

LCQ8: Carers of children with special educational needs

Following is a question by the Hon Stanley Li and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

It has been reported that the findings of a survey published by a concern group indicate that more than half of the carers of children with special educational needs (SEN) interviewed provide "full-time and unpaid care", and among them, nearly 65 per cent wish to take up employment. In addition, there are views that the Government's current support for carers of SEN children is inadequate (e.g. child care services). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of carers of SEN children in the past three years;
- (2) of the respective numbers of applications received and approved by the authorities so far this year for the Training Subsidy Programme for Children on the Waiting List of Subvented Pre-school Rehabilitation Services;
- (3) in view of the aforesaid situation where over half of the carers of SEN children interviewed provide full-time and unpaid care, whether the Government will consider lowering the threshold for them to apply for government subsidies and increasing the amount of subsidies, as well as specifically improving the policy of providing financial assistance to carers of SEN children in order to alleviate their livelihood pressure; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (4) regarding the problem of the inadequate support for carers of SEN children in relation to child care services, whether the Government will consider increasing the provision of child care services, including the establishment of service stations and an increase in the manpower of relevant professionals; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (5) as there are views pointing out that carers of SEN children have difficulties in finding suitable interest classes for their children, whether the Government will introduce incentive measures to encourage social welfare organizations to offer more related interest classes for SEN children, as well as provide corresponding guidance and formulate specifications; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (6) given that nearly 65 per cent of the carers of SEN children interviewed wish to take up employment, whether the Government will consider setting up an effective employment information platform and providing targeted

vocational training to help them successfully find a job; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In response to the Hon Stanley Li's question, having consulted the Education Bureau (EDB), our consolidated reply is as follows:

(1), (3), (4) and (6) In the 2023/24 school year, there were approximately 64 200 students with special educational needs (SEN) attending public sector ordinary secondary and primary schools, and approximately 8 700 students attending aided special schools. In addition, as at end-March 2024, there were around 18 700 pre-school children receiving pre-school rehabilitation services provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD). While the Government does not have the statistics on the number of carers of students with SEN, it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of carers of these students having regard to the aforementioned student numbers.

On child care services, carers of students with SEN would have a few hours to attend to other matters, including part-time or full-time employment, when the students are attending school. To support parents with further need for child care (including carers of students with SEN), the SWD provides subvention to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for the provision of different types of day child care services, including Child Care Centre Services, After School Care Programme for Pre-primary Children, After School Care Programme for Primary School Students and Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project. In addition, the Government launched the School-based After School Care Service Scheme to provide focused support for primary students (including students with SEN) from single-parent families to stay at school after school hours for care and learning support, allowing their parents to take up jobs. Over 110 primary schools across the territory have participated in the scheme in the 2024/25 school year and, subject to actual utilisation and outcome of the scheme, the quota for participating primary schools may be removed in the 2025/26 school year. Furthermore, there are 47 Special Child Care Centres (SCCCs) and Early Education and Training Centres (EETCs) in the territory providing Occasional Child Care Service for pre-school children with special needs aged between 2 and 6.

On employment support, the Labour Department (LD) provides diversified employment services, and disseminates job vacancy information through various channels, including the Interactive Employment Service (iES) website (www.jobs.gov.hk) and its mobile application. To further encourage older and middle-aged persons (including carers of children with SEN) to join the employment market, the LD launched the three-year Re-employment Allowance Pilot Scheme (REA Scheme) in July 2024. Each eligible participant who has worked for 12 consecutive months will receive a maximum re-employment allowance of \$20,000. The REA Scheme also covers part-time jobs and qualified "casual work" to cater for the needs and circumstances of participants.

The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) implements the Modular Certificates Accumulation Scheme to encourage individuals who cannot take training courses of the ERB in full-time mode (including carers of children with SEN) to make flexible study arrangement and acquire recognised qualifications, with a view to assisting them in joining or re-joining the labour market. Besides, under the "Hire and Train" Scheme, participating employers will provide suitable job vacancies for trainees, adjust the working hours and leave arrangements to cater for trainees' family and personal situations, and provide on-the-job training and other related support measures so as to encourage the potential workforce to enter the labour market.

To strengthen support for low-income carers, the SWD regularised the Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities (the Allowance Scheme) in October 2023 to provide carers of persons with disabilities from low-income families with allowances to supplement their living expenses. Carers of persons with disabilities who are on the waiting lists for any specified rehabilitation services subvented by the SWD (including SCCCs), special schools with boarding placement under the EDB or infirmary service of the Hospital Authority are eligible for the Allowance Scheme. A monthly allowance of \$3,000 is provided for an eligible carer taking care of one person with disabilities, and a maximum monthly allowance of \$6,000 is provided for a carer taking care of more than one person with disabilities simultaneously. To ensure prudent use of public money, there is a means test under the Allowance Scheme. The household income of beneficiaries shall not exceed 75 per cent of the Median Monthly Domestic Household Income by household size in Hong Kong. Assets are not included in the calculation. The SWD will review the implementation of the Allowance Scheme as appropriate.

(2) On pre-school rehabilitation services, the SWD subvents NGOs to provide services for children with special needs. Services include On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services (OPRS), SCCCs, EETCs and the Integrated Programme in Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centre. Among others, OPRS provides comprehensive and timely assistance to pre-school children with different levels of special needs through inter-disciplinary service teams under a school-based and integrated approach for children. Starting from 2024-25, OPRS has achieved "zero waiting time", providing over 10 000 service places as of today, covering nearly 900 kindergartens/kindergarten-cum-child care centres (i.e. around 90 per cent of total) across the territory.

Moreover, the SWD provides training subsidy for children on the waiting list of subvented pre-school rehabilitation services, including a Higher Level Subsidy (non-means-tested with maximum subsidy level of \$6,904 per month) for children waitlisting for SCCCs and a Normal Level Subsidy (means-tested with maximum subsidy level of \$3,549 per month) for children waitlisting for other pre-school rehabilitation services, so as to enable eligible children with special needs to receive training by recognised service providers as early as possible. From January to September 2024, the SWD received a total of 1 696 applications, of which 1 186 applications were approved and 369 applications were withdrawn as places had been allocated.

(5) To strengthen support for the parents and relatives/carers of persons with disabilities (including carers of children with special needs), the SWD has established 19 Parents/Relatives Resource Centres (PRCs) across the territory to provide emotional support and professional advice for them to learn how to take care of persons with disabilities in their families, as well as to facilitate them to exchange experiences and support one another. PRCs also organise various types of activities, including interest classes and parent-child activities, therapeutic groups, community education programmes, care skills workshops, social and recreational activities. In addition, other subvented welfare service units such as Integrated Family Service Centres and Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres also organise similar activities for meeting the needs of service users.

In addition, the EDB provides different kinds of recurrent subsidies and resources for public sector schools (including special schools) to provide appropriate after-school learning activities in a school-based approach, with a view to facilitating whole-person and all-round development of students (including students with SEN). For example, to support needy students to participate in after-school learning activities, the EDB has since the 2005/06 school year implemented the School-based After-school Learning and Support Programmes to provide public sector schools (including special schools) and schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme as well as NGOs with the School-based Grant and Community-based Project Grant respectively to organise school-based and district-based after-school learning activities for needy students. Eligible students with SEN can also benefit from these grants.