

LCQ4: Monitoring extra-curricular activities organised for students

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (November 14):

Question:

Earlier on, an organisation invited, through the schools concerned, some 200 primary school students, who were accompanied by 400 parents, to go to Thailand to take part in an international mathematics contest. Some of the students and their parents joined a related group tour arranged by the organisation. Some parents have reproached the organisation for making inadequate preparation for the contest as well as the inappropriate reception and itinerary arrangements of the group tour, undermining the rights and interests of the parents and students concerned. Regarding the monitoring of extra-curricular activities organised for students, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it received in the past three years requests for assistance and complaints about students taking part in courses and activities held overseas; if so, of the details; how the implementation and quality of such courses and activities are currently monitored, with a view to safeguarding the rights and interests of the parents and students; and

(2) given that the Government has put forward in this year's Policy Agenda the setting up of a Student Activities Support Fund with the total amount of \$2.5 billion to support, through a subsidy, students with financial needs to participate in out-of-classroom learning activities starting from the next school year, of the authorities' measures to monitor the use of the subsidy by schools; whether it will consider setting up a recognition system for, or a register of, organisations which may collaborate with schools in organising extra-curricular activities, and issuing guidelines setting out matters such as the scope of use of the subsidy, as well as the issues that schools should bear in mind when organising extra-curricular activities in collaboration with other organisations; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the questions raised by the Hon Luk Chung-hung is as follows:

(1) Courses or activities outside Hong Kong for students are mostly arranged by parents or organised by schools.

Regarding study tours for students organised by travel agents engaged by parents, the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC), being the regulator of the tourism industry, has promulgated the Code of Business Practice on Study Tours under the existing regulatory framework of the tourism industry to impose strict requirements on travel agents in organising study tours. Such requirements include: all travel products or services arranged by travel agents shall be provided by licensed or legally registered suppliers; all participants should purchase appropriate comprehensive travel insurance; study tours must be accompanied by holders of valid Tour Escort Pass issued by TIC, who will assist the tour groups in liaising with local service suppliers and related organisations, and handling emergencies, so as to safeguard the interest of the participants. During the past three years, the Tourism Commission has not received any requests for assistance or complaints in relation to students participating in courses and activities outside Hong Kong.

Furthermore, the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (Cap. 362) prohibits six offences of unfair trade practices, including false trade descriptions, misleading omissions, aggressive commercial practices, bait advertising, bait-and-switch and wrongly accepting payment.

During the past three years, the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) received 11 complaints (involving four traders) related to traders who organised courses or activities outside Hong Kong for students, allegedly in contravention of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance. After investigation, the C&ED initiated prosecution against the person-in-charge of a trader who was involved in four of the complaint cases. The person-in-charge was convicted by the court and was sentenced to 180 hours community service order, and was ordered to make a total compensation of \$69,380 to four consumers. Regarding the remaining seven complaint cases, five are under investigation, while no contravention of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance by traders was found in the other two cases.

The Government and the Consumer Council are committed to encouraging "smart consumption" through publicity and public education. Parents, as consumers, should get to know the quality of services provided by the organisations, and consider carefully their own needs and the relevant terms and conditions before making a consumption decision.

If the activities (including learning activities outside Hong Kong) are organised by schools, they are regulated by the Education Bureau (EDB). The EDB has provided schools with various guidelines (such as the "Guidelines on Extra-curricular Activities in Schools", "Guidelines on Study Tours Outside Hong Kong" and "Guidelines on Conducting Trading Operations") to ensure that the programmes and activities outside the classroom provided for students by schools (including those co-organised with other organisations) can be conducted effectively as well as in accordance with the related requirements in administrative and financial arrangements to safeguard students' safety and interests. If the activities organised by schools are conducted outside Hong Kong, school teacher(s) should be appointed to escort participating

students to take part in visits, exchange programmes, studies or services, and make reference to the "Guidelines on Study Tours Outside Hong Kong" (Guidelines) compiled by the EDB. The Guidelines are drawn up with a primary aim of reminding schools to ensure the safety of participants of study tours. Schools should also make reference to the curriculum guides on different Key Learning Areas to design suitable study tour programmes according to their respective school-based curriculum and needs of students. The Guidelines are not applicable to study tours arranged by non-school organisations.

From the 2015-16 to 2017-18 school years, the EDB received two complaints from parents/students regarding schools arranging for students to take part in courses or activities held outside Hong Kong, including a case of students participating in a mathematics contest held overseas and a case of school arranging an overseas exchange tour. Regarding the case of the exchange tour, the parent of a participating student was dissatisfied with the arrangements for flight and accommodation. After investigation, it was confirmed that the school had followed the EDB's guidelines on organising exchange tours and the complaint was not substantiated. As regards the case of overseas mathematics contest, after the investigation by the EDB, it was confirmed that there were schools which had assisted their students in enrolling to the organiser on the preliminary contest in Hong Kong but no schools had participated in or recommended students to join the overseas contest concerned. It was considered an activity joined by the parents on their own accord. Regarding the case, the C&ED and the Police are taking follow-up actions.

(2) The Government proposes to set up the Student Activities Support Fund to provide schools with the Student Activities Support Grant, to replace the Hong Kong Jockey Club Life-wide Learning Fund which will end by the close of the current school year, to continue to support financially needy students to participate in life-wide learning (LWL) activities organised or recognised by the schools, so as to enable them to gain learning experiences that are difficult to be obtained in the classroom. These are different from interest classes and activities that parents arrange for their children. Since the curriculum reform in 2001, schools have accumulated considerable experience in promoting LWL through different means, including hiring outside services, to organise LWL activities for students to enable them to learn in authentic contexts for whole-person development. On financial management, schools have all along been required to put in place effective procedures to ensure proper use of public funds and that the resources are being deployed effectively for educational purposes. Schools will be required to set up a separate ledger for the Student Activities Support Grant, which will be monitored by the School Management Committee/ Incorporated Management Committee of the respective schools. We will consult the school sector on the operational details of the Grant in due course, and issue circulars and relevant guidelines to schools. Under the principle of school-based management, schools should adhere to the guidelines on the utilisation of the Grant to enhance student learning, as well as submit annual audited account reports to ensure that public funds are not being abused. In addition, the EDB will conduct school visits to understand the use of the Grant and provide advice to schools as appropriate. On hiring outside services, schools should adhere

to relevant the EDB circulars and guidelines to ensure students' safety and the appropriateness of the activities. There are many organisations offering after-school activities for students, and schools have been deploying relevant grants to smoothly collaborate with different organisations. The EDB does not see a need to set up a registration mechanism or a register of collaborating organisations at present.

Thank you, President.