

LCQ9: Student Activities Support Fund

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (May 8):

The Government established in early 2019 a \$2.5 billion Student Activities Support Fund (the Fund) to support primary and secondary students with financial needs to participate in school-organised or recognised out-of-classroom life-wide learning activities, so as to foster their whole-person development. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the annual and cumulative (i) amounts of revenue and expenditure of and (ii) numbers of school and student beneficiaries as well as activities organised (together with the types and natures of the activities) under the Fund since its establishment;

(2) whether there are schools which have never or scarcely applied for subsidy under the Fund; if so, whether the authorities know the reasons for that, and whether assistance has been provided to such schools to ensure that all students with financial needs are given the opportunity to participate in life-wide learning activities;

(3) as it is reported that situations such as low birth rate, decline in the number of school-age children and the addiction of many students to online activities arise in Hong Kong, whether the authorities will encourage schools to make use of the subsidy granted under the Fund to organise more life-wide learning activities conducted in groups and physical settings;

(4) whether the authorities have received complaints on or identified problems in the operation of the Fund since its establishment; if so, of the follow-up actions; and

(5) whether the authorities have assessed if the operation of the Fund since its establishment can achieve its intended objectives; whether a comprehensive review of the overall operation of the Fund will be conducted in the light of the experience gained in the operation of the Fund, feedback of stakeholders, development of society, changes in students' needs, etc.?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) has been providing resources for schools to organise a wide range of learning activities and schools may deploy such resources flexibly to support student learning and offer after-school student activities to foster students' whole-person development. Starting from the 2019/20 school year, the EDB has been providing a recurrent Life-wide

Learning Grant (LWL Grant) with an annual provision of about \$900 million to support public sector and Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools in taking forward life-wide learning based on the present foundation. The LWL Grant aims to help students develop lifelong learning capabilities and foster their whole-person development through the knowledge, skills and positive values and attitudes acquired in experiential learning. At the same time, the Government set up the Student Activities Support Fund (SAS Fund) in 2018-19 with an allocation of \$2.5 billion, and the investment return of the SAS Fund has been used to provide the Student Activities Support Grant (SAS Grant) for public sector and DSS schools to support students with financial needs to participate in out-of-classroom life-wide learning activities organised or recognised by schools. While the SAS Grant is supplementary in nature, schools should make good use of the LWL Grant and the SAS Grant, having regard to their own development contexts and students' needs.

Our consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Tony Tse is as follows:

(1) and (2) The SAS Grant has been available for schools' application since the 2019/20 school year. The amount to be disbursed to a school is calculated based on the number of students of the school in receipt of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) or the full-grant under the School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS full-grant) in that school year (based on the number in December of the school year). The rate for each primary student is \$350 and that for each secondary student is \$650. Noting that some families may be in need of support but are not in receipt of the CSSA or STAS full-grant for various reasons, so besides providing support for students receiving the CSSA or STAS full-grant, schools are given the flexibility to, at their discretion, deploy up to 25 per cent of the total provision of the SAS Grant for the school year to support students who are identified as needy according to the school-based criteria (e.g. students receiving the STAS half-grant) to participate in out-of-classroom experiential learning activities. Since the 2019/20 school year, nearly 95 per cent of schools have applied for the SAS Grant. For the schools which have not submitted any application, the main reason is that their numbers of students with financial needs are relatively small and they have flexibly deployed the LWL Grant and other resources to support student learning.

From the 2019/20 to 2023/24 school years, the incomes and expenditures of the SAS Fund, the numbers of beneficiary schools and the numbers of students are set out in the table below:

School year	Income (\$ million)	Expenditure (\$ million)	Number of beneficiary schools	Number of students
2019/20	86	37#	942	160 930
2020/21	111	32#	935#	165 090
2021/22	136	45#	928#	161 540

2022/23 (Provisional figures)	116	46#	929#	151 720
2023/24 (Estimate)	102	72	932	140 570

* The numbers of students are rounded to the nearest ten. The figures show the numbers of students in receipt of either the CSSA or STAS full-grant in the beneficiary primary and secondary schools, which are used for calculating the provision of the SAS Grant.

