

LCQ6: Mental health of principals and teachers

Following is a question by the Hon Michael Tien and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (April 17):

Question:

It has been reported that an incident of a primary school teacher committing suicide on the school campus last month has aroused public concern about the work pressure on teachers and the psychological counselling services they receive. On the other hand, the results of the Teachers' Work Stress Survey conducted by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union last year showed that close to 30% of the teacher respondents had depression symptoms. Although the Government will, starting from September this year, implement the measure of "two school social workers for each school" in more than 460 secondary schools in Hong Kong, the measure of "one school social worker for each school" in primary schools has remained, and the major service targets of the school social workers are students instead of teachers. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the respective numbers of cases in the past five years in which school social workers provided psychological counselling services to primary and secondary school teachers, and the mechanism under which school social workers handled cases of teachers in need of professional psychological counselling services;

(2) apart from setting up the Teachers' Helpline and organising stress management courses, of the measures that the Education Bureau has put in place to (i) support principals and teachers in coping with work pressure and (ii) promote their mental health; and

(3) of the latest progress of the implementation of the measure of "two school social workers for each school" in secondary schools; whether it will provide more resources to strengthen the provision of psychological counselling services by school social workers to principals and teachers?

Reply:

President,

The Government provides primary and secondary schools with social workers and guidance personnel as well as relevant resources to enhance student guidance work. Under the Whole School Approach, schools provide all students with comprehensive and extensive guidance service through the collaboration among teachers, social workers, guidance personnel or other professionals. School social work service aims to identify and help students

with academic, social or emotional problems, maximise their educational opportunities and develop their potentials. On support for teachers, social workers and student guidance personnel help enhance teachers' understanding of students' emotions, behaviours and developmental needs, offer teachers appropriate professional consultation service and advice to help them handle the problems of students, and provide immediate intervention and follow-up service in times of crisis.

Regarding the questions of the Hon Michael Tien concerning the mental health of principals and teachers and the implementation of the measure of "two school social workers for each secondary school", in consultation with the Social Welfare Department (SWD), the Education Bureau (EDB) provides a consolidated reply as follows:

(1) School social workers and guidance personnel are primarily targeted at serving students. Principals, educational psychologists or school social workers are not professionals for treating and handling mental health issues of adults. A teacher who shows persistent or distinct signs of stress should immediately seek help from relevant professionals (such as clinical psychologists and psychiatrists) and receive appropriate counselling or treatment as early as possible. The Government has not asked school social workers to provide teachers with professional psychological counselling services nor collected information on the provision of such services to teachers by schools. Therefore, the relevant statistics are not available.

(2) The EDB has all along attached great importance to teachers' well-being. We have already provided additional resources and implemented various measures to establish a healthy and stable working environment for teachers. For example, since the 2017/18 school year, the EDB has increased the teacher-to-class ratio for public sector schools by 0.1 across the board, providing around 2 200 additional regular teaching posts. Besides, aided secondary schools with surplus teachers arising from the reduction of secondary one classes in the past few years were allowed to extend the retention period for the surplus teachers concerned until the overall secondary one student population rebounds steadily. Moreover, the EDB will implement the policy of "one executive officer for each school" starting from the 2019/20 school year to provide public sector schools and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools with resources for hiring a total of about 1 000 School Executive Officers. This reduces the administrative work of teachers and principals, thereby creating room for them to focus more on teaching and developing a healthier working environment for teachers. To facilitate the sustainable development of schools, the EDB also encourages schools to enhance communication and collaboration with teachers, to formulate appropriate work arrangements based on school development and students' needs, as well as to review the teachers' work in a timely manner.

In addition to stress management, the training provided by the EDB to school leaders, such as the Induction Programme for Newly-appointed Principals and the Educational Administration and Management Course for Senior School Administrators, also includes topics of human resources management to guide trainees in using various strategies to support teachers

and relieve their work stress. Such strategies include conducting a holistic review on teachers' work and simplifying unnecessary administrative procedures, leveraging additional manpower or stakeholders' resources to unleash teachers' capacity, launching an induction scheme to help teachers have a better grasp of their responsibilities, and cultivating a positive and collaborative culture in schools. As we understand, many schools also make use of teacher development days, which encompass topics such as stress management, emotion management, mind and body healthcare, and team building, to support principals and teachers in coping with their work stress.

Meanwhile, the EDB encourages schools to promote mental health on campus and enhance the understanding and value of mental health generally among students, teachers and parents through means such as implementing mental health projects and education. While these activities are mainly targeted at students, teachers and other stakeholders are also encouraged to be aware of the importance of mental health, understand the sources of stress and how to handle it by participating in such activities. Apart from organising talks and sharing sessions on mental health for teachers, the EDB has provided primary and secondary teachers with the Professional Development Programme for Mental Health from the 2017/18 school year onwards, which includes elementary training for teachers and in-depth training for designated teachers, both covering the content of mental health of teachers. Besides, aiming at supporting students with mental illness, the Student Mental Health Support Scheme launched by the Food and Health Bureau in collaboration with EDB, the Hospital Authority and SWD also includes training related to teachers' mental well-being and healthy lifestyle. Moreover, talks and related activities are organised to share with teachers ways to maintain their mental health under the Joyful@School Campaign co-organised by the EDB and the Department of Health, as well as the Mindshift+ Educational Programme launched by the University of Hong Kong with funding support from the EDB. Through participating in the above professional development activities, teachers can enhance their understanding of mental health and finding ways to handle and cope with their stress as well as emotions. We believe that such knowledge and skills not only help teachers support students with mental health needs, but also strengthen their capabilities in handling their own emotions and stress. In addition, the Hong Kong Teachers' Centre has been organising different kinds of stress reduction programmes. The Quality Education Fund (QEF) has also included "Teacher Development and Wellness for Promoting Schools as Learning Organisations" as a priority theme, so that schools can apply for funding from the QEF to organise activities relating to teachers' health and stress management, with a view to enhancing teachers' well-being.

(3) The SWD plans to implement the measure of "two school social workers for each school" in secondary schools from the 2019/20 school year, with the recruitment of about 370 additional school social workers. The number of school social workers for each secondary school will then be increased from the current provision of 1.2 to 2 and about 46 posts of Social Work Officer will be increased concomitantly to enhance supervisory support.