

LCQ7: Impacts of epidemic on students

Following is a question by the Dr Hon Cheng Chung-tai and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (January 6):

Question:

In light of the severe situation of the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic and upper respiratory tract infections among students, the Education Bureau (EDB) has directed schools to suspend face-to-face classes on a number of occasions since January last year. Many parents have expressed that since there is a significant reduction in the number of school days in this school year as compared with those in previous years, they are worried that the learning progress as well as the physical and mental health of their children may be affected. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that while the EDB has repeatedly stressed that schools should achieve "suspending classes without stopping learning", online teaching undoubtedly has fewer interactive elements, and the findings of a survey reveal that almost half of the responding students relayed that they have difficulty in staying concentrated during online learning and they were unable to grasp the contents of the lessons and homework, and some students even indicated that they had not acquired any knowledge during class suspension, whether the EDB will consider making an exception by extending this school year and shortening school holidays, as well as making relevant arrangements;

(2) as the findings of the aforesaid survey have revealed that during class suspension, students rarely met their classmates, stayed home for a prolonged period, and lacked discipline in their daily living, which resulted in various emotional problems, whether the EDB will allocate additional resources to schools for employing additional school social workers to help students address such problems; and

(3) as there are comments that small class teaching (SCT) not only may enhance teaching effectiveness but also may reduce the risks of students contracting diseases as the class sizes are reduced, but currently only around 80 per cent of the public sector primary schools are implementing SCT, whether the EDB will allocate additional resources to enable all public sector primary schools to implement SCT?

Reply:

President,

Since the beginning of 2020, the situation of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic has been fluctuating. Schools are places where many young students study and engage in activities. On campuses activities are

frequent. In order to safeguard the safety of students, school staff and the public, and prevent the spread of the virus in schools and communities, the Government has been in close liaison with health experts and the school sector to timely announce measures, including suspension of face-to-face classes, partial face-to-face classes and half-day face-to-face classes in response to the epidemic development, so as to strike a balance between student learning and epidemic prevention. All along, schools have been actively supporting the arrangements, coping with the changes with flexibility and quickly adapting to the new normal, with a view to achieving the objective of "suspending classes without suspending learning", as well as caring for and taking care of students' learning, social and emotional needs. The Education Bureau (EDB) has also developed relevant resources to share with teachers and parents to help them support students in need. The EDB will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic, take into account professional advice from health experts as well as maintain dialogues with the school sector. We will review the school arrangements in a timely manner and provide schools and students with appropriate support.

Our reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(1) During the suspension of face-to-face classes, schools flexibly adopt different modes of learning and teaching, such as e-learning, according to their circumstances and needs of students at different key stages, to support students to continue learning at home so that they can achieve "suspending classes without suspending learning".

For secondary and primary schools, they assist students to make good use of the time at home to learn by encouraging them to prepare for their studies and to read extensively, and by organising small online study groups for them, etc. Schools have also developed numerous teaching video clips, conducted real-time online lessons and adopted online platforms/learning management systems for supporting students' learning. Learning and teaching resources have been distributed to students via electronic means such as emails/intranet while students are required to submit assignments electronically. Furthermore, schools have made arrangements for the teaching staff to keep in touch with parents via telephone or other electronic means.

The survey conducted by the EDB in the 2019/20 school year reveals that primary and secondary schools have adopted diversified strategies to support students to learn systematically at home and schools have also adopted different means to track students' learning progress during the class suspension period. Most schools considered that the progress of implementation of home learning plans for students met the pre-set targets. The EDB will maintain close communications with schools to understand their operation and needs, and in response to epidemic changes, work hand in hand with them to make flexible arrangements for the learning stages.

Besides, the EDB seeks to understand how secondary and primary schools support student learning and development in the new normal under the epidemic. As observed in inspections, schools, in general, are still

gathering experience and continuously exploring effective measures to cater for student learning and development. We will continue to share schools' successful experience with the education sector in future for refining related school work, such as using e-learning to enhance students' self-directed learning.

As regards kindergartens (KGs), since it is not desirable for young children to use electronic screen for a long period of time, e-learning is not suitable for KG students. We encourage KGs to design activities suitable for home learning, such as encouraging children to read at home; producing and distributing learning materials that align with the learning themes, children's interest and abilities; encouraging parents to support their children in doing simple housekeeping tasks etc, so as to help maintain children's learning motivation and curiosity; as well as collaborate with parents to better cater for children's emotional and moral developmental needs. To further support KG students' learning at home, we launched a new initiative in December last year that a one-off subsidy would be provided to all KGs joining the KG education scheme to support them to implement the "Gift Book Scheme" and "Do It Yourself (DIY) Handicraft and Learning Package Scheme", which aim to cultivate children's reading interest and promote reading culture.