Due to the epidemic, life-wide learning activities were generally reduced during the suspension of face-to-face classes. Consequently, the usage rates of the SAS Grant were lower than expected and the numbers of school applications were also slightly affected.

(3) to (5) Schools are required to formulate school-based criteria according to the learning needs of their students. They have to ensure that the SAS Grant is deployed in a fair and impartial manner to support students with financial needs to participate in out-of-classroom learning activities, including visits, training, competitions, exploration and exchange activities, and procurement of necessary materials, uniforms or equipment for participation in life-wide learning activities, with a view to enriching intellectual development, values education, community service, physical and aesthetic development, and career-related experiences for students. The EDB has uploaded relevant guidelines, together with examples of life-wide learning activities of different areas and themes, to its website (www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/curriculum-area/life-wide-learning/index.html) for the reference of schools.

Under the principle of school-based management, schools should evaluate the utilisation of the SAS Grant (including the number, area and expenditure of the activities) on a regular basis, and include the report on the use of the SAS Grant in the School Report of the respective school year for endorsement by the School Management Committee/Incorporated Management Committee before uploading such report to the school website. The EDB does not keep statistics on the total number, type or nature of activities related to the SAS Grant.

The EDB learns about schools' utilisation of the SAS Grant through daily contacts (including school visits) and provides professional advice in a timely manner. The EDB will continue to seek the views of the school sector and review schools' utilisation of grants in supporting students with financial needs to participate in life-wide learning activities, so as to ensure that schools have sufficient resources and that resources are used properly to enable all students to gain life-wide learning experiences. The SAS Fund has been operating smoothly since its launch in 2019, and is able to meet the expenditure of the SAS Grant with its investment return. So far, the EDB has not received any complaints. On the whole, schools have flexibly deployed the SAS Grant, the LWL Grant and other resources to support all students, regardless of their socio-economic status, to participate in diversified life-wide learning activities, including those in group and face-

to-face mode.

LCQ22: Non-plastic disposable tableware

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Siu-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (May 8):

Question:

It has been reported that the findings of a multinational survey on the presence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in food packaging materials published by a global environmental group at the end of last year indicated that of the 119 samples tested, 64 were found to contain these substances. The food packaging materials concerned include plant fibre food containers, cardboard boxes for greasy food and grease-resistant paper bags, etc. These substances are difficult to excrete, and their accumulation in the human body may even lead to health problems such as liver damage, infertility and cancer. Regarding non-plastic disposable tableware, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that at present, tableware suppliers wishing to enrol their non-plastic disposable tableware on the Green Tableware Platform under the Environmental Protection Department are only required to demonstrate the compliance of the tableware with the relevant non-plastic requirements when submitting their applications, whether the authorities will, in the light of the aforesaid survey findings, consider requiring suppliers to also provide the relevant safety test reports in respect of their non-plastic disposable tableware when submitting applications via the Green Tableware Platform; if not, whether the authorities will take the initiative to test the safety of such tableware;

(2) as the Government indicated in its paper submitted to the Panel on Environmental Affairs of this Council in February this year that it will continue to, through different channels (such as supporting community programmes that offer reusable meal box lending services), promote various "plastic-free" campaigns which aim at reducing the use of disposable plastic tableware and encouraging the use of reusable ones, of the details of the relevant support programmes; whether the Government has plans to develop centralised meal box lending services in the future; and

(3) as it has been reported that some restaurants consider biodegradable disposable plastic tableware more environmentally-friendly and choose to use it as an alternative for disposable plastic tableware, but biodegradable

disposable plastic tableware requires a specific environment to degrade and cannot be recycled and processed with other plastics, and the catering industry can still provide biodegradable disposable plastic cups and plastic food containers to takeaway customers during the first phase of implementation of the relevant legislation on regulating disposable plastic tableware, whether the authorities have studied how to reduce the amount of biodegradable disposable plastic tableware being sent to landfills before the second phase of implementation of the relevant legislation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

To minimise micro-plastic pollution brought about by the difficulty of decomposing plastics in the natural environment, as well as its threat and harm posed to ecological environment and human health, "plastic reduction" and "plastic-free" have become an international consensus in recent years. Different places around the world have implemented measures to regulate disposable plastic products one after another. In Hong Kong, the regulation of disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products has been implemented since April 22 this year (Earth Day) to regulate disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products at source and from their supply.

The reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Siu-hung is as follows:

(1) Establishing the Green Tableware Platform (the Platform) (www.greentableware.hk) aims to provide the trade with information on alternatives that meet the requirements of the new legislation on the regulation of disposable plastic products, with a view to assisting the trade in the early adoption of more environmental-friendly non-plastic tableware. At present, the secretariat of the Platform (Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency) has not required suppliers to submit information on per- and polyfluoro alkyl substances (PFAS). We notice that there are many public concerns about the quality and safety of non-plastic tableware in the market. To provide better services to the public and the trade, the Government will consider inviting suppliers to voluntarily submit relevant certificates or documents, and listing out non-plastic tableware with these certificates or documents for reference.

As regards the health risks of PFAS, PFAS is a general term for a large group of chemically synthetic substances that are widely found in a wide range of artificial products, especially those with surface coatings, such as clothes, food packaging materials, cooking utensils and various plastic products, etc. According to information from international scientific research and regulatory organisations, although some products contain a small amount of PFAS, the risk to human health associated with exposure from these products is very low. It has been recently reported that a research team from the Universiteit Antwerpen in Belgium conducted a study on the PFAS content in straws made of different materials, and its findings showed that PFAS was detected in paper, bamboo, plastic and glass straws available in the Belgian

market, and yet there was no statistically significant difference in the total PFAS content in these paper, bamboo, plastic and glass straws. Based on the data in the report, it is projected that the public would need to consume a significant amount of all PFAS contents in straws for a continuous period (about 300 straws per person per week) to exceed the tolerable intake level of PFAS set by the European Food Safety Authority. Under normal circumstances, hence, there is no need to be worried.

(2) To motivate the public to reduce waste at source and go "plastic-free", the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has been encouraging the trade and the public to use reusable tableware through various means, including promoting rental schemes for reusable containers or cutlery, encouraging eateries to accept customers to use their own containers when ordering takeaways, cultivating the habit of bringing their own containers and cutlery, and encouraging the public to make use of the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application to collect stamps and redeem reusable tableware.

In collaboration with the Environmental Campaign Committee (ECC), the EPD has launched the "Reusable Tableware Lending Programme for Large-scale Events" since December 2018 to provide free-of-charge reusable tableware lending services for organisers of large-scale events, including delivery, collection and cleaning services of reusable tableware. The EPD and the ECC also launched a free meal container lending programme in two phases in 2021 and 2022 respectively, with the pilot scheme of the second phase covering seven local universities. By lending meal containers to the public in a convenient way, the objective of the pilot scheme is to encourage the public to build a good habit of bringing their own reusable meal containers when ordering takeaways. Meanwhile, it also serves as a demonstration for organisations such as private companies and schools.

Furthermore, the Government is supporting community waste reduction projects on the reusable tableware rentals through the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF). Starting from October 2022, the ECF has provided funding support for a green group to collaborate with a takeaway platform to launch a two-phased 22-month reusable food container rental scheme with restaurant partners in various districts on Hong Kong Island, thereby promoting the culture of reusable tableware rental in a more extensive manner. Since the commissioning of the scheme, positive responses have been received with a total reduction of more than 25 000 disposable food containers.

To further encourage the public to bring their own containers when ordering takeaways, the EPD launched the Bring Your Own Containers (BYOC) Eateries Scheme in September 2023. Eateries participating in the scheme are required to accept customers to use their own containers (i.e. food containers or beverage cups) when ordering takeaways, or provide customers with reusable container lending services. The relevant eateries will be given the BYOC Eateries stickers for easy identification by customers. Currently, over 470 eateries have joined the scheme.

The EPD also collaborated with the catering industry to organise the

third "Plastic-free Takeaway, Use Reusable Tableware" large-scale publicity and public education campaign. The campaign started from November 2023 and will be extended until October this year. Members of the public can collect stamps and redeem rewards through the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application by opting out disposable tableware or containers when ordering takeaways from more than 750 participating eateries. During May 5 to June 5 this year, a time-limited promotion has been launched on the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application under which users who have collected three stamps will be able to redeem a set of reusable tableware.

