

SED opening remarks at press conference

The Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, and the Secretary General of the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), Dr So Kwok-sang, today (February 25) held a press conference on matters related to class suspension and arrangements for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination. Following is the English translation of the opening remarks by Mr Yeung at the press conference:

Good afternoon. At our last press conference, we announced the extension of class suspension and would continue to assess the situation. As the novel coronavirus epidemic shows no obvious signs of abatement, the Education Bureau (EDB) decided today that classes of all schools will continue to be suspended until end of the schools' Easter holidays, i.e. classes will be resumed on April 20 the earliest. The exact date of class resumption is subject to further assessment.

The EDB will continue to take into account the professional advice from health experts, readiness of schools as well as the supply of epidemic preventive materials in the community in deciding on the exact date of class resumption. We tend to resume classes in phases and will draw up relevant arrangements and inform schools as soon as possible to allow stakeholders to prepare early.

I understand that students are eager to go back to school to have lessons with their classmates. Some parents may also worry that their children's studies will be affected and wish to resume classes as soon as possible. Therefore, extending class suspension is a difficult decision. However, as the World Health Organization and virus experts all expect the epidemic to last for some time, extending class suspension is currently the most appropriate decision to safeguard students' health. I call for understanding from all of you.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all school principals and teachers for making use of different modes, including e-learning, to help students continue their studies at home during the class suspension period so as to achieve the goal of "suspending classes without suspending learning". Meanwhile, I would also like to sincerely thank different sectors of the community including universities, information and technology companies and other organisations for their support in allowing the school sector to use their online learning platforms for free during the class suspension period. The EDB has also provided a wide variety of e-learning resources and has supported teachers in need through hotlines, mobile communication applications and online seminars, etc. I hope schools and parents will communicate more to cater for the diverse learning needs of students, without exerting undue pressure on students and parents.

We learnt from the school sector that in general schools have

implemented "suspending classes without suspending learning" in an orderly manner through different plans. We understand that learning at home cannot fully replace classroom learning and we believe that after class resumption, schools will suitably adjust their teaching arrangements, including re-arranging school activities and make-up classes, to keep up the learning progress of their students. Therefore, we believe that schools in principle do not need to change their original summer holiday arrangements. Nevertheless, if individual schools consider it necessary, they can arrange make-up lessons for individual grades of students in accordance with their school-based situation and needs of parents and students. In fact, this is in line with the usual practice of some schools in arranging make-up classes during the summer holidays.

Meanwhile, after listening to the views of the school sector, the EDB has decided to suspend the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) (including all oral and written assessments) for the current school year. As the setting of all TSA questions has basically been completed, the EDB will discuss with the school sector on how to make use of the assessment materials to allow schools and the EDB to better understand how the relatively longer period of class suspension due to the epidemic and various arrangements on "suspending classes without suspending learning" have affected and helped students in attaining basic competencies in the current school year.

Next, I would like to talk about the latest arrangements for the Student Grant for the current school year. The grant for each student in this school year will be increased by \$1,000, i.e. total amount to reach \$3,500, following the passage of the funding application for the \$30 billion Anti-epidemic Fund by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council last Friday. No extra applications by parents are necessary. We will start disbursing the grant within a week after the establishment of the fund. If individual parents have not yet received the application forms through schools, I urge them to check with the school or download the form from the EDB website as soon as possible. Parents should also return the completed forms to schools as soon as possible.

I would also like to take this opportunity to talk about arrangements for the HKDSE Examination. As the seating arrangement of a public examination centre is different from that of a normal school classroom, the number of people involved is much smaller and that candidates in general will not have social contacts with one another. Therefore, there are different considerations for holding an examination and suspending classes.

The HKDSE Examination is an important articulation ladder for further studies and career development for all candidates. Therefore, the EDB and the HKEAA have been maintaining close communication with the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) and the education sector to follow up on the latest development of the epidemic and step up the necessary preparatory work including the formulation of preventive measures and procurement of epidemic preventive materials. According to the assessment of experts, we believe that as long as we all (including candidates and invigilators) make good preparation and take proper precautionary measures, this year's HKDSE Examination should be able to commence on March 27 under

safe conditions.

In brief, written examinations of HKDSE subjects and the English Language speaking examinations will commence on March 27 as scheduled, while the practical examinations of Physical Education and Music will be postponed to May and the speaking examinations of Chinese Language will also be postponed to May 18-26. The release of examination results is expected to be deferred by about a week to July 15, which we believe will not seriously affect the application schedule of candidates for admission to local and overseas universities.

The health and safety of candidates and examination personnel will always be our prime concern. Having considered the advice of the CHP, we will step up precautionary measures for the HKDSE Examination, including enhancing the cleanliness of examination centres, requiring candidates to check their body temperature every day and only allowing them to take part in the examination if they have no fever or symptoms of acute respiratory infections, and increasing the distance between candidates' seats as far as possible to enhance safety in accordance with the advice of health experts. Since schools will suspend classes until April 19 at least, the EDB will advise schools to make best use of the vacant classrooms to add distance between candidates' seats so as to further reduce the risk. We also call upon schools to encourage teachers to share the increasing workload of invigilation.

In addition, candidates must wear face masks during the examination to protect themselves and the others. In principle, candidates have to bring their own face masks. However, the Government understands that the supply of face masks is relatively tense. Hence, each candidate will be provided with a face mask on each examination day so that they do not have to worry about a shortage of face masks. School candidates will collect face masks on the same day when they collect their admission forms from their schools. For example, a candidate will be provided with 10 face masks for 10 days of examinations (including the two speaking examinations), eight face masks for eight days and so on. Private candidates can also collect their required quantities of face masks from the HKEAA from March 16 to 26 after receiving their admission forms by post.

The DH has issued quarantine orders to all people entering Hong Kong from the Mainland, including Hong Kong residents and Mainland residents. They are required to stay at home or other accommodation for a 14-day compulsory quarantine. Since some HKDSE candidates reside in the Mainland, they are also required to comply with the quarantine orders to arrive in Hong Kong and be quarantined for 14 days before taking the examination so as to meet the requirement of epidemic prevention and safeguard the public health of Hong Kong.

If any school candidates cannot attend the examination because of health reasons or not being able to return to Hong Kong to undergo the 14-day compulsory quarantine, they can submit an application to the HKEAA through their schools for assessment of results. The HKEAA will assess the candidate's results in accordance with the existing mechanism. As regards the

maximum level to be reached after assessment, there will be a special arrangement in view of the special circumstances this year. After assessment, the maximum level which an absent candidate can attain will be changed from Level 4 previously to Level 5. This one-off arrangement will also apply to other school candidates who are absent from the examination with reasons accepted by the HKEAA. But the arrangement will only be adopted this year and will not be applicable to the examinations in future.

During the SARS in 2003, the HKEAA completed the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination under strengthened preventive measures. We call for the concerted efforts of everyone to ensure the smooth operation of the HKDSE Examination this year under strengthened health protection measures. However, the epidemic situation is unpredictable. We will continue to closely monitor the latest situation and make an announcement as soon as possible if there are any unpredictable circumstances that will affect the examinations.

I believe the epidemic has upset the daily life of every citizen. In these difficult times, we all need to work together to fight against the epidemic. I thank again our education sector representatives for their hard work, and parents for their understanding, and I hope candidates will make the most of this examination, which is not easy to arrange, and give a good account of themselves.

I now invite the Secretary General of the HKEAA, Dr So Kwok-sang, to further explain the precautionary measures and detailed arrangements for the HKDSE Examination.