

LCQ21: Arrangement of designating the day following an election day as a school holiday

Following is a question by the Hon Judy Chan and a written reply by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Erick Tsang Kwok-wai, in the Legislative Council today (November 15):

Question:

The Education Bureau announced in June 2020 that given that in the elections held in the preceding few years, school premises could only be returned to schools in the mornings following the election days for some polling stations, which had as a result affected the normal operation of the schools concerned, starting from the 2020-2021 school year, all schools offering formal curriculum, including public sector, Direct Subsidy Scheme and private secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres, were required to designate the day following the election day of a major public election as a school holiday. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of schools which lent out their school premises for use as polling stations and counting stations in the 2021 Legislative Council (LegCo) General Election as well as its percentage in the total number of schools (with a breakdown by school category (i.e. secondary school, primary school, kindergarten and kindergarten-cum-child care centre)); whether it has projected the relevant figures for the 2023 District Council Ordinary Election (DCOE) to be held next month; if so, of the details;

(2) whether, in the 2021 LegCo General Election, there were cases in which the authorities could only return school premises used as polling and counting stations to schools in the morning following the election day; if so, of the details;

(3) as there are views that the designation of the day following the election day of a major public election as a school holiday will result in more members of the public being unable to vote since they will make use of the three-day long weekend holiday for outbound travel, whether the authorities have reviewed if the arrangement of designating the day following an election day as a school holiday will lower the voter turnout rate; if they have, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether it will introduce targeted measures to encourage members of the public to stay in Hong Kong and vote during the weekend when the 2023 DCOE is held; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

As school premises are more spacious and conveniently located, around half of the polling and counting stations are set up in various types of schools in every major public election, including secondary schools, primary schools and kindergartens. In the past, the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) must clear and return the premises concerned before 6 am on the day following the election day so as to enable the schools to resume their normal operation. In the event that the count has not been completed, the REO might have to relocate to a reserve counting station to continue the count.

The Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC) recommended for the first time in the Report on the 2016 Legislative Council General Election (LCGE) for the Government to consider designating the day following the Legislative Council election polling day as a school holiday, so that polling stations and counting stations that were set up in school premises need not relocate to a reserve counting station due to the need to return the premises by 6 am on the following day. Not only does this ensure the count would not be interrupted, it also effectively alleviates the work pressure on the counting staff as well as the impact on the operation of schools. The EAC reiterated the same recommendation in the Report on the 2019 District Council Ordinary Election (DCOE).

Having consulted the school sector on the recommendation in 2020, the Government issued the Education Bureau Circular No. 5/2020 to all public, Direct Subsidy Scheme and private secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres to announce that, starting from the 2020/21 school year, the day after the election day of a major public election (viz. LCGEs and DCOEs) would be designated as a school holiday. The related arrangement was first implemented in the 2021 LCGE. Experience revealed that the measure promoted schools to lend their premises for the elections, and avoided the risks involved in the transport of the ballot papers and other election materials to the reserve counting stations.

In response to the Hon Chan's question, our reply is as follows:

(1) For the geographical constituency (GC) elections of the 2021 LCGE, a total of 384 schools were used as polling-cum-counting stations, whereas it is estimated that 363 schools will be used as polling-cum-counting stations in the 2023 DCOE. Please refer to details at Appendix.

(2) The time to complete the count in addition to the return of school premises are affected by many factors. For example, candidates, their election agents and/or counting agents can request for a re-count of valid votes for all counting stations of that District Council geographical constituency (DCGC) after the Returning Officer (RO) has announced the compiled counting results of all counting stations in that DCGC. Therefore, respective Presiding Officers must wait until the ROs have confirmed that no further re-count is required before wrapping and sealing the election

documents and ballot papers, and then clearing up the venues before returning the school premises. For the 2021 LCGE, the counting results of respective GCs were declared gradually from around 5.46am to 7.17am on the day following the polling day. Some 180 schools used as polling/ counting stations could not complete the count process and clearing up before 6am on the day following the election and could only be returned to the schools later during the day.

(3) The Government currently has no plans to make changes to the prevailing arrangement of having the day following the election as a school holiday. As we have all along been emphasising, the voter turnout rate could not be regarded as an indicator of success of the system and it is also affected by various factors at the same time. Therefore, we should not blindly go after the so-called "high voter turnout rate" or set any specific indicator. We will only endeavor our best efforts to continue with the relevant publicity works, and ensure the smooth operation of the new system, with a view to achieving the anticipated results of the system, benefiting the public's livelihood and ensuring the harmony and stability of the community.

(4) As emphasised by the Government, this District Council (DC) election is the first major territory-wide election after the improving district governance system and reforming the DCs, and is of particular significance. Therefore, the Government has all along spared no efforts in taking forward various publicity and promotional activities, to enable the public to fully understand that the new district governance system and DCs are crucial to building a better place to live in and work as well as improving people's livelihood. Hence, they are encouraged to vote on the election day for their preferred candidate who will serve the community together. Apart from the conventional and innovative promotional activities already launched, the Government will continue to roll out other different promotional activities. Details of the activities will be announcement at suitable juncture.