Establishment of a centralised food container lending programme would require consideration of various factors including market demand and supply, habits of the public, operational feasibility, and cost-effectiveness, etc. The Government has no plan to develop a centralised food container lending services programme at present. We will continue to promote "plastic-free" practices and environmental awareness on reuse in the community through the various channels mentioned above.

(3) The regulation of disposable plastic tableware for takeaway is closely related to people's daily lives, and the actual situation in Hong Kong is of utmost importance. Taking into account the supply, availability and affordability of alternatives to plastic cups and food containers commonly used by the public for takeaways, the first phase of the regulation only prohibits the use of expanded polystyrene cups and food containers but not other disposable plastic cups and food containers, so as to avoid causing excessive impact on their daily lives. As we are adopting a progressive regulatory approach, there are no specific requirements to reduce the use of biodegradable disposable plastic tableware at this stage. At the same time, we have been proactively encouraging the reduction of the use of disposable tableware at source through "plastic-free" measures. At present, many citizens begin to opt out disposable cutlery when ordering takeaways. By doing so, a healthy "plastic-free" culture will soon be developed.

The second phase of the regulation covers plastic cups and food containers commonly used for takeaways. We will introduce the second phase only after giving due consideration to the availability and affordability of the relevant non-plastic alternatives, as well as both the trade and the public's adaptation to the first phase regulation. There is no implementation timetable at present.

Red flag hoisted at Stanley Main Beach

Attention TV/radio announcers:

Please broadcast the following as soon as possible:

Here is an item of interest to swimmers.

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department announced today (May 8) that due to big waves, the red flag has been hoisted at Stanley Main Beach in Southern District, Hong Kong Island. Beachgoers are advised not to swim at the beach.

LCQ2: Measures to promote the development of the tourism industry

Following is a question by the Hon Shang Hailong and a written reply by the Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (May 8):

Question:

It has been reported that a large number of members of the public travelled outside Hong Kong during the recent long Easter holidays, dealing a heavy blow to various sectors in Hong Kong. Moreover, the Financial Secretary has recently pointed out in his blog that while visitor arrivals exceeded 11 million in the first quarter of this year which provided support to the retail, catering and transportation sectors, changes in the consumption patterns of inbound visitors as well as some members of the public going north more frequently for spending have presented quite a number of challenges for the operations of small and medium enterprises. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will consider organising in collaboration with trade associations of various sectors citywide consumption festivals to distribute discount coupons to members of the public meeting specified spending amount, or even directly hand out holiday consumption vouchers to encourage members of the public to stay and spend in Hong Kong;

(2) as it is learnt that members of the public and the business sector generally support raising the duty-free allowance of the Mainland visitors arriving in Hong Kong, whether the Government has put forward to the Central Government a specific timetable for such proposal; if it has not, of the reasons for that; and

(3) given that members of various sectors have suggested that the Government should spare no effort in striving for the Central Government's reinstatement of "multiple-entry" endorsements under the Individual Visit Endorsements for Shenzhen permanent residents visiting Hong Kong, extension of the period of stay for inbound visitors under the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS), as well as inclusion of more second and third tier cities of the Mainland in IVS, so as to enhance the economic benefits of the series of mega events to be organised

in Hong Kong and stimulate visitors' spending, whether the Government will consider such suggestions?

Reply:

President,

In respect of the question raised by the Hon Shang Hailong, the reply is as follows:

(1) Riding on various mega events and activities in town, the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) has been partnering with the trade to step up publicity and promotion, with a view to encouraging spending by locals and visitors and boosting consumption ambience. For instance, the HKTb extended the vibes of the "Hong Kong Wine & Dine Festival" held in October to launch the "Taste Around Town" campaign in November last year in partnership with some 400 restaurants and bars to step up promotion on the wine and dine activities and catering offerings in various districts in town. From late last year to early this year, the HKTb also distributed 200 000 "Hong Kong Night Treats for Locals" dining vouchers, valued at HK\$100 each, to locals in support of the "Night Vibes Hong Kong" campaign to enhance the appeal of local businesses and sustain business opportunities for the dining sector. In addition, riding on the Labour Day Golden Week, the HKTb launched a dedicated "one-stop webpage for Golden Week offers and activities" to promote shopping, dining, attractions and hotel offers for visitors and locals with information on traffic arrangements, opening hours of major attractions, etc, to create a vivid ambience citywide to stimulate consumption in town.

