

LCQ5: Political disputes and violence in schools

Following is a question by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (November 6):

Question:

It has been reported that earlier on, some secondary school students with different political views had confrontations in a school, subsequently dozens of persons dressed in black arrived there to express support for one of the parties and they surrounded the school and yelled; they even forced their way into the school and drew graffiti everywhere and vandalised the facilities. Furthermore, some students of tertiary institutions detained, attacked and insulted a lecturer who held different political views, hurled abuse at and surrounded the presidents of the institutions concerned, stormed the presidents' offices, as well as caused widespread destructions and drew graffiti on campus. Some members of the public have expressed concern about political disputes and violence permeating schools. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Education Bureau (EDB) has any immediate measures to stop violence from permeating schools and from being rationalised, and whether the EDB has reviewed the guidelines on how schools should handle the entry of police officers into campus for law enforcement; if so, of the details; if not, whether the EDB will immediately draw up such measures and review the guidelines;

(2) as some teaching staff members have relayed that recently, some students and alumni holding different political views have made public on the Internet their personal information, as well as surrounded and even attacked them, and yet the schools concerned, which sought to settling the matter to avoid trouble, have adopted a tolerant attitude towards the students involved, whether the EDB will offer assistance to the teaching staff members who have been bullied for holding different political views, so as to safeguard their personal safety and rights; and

(3) as it has been reported that some secondary school teachers instigated students to boycott classes, sing songs that carry ideas of advocating the independence of Hong Kong, participate in activities to form human chains and even take to the street to demonstrate, whether the EDB will initiate an investigation to see if such teachers have violated the professional codes of conduct, and solemnly hold them responsible?

Reply:

President,

Disputes in society in recent months have brought pressure on the academia. Confrontations have even happened in some post-secondary institutions and schools. The Education Bureau (EDB) does not accept any verbal or physical violence, and calls upon all in society to oppose all violent acts that disrupt the normal operations of schools as well as teaching and research activities so that our schools (including post-secondary institutions) can provide a safe and harmonious teaching and learning environment that puts students at ease when learning, whilst all educators must uphold professional ethics.

Hong Kong is a diversified society, and it is normal for different people to hold different views on social issues. However, anyone expressing his/her views must do so in a rational, peaceful and lawful manner, with mutual respect for others' rights. Freedom of speech or academic freedom must not be used as a disguise or an excuse for advocating improper speech or behaviour. The community holds very high expectations for post-secondary students in particular.

Post-secondary institutions are independent and autonomous organisations. They are responsible for handling matters taking place on campus, including protests and confrontations. According to the institutions, since the commencement of the academic year in September, classes and on-campus activities have proceeded largely normally, and teaching and research activities as well as the overall operations have not been affected too significantly. There were confrontations among some students possibly because of different backgrounds and political stances. A small number of students even organised rallies, publicised protest actions, and even engaged in graffiti and vandalism on campus. The Chairmen of the Councils of the eight publicly-funded universities issued a joint statement on October 20, pointing out that the universities should cherish a diversity of views and promote rational discussion, rather than being drawn into supporting any particular political position. The statement also opposed any form of violent conduct and criminal acts, including defacing and damaging university property, and stressed that university staff and students were responsible for the actions they take, and that the universities had standing mechanisms and procedures to deal with those who violated the laws or university regulations. The EDB considers that institutions should uphold the principles in the statement, handle the views of various stakeholders appropriately, and handle the conduct issues of students and staff members in accordance with the standing mechanisms.

For secondary schools, there are also students who wish to express their views, some of whom demanded boycotting classes and some participated in the forming of human chains near schools. Schools have generally been able to handle the situation properly, and help the students concerned to improve their behaviour and help them build up positive values according to the established school-based discipline and counselling mechanism.

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan is as follows:

(1) The EDB has issued guidelines to all kindergartens, primary, secondary and special schools in late August, providing some basic principles and reference materials for them to formulate their school-based arrangements and specific measures, taking into account their actual circumstances, to meet various challenges arising from the social events. Among others, the guidelines reminded schools again that they should draw up contingency plans in advance, conduct periodic review and update the plans from time to time, to meet possible situations. Besides, the School Administration Guide issued by the EDB specified that, in the event of school crises (including violent incidents), schools should put the safety of all staff and students at top priority and take appropriate actions. When the situation warrants immediate support, schools should dial 999 promptly for assistance. Besides, the Police School Liaison Officers have all along maintained close liaison with schools and have provided them with the necessary assistance.

The post-secondary institutions are generally responsible for their security matters. Each institution has its own internal mechanism, rules and procedures to deal with ad hoc incidents that occur on campus, including seeking assistance from law enforcement agencies, depending on the actual needs. In general, it is only upon receipt of requests from the institutions concerned for assistance in handling incidents relating to public safety and public order, and after liaising with the institutions concerned that the Police will enter the campus to render assistance. Section 50(3) of the Police Force Ordinance also provides that if any police officer has reason to believe that any person to be arrested has entered into or is in any place, the person residing in or in charge of such place shall allow that police officer free ingress thereto and afford all reasonable facilities for the police officer's search therein. Regarding a recent incident of a post-secondary institution of the Vocational Training Council being vandalised, I understand that the relevant institution has reported the case to the Police. The EDB has all along maintained contact with the post-secondary institutions over various issues to understand the on-campus situation and offer support and advice as and when necessary. In the light of the recent tense atmosphere in society, the EDB reminded the institutions before the start of the academic year to make appropriate arrangements, with a view to coping with possible confrontations on campus and ensuring a safe learning environment for all members of the institutions.

(2) As regards the concern about staff members being bullied, we reiterate that no one should treat others with hostility or violence because of differences in stances or political views. For secondary schools, we have not received any complaints about personal information of staff being disclosed online, or staff being bullied or attacked. If such cases arise, they should inform their schools and report to the police. The EDB will maintain close contacts with schools and offer assistance as necessary.

Various post-secondary institutions are responsible for dealing with student affairs properly and protect the safety of their staff members on campus. The EDB has suggested that the institutions reiterate through faculties, halls, etc the need to respect different views of people and

refrain from propagating messages about bullying or isolating others. The institutions should provide appropriate and timely assistance in cases where staff members have been bullied or isolated. Furthermore, the institutions will handle the conduct issues of students and staff members in accordance with the established mechanism after considering all the relevant factors including the related judicial procedures or court decisions.

(3) Schools are places for students to learn. All parties concerned should work together to ensure that students can learn normally and grow healthily in a safe, stable and peaceful environment. No one should use schools as the venue for expressing their political demands, not to mention inciting immature students to indicate their stance on controversial or evolving political issues or even take part in unlawful activities. Teachers serve as students' role models through teaching by words and examples. Their words and actions must be in compliance with the professional conduct and meet the general moral expectations from the public. Teachers must not incite students to express their views through class boycott, forming human chains, singing inappropriate songs, etc. The EDB handles any suspected case of professional misconduct from the perspective of education professionalism and in accordance with the Education Ordinance. Full consideration will be given to the facts and circumstances of every case before a decision is made. If a teacher is found to have committed a serious offence or an act of misconduct, this Bureau will review his professional conduct based on the information available and take necessary follow up action. For serious cases, the registration of the teacher concerned may be cancelled.

Thank you, President.