peers or school bullying. Through the hotline and online services, duty counsellors and registered social workers will provide advice and counselling services for students and parents, and may refer the cases to government or non-governmental organisations for follow-up where necessary. The hotline and online counselling services will commence operation in May 2024. The EDB will disseminate the details of the hotline and online services through various channels such as circular memorandum, briefings and websites, and will monitor the services operation on an on-going basis.