The above shows that schools have effectively sustained students' learning motivation and progress through a variety of methods, and this fully illustrates that learning is not confined to the classroom. Learning is not only a teaching and studying process to catch up with the subject knowledge, but also a way to cultivate students' self-directed learning skills and attitudes, so that during the epidemic, they can stay positive and optimistic and care for people around them. We notice that different organisations have conducted various surveys on the learning arrangements during the school suspension period. Since the objectives, targets, methods and timing of the surveys are different, when interpreting the survey results, we should understand the relevant background and factors in detail to analyse whether the results are representative and could reflect the actual situation, rather than taking them out of context.

We are of the view that there is no need to extend the school year or shorten the school holidays at the current stage.

(2) Under the epidemic, students lack regular social activities, and their emotions are easily affected. In response, schools have strengthened professional support, maintained communication with parents and students, and cared for and taken care of students' learning, social and emotional needs.

Since the 2018/19 school year, the EDB has started to enhance student guidance service in primary schools. The EDB has provided a new funding mode, implementing the policy of "one school social worker for each school" in all public sector and Direct Subsidy Scheme primary schools. Schools may, having regard to their own circumstances, employ at least one school-based registered graduate social worker with professional qualifications to further enhance the overall quality of guidance services. In the 2020/21 school year,

over 80 per cent of public sector primary schools were served by at least one school-based registered graduate social worker, with around 480 registered graduate social workers being employed by the schools. As for secondary schools, the Social Welfare Department has implemented the measure of "two school social workers for each school" in more than 460 secondary schools in Hong Kong since the 2019/20 school year, with the addition of about 370 school social workers. The number of school social workers for each secondary school is increased from 1.2 to 2 and there is an increase of about 46 posts of Social Work Officer concomitantly to enhance supervisory support for handling complicated cases.

Professionals of different disciplines in a school (including guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists) will provide students with appropriate support. Through the whole-school discipline and guidance approach, related professionals collaborate with teachers to provide remedial, preventive and developmental counselling programs for students as necessary. During the period of suspension of face-to-face classes, the EDB has recommended and encouraged schools to keep in contact with and express concern to students through telephone or electronic communication as well as to understand whether students are affected through close observation of students' performance and enhanced communication with parents. If students have encountered emotional difficulties, teachers can refer them to professionals to help solve the academic, social and/or emotional developmental problems, including pressure faced under the epidemic.

The EDB has also reminded teachers/guidance personnel/school social workers to continue to pay attention to those in need (i.e. cases of prolonged absence from school, families lacking support and suspected child maltreatment or child being reported maltreated, etc.) and follow the prevailing procedures in handling at-risk cases in light of the principle of child protection.

To help teachers and parents understand how to handle negative emotions of students and assist them to maintain mental well-being, the EDB has produced a series of short psychoeducational videos for teachers and parents, namely "Suspending Classes without Suspending Love in the Epidemic". The EDB has also issued an information note on "Providing Emotional Support for Students in the New School Year" and information on mental health, facilitating teachers to help students maintain regular living habits and engage in school life again under the epidemic. Besides, the EDB has also organised workshops with a view to enhancing the capabilities of teachers and school personnel in supporting students to mitigate their negative emotions and stress.

(3) As an established measure to optimise learning and teaching, the current policy of implementing small class teaching (SCT) progressively in public sector primary schools will not be changed due to the epidemic. At present, around 80 per cent of public sector primary schools have implemented SCT. As the overall demand for Primary One school places has gradually declined to a steady level from its peak, both the EDB and the school sector believe that

this has created a favourable condition for more schools to implement SCT for better learning and teaching. After careful examination and communication with the school sector last year, the EDB has decided to arrange for suitable primary schools to implement SCT in phases starting from the 2021/22 school year. In the first phase, an additional 11 public sector primary schools will start implementing SCT concurrently. The EDB will continue to regularly review the situation of supply and demand of school places in each district and closely liaise with relevant schools and school sponsoring bodies for the orderly implementation of SCT. In tandem, the EDB will organise relevant professional development and support programmes for teachers on an ongoing basis to maximise the effectiveness of SCT and hence the number of students that can benefit from SCT.