

LCQ7: Prevention of youth suicides

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (January 9):

Question:

Earlier on, the Task Force on Prevention of Youth Suicides submitted a report (the Report) to the Chief Executive. The Report proposes 13 recommendations on enhancing the Government's strategies and services. The Report points out that "[e]xcessive homework and assessment ... have been seen as sources of pressure for students", and it therefore recommends that schools should make efforts to improve the quality of homework and enhance assessment literacy. On the other hand, the Education Bureau (EDB) issued to schools in 2000, and thereafter updated from time to time, guidelines on homework and tests. Nevertheless, some parents have relayed to me recently that the problem of excessive homework and assessment remains serious. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) (i) of the new measures put in place by the EDB to ensure that the recommendations made in the Report will be implemented, and (ii) whether the EDB will consider afresh introducing measures to make it mandatory for schools to reduce homework and the number of examinations; if the EDB will, of the details; if not, the reason for that;

(2) when the recommendation made in the Report that one school social worker be provided for each primary school will be fully implemented; and

(3) given that the authorities launched the Joyful@School Campaign in the 2016-2017 school year to assist schools in promoting mental health and reducing the stigma attached by students to the help-seeking behaviour, of (i) the respective numbers of applications for grants under the Campaign received and approved, and (ii) the total amount of grants approved, by the authorities so far; the details and effectiveness of the activities funded?

Reply:

President,

The Government attaches great importance to the developmental needs and mental health of young people, and has been providing support to young people with mental health needs (including those with suicidal risk) through cross-sector and multi-disciplinary collaboration among different bureaux and departments. The Education Bureau (EDB) has been encouraging schools to adopt the Whole School Approach, synchronising the school policies, culture and practices with involvement of all stakeholders (including school personnel, parents and students) to promote mental health and to identify as well as support students with mental health needs. School professionals, including guidance teachers, school social workers and educational psychologists,

provide support and counselling services for students with learning and adjustment difficulties (including those with mental health needs). The EDB has also been actively promoting diversified development programmes, continuously enhancing the school curriculum and promoting life education so as to facilitate students' learning and development.

In the earlier report submitted to the Chief Executive by the Task Force on Prevention of Youth Suicides, a number of recommendations were provided. Although the report pointed out that excessive homework and assessment had been seen as part of the sources of pressure on students, it also clearly stated: "If used appropriately, these are in fact useful and indispensable tools in school education. The EDB has called on schools to design homework that are stimulating can help students to consolidate and apply what they have learnt at school rather than giving out homework that has the effect of mechanical drilling only." This shows that we are concerned about pressure exerted on students, yet we should not focus excessively on the homework load, frequency of tests and examinations and assessment results, thereby neglecting the importance of quality homework and assessment in enhancing student learning. Thus, the focus of the report is on improving the quality of homework and enhancing assessment literacy of teachers.

Regarding the questions raised by the Hon Chan Han-pan, my reply is as follows:

(1) The purposes of homework are to enable students to consolidate their learning in class, stimulate thinking, enhance their understanding of lesson topics and construct knowledge. The amount of homework given should definitely not be excessive, nor should it be meaningless and mechanical copying/drilling. The EDB always emphasises that it is the quality rather than the quantity of homework that matters. We do not agree to simply equate homework with study pressure and thereby negate the positive educational functions of quality homework. This may mislead the public and students that affect the overall educational outcome in the long run. In fact, the education sector generally agrees that homework has positive educational functions in the learning and teaching process, and is conducive to revision and consolidation of learning.

Regarding assessment, it facilitates students' learning by collecting evidence of their learning process and outcomes as reference for reviewing the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and students' learning so as to help refine the curriculum and teaching strategy. Assessments are not equivalent to examinations; they can be short tests, project work or daily coursework that assess students' performance continuously. Schools should formulate appropriate assessment policies in the light of their contexts and students' needs. Besides, schools should explain to parents these arrangements in a timely manner.

To enhance the assessment literacy of school leaders and teachers so that they can design quality assessment tasks, make good use of assessment data and communicate with parents appropriately, we will continue to provide them with effective supports, for example, organising professional training

programmes for teachers and recommending good practices employed by schools; conducting school visits and inspections, etc. to gain an understanding of the school implementation of relevant policies and give feedback to schools; and reviewing and updating relevant circulars and curriculum documents in a timely manner. Besides, we will continue to maintain liaison with school sponsoring bodies and school councils on homework and assessment matters.

We are of the view that it is not appropriate to set any rigid indicators/guidelines on homework load and frequency of tests and examinations for schools on an across-the-board basis. Instead, schools and teachers should be allowed to assign homework and formulate school-based assessment policies professionally based on their school contexts and students' learning needs. As for individual students with learning difficulties, their schools/teachers should communicate with the parents, and adapt homework and assessment arrangements.

(2) Starting from the 2018/19 school year, the policy of "one school social worker for each school" has been implemented in public sector primary schools. The new measure is implemented on the basis of the Comprehensive Student Guidance Service under which more resources are provided for schools. The objective of the new measure is to further enhance the overall quality of guidance services by ensuring that every public sector primary school is served by at least one school-based registered graduate social worker with professional qualifications.

For schools currently not employing student guidance teachers, the EDB has provided a three-year transitional period for them to switch to the new funding mode under the policy of "one school social worker for each school" before the 2021/22 school year. In the 2018/19 school year, about half of the public sector primary schools have opted to change to the new funding mode and currently over 80 per cent of public sector primary schools employ registered social workers. In case schools need more time to handle personnel matters in respect of their serving student guidance personnel and cannot switch to the new funding mode after the three-year transitional period, they may discuss with the EDB separately.

The EDB will continue to review the mode of collaboration between student guidance and social work services, and explore together with the sector various feasible proposals, so as to enable schools to adopt the best way to provide social work and guidance services for students.

(3) The EDB and Department of Health has jointly launched the Joyful@School Campaign to promote students' engagement in promoting mental well-being, cultivate positive culture and attitudes towards acceptance of help-seeking, raise students' knowledge and understanding of mental health through the three key elements of "Sharing", "Positive Thinking" and "Enjoyment of Life", so as to strengthen their ability to cope with challenging situations. One of the initiatives facilitating the implementation of the Joyful@School Campaign is the provision of additional resources by the Quality Education Fund (QEF) for proposals from schools, non-governmental organisations and tertiary education institutions through simplified procedures for mini-scale

applications for organising activities related to the Joyful@School Campaign, including a series of activities to enhance students' awareness and understanding of mental health as well as strengthening their ability to cope with adversity. The proposals would also provide teacher development programmes to empower teachers with the related skills for identifying and supporting students with lower level of resilience. From September 2016 to November 2018, the QEF received more than 900 related applications among which about 740 applications were approved with a total amount of funding of over \$140 million. Schools use different methods, including pre- and post-tests, focus group interviews and questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of the projects. The EDB also arranges visits to schools, observation of activities, and interviews with students, and conducts seminars for schools to share good practices, etc. to examine the progress of the projects. Overall speaking, schools find that the importance of mental health is promoted and students', as well as teachers', understanding of mental health is also enhanced through the project activities.