

SED's opening remarks at media session (English translation) (with video)

Following is the English translation of the opening remarks by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, at a media session at the Central Government Offices today (August 31):

Good afternoon. Tomorrow is the class commencement day for primary and secondary schools. In early August, the Education Bureau (EDB), in view of the situation of COVID-19 at that time, announced that all schools in Hong Kong should suspend all face-to-face teaching activities upon the commencement of the new school year, but should help students study from home through various modes of learning until further notice. Today, I would like to announce the arrangements for resumption of face-to-face teaching activities.

The EDB has been monitoring the development of the epidemic, seeking health experts' advice, and maintaining close liaison with the school sector. The epidemic has recently shown signs of subsiding, and now we have the basis to allow schools time to prepare for the resumption of face-to-face classes in the second half of September.

Taking into account the experience gained in the phased resumption of classes in May and June, and balancing the learning needs of students and risks in health protection, we have decided to resume face-to-face classes in two phases. The first phase starts on September 23 (Wednesday) – Secondary One, Five and Six and Primary One, Five and Six as well as Kindergarten Three can resume face-to-face classes. The second phase starts on September 29 (Tuesday) – the remaining classes, namely Secondary Two to Four and Primary Two to Four as well as Kindergarten One and Two, can also resume face-to-face classes.

We have taken into account a variety of factors in making the above arrangements. The senior classes' students have better self-care capabilities and have to prepare for public examinations. On the other hand, some stakeholders are of the view that Primary One and Secondary One students, as newcomers, are not familiar with their new school campuses and will need more time to get used to the new learning routines. Thus these students are included in the first phase of face-to-face class resumption. As for kindergarten students, we are more concerned about their self-care capabilities. Kindergarten Three students are better in this regard, and are put in the first phase.

For international and special schools, they will broadly follow the aforementioned timetable to resume face-to-face classes in phases. As the curricula and class structures of these schools are different from those of mainstream schools, they will put in place the actual arrangements in accordance with their respective school circumstances.

Face-to-face classes will be held on a half-day basis for the time being. This is to avoid students having to take off their face masks over lunch so as to minimise infection risk. Schools should not arrange whole-school learning or other activities in the other half of the day. This is to avoid the gathering of a large number of students on campus for the whole day.

The EDB has been communicating with the school sector, and a number of schools have told us that although they have flexibly arranged for students to study at home, some activities, such as orientation, counselling and campus familiarisation classes, are better conducted face to face, and are difficult to be run online. On top of that, after months of class suspension and early commencement of the summer vacation, some classes that have to prepare for public examinations have urgency to return to school campuses to take make-up classes to catch up on progress. In view of this, we recommend that before the first phase of resumption of face-to-face classes (on September 23), schools can, taking into account their school circumstances, consider allowing a small number of students to return to campuses for learning activities for not longer than half a day. The upper limit for each school will be one-sixth of its student population.

I wish to remind everyone that although the epidemic has shown signs of subsiding and activities in the community are gradually resuming, we should not lower our guard. Schools must continue to observe all health precautionary measures. School staff and students have to wear face masks, maintain social distance at all times, ensure good indoor ventilation, avoid gathering of crowds, wash hands frequently and measure body temperature regularly, etc, to ensure that students can study in a safe school environment. The EDB is refining the health protection guidelines used during class resumption before, and will in particular enhance the part concerning what to do when there are cases confirmed on campus and when students and school staff are confirmed with infection or become close contacts. We will issue the updated guidelines to schools shortly to allow time for schools, students and parents to make preparations in advance. I trust that having been through the earlier class resumption, all concerned will stock up on health protection gear, including face masks, hand sanitisers and thermometers. The EDB will provide face masks, including children's masks, to students with financial needs through schools for students' use.

As regards class resumption for cross-boundary students, it involves a number of aspects, including the health protection and anti-epidemic policies between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, immigration control and transportation arrangements. The EDB is actively discussing with other departments and the relevant parties in the Mainland, and will co-ordinate as far as practicable. We will first make arrangements for Secondary Four to Secondary Six students. Before the return of cross-boundary students to Hong Kong, schools will continue to help students study at home through suitable modes of teaching. The EDB will make an announcement when new arrangements are available.

The Universal Community Testing Programme will commence tomorrow

(September 1). I take this opportunity to encourage school staff, students and parents to participate in the testing to protect the health of all school staff and students, and to create more favourable conditions for the upcoming resumption of face-to-face classes.

Finally, I wish to thank school staff, parents and students again for their co-operation and support in adapting the learning and teaching adjustments in the past few months. The epidemic situation may fluctuate in the future. Even though schools can resume face-to-face classes in the second half of September as scheduled and resume normal operation gradually, they may still have to switch to half-day schooling or online learning from time to time in accordance with the epidemic situation. I call on all schools to get prepared for this new normal, remain agile and flexibly deploy suitable modes of teaching. I also appeal to parents and students for understanding and support. School commencement is around the corner. I wish all principals, teachers and parents good health, and all students a healthy and happy school year. Thank you.