While different government departments will join hands to promote economic development, the HKTb will continue to closely communicate and collaborate with the trade. The HKTb will disseminate information on spending deals, events and offers from merchants through its one-stop e-platform with a view to attracting visitors to explore the different spending experiences in town.

(2) and (3) Expanding visitor sources to attract more high value-added overnight visitors has all along been one of the key strategies for developing Hong Kong's tourism. Hong Kong's capacity to receive tourists has been enhanced following the completion and optimisation of various large-scale cross-boundary infrastructure, tourist facilities, hotels and public transportation networks in the past few years. The Government is confident in providing more tourists from different source markets with a variety of high-quality travel experiences.

The Government has been in close liaison with the relevant Mainland authorities on the situation of Hong Kong and actively seeking policy initiatives to facilitate more high value-added Mainland visitors to experience Hong Kong's rich tourism resources in a more convenient and flexible way in a bid to promote the vibrant development of tourism-related industries.

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government expressed sincere

gratitude to the Central Government's support for expanding the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) to cover Xi'an and Qingdao, and thereby increasing the number of Mainland cities covered under IVS from 49 to 51 since March 6, 2024. In addition to leading the HKTB to visit Xi'an and Qingdao in mid-March to promote Hong Kong tourism, the HKTB has also immediately launched a series of publicity and promotional activities targeting the new visitor source markets. We will continue to work with the trade to link up and explore more high-quality travel itineraries and products and to improve service quality, with a view to providing visitors with a variety of high-quality travel experiences.

The Government will continue to maintain communication with the relevant Mainland authorities and strive for policy initiatives that are conducive to Hong Kong's tourism development, including raising tax free threshold for shopping and increasing IVS cities.

LCQ5: Compensating employees for online "invisible overtime"

Following is a question by the Hon Kingsley Wong and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (May 8):

Question:

It is learnt that online working is increasingly common as a new mode of working, and many employees have even been asked to work during non-office hours (e.g. attending meetings and replying to emails/messages) using communication tools. On the other hand, the Supreme People's Court, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions jointly published typical cases involving disputes over non-payment of wages early this year. It has been reported that the Court ruled that the online work performed by the employee concerned during non-office hours was overtime work on the grounds that the employee had "performed substantial work" and that the work in question was "obvious occupation of rest time", and exercised discretion in determining the overtime compensation for the employee's online "invisible overtime", taking into account factors such as the frequency and duration of the employee's overtime work, and the employee's wage standards and work contents. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has conducted studies on (i) the adoption of online working as a new mode of working in various local trades and industries, and (ii) the form of compensation offered by employers to employees who perform online invisible overtime work; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will consider improving the labour legislation to establish a definition for online invisible overtime and the criteria for calculating the relevant compensation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as many civil servants have relayed that they are often asked to perform online invisible overtime work during non-office hours without receiving any compensation, whether the Government will set an example as a good employer and take the lead in counting invisible overtime involving the performance of substantial work and obvious occupation of rest time as official overtime, and in granting time off in lieu or an overtime allowance to the civil servants concerned; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

All along, the Government has been reviewing the labour legislation from time to time to progressively improve employees' rights and benefits, taking into account the interests of employees and the affordability of employers. In consultation with the Civil Service Bureau (CSB), our consolidated reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) The Employment Ordinance (EO) stipulates that an employer must, before an employment begins, inform the employee of the conditions of employment including wages, wage period and length of notice required to terminate the contract, etc. Pursuant to the Minimum Wage Ordinance (MWO), the hours worked for computing the minimum wage include the time when the employee is in attendance at a place of employment in accordance with the contract of employment or with the agreement or at the direction of the employer, and a place of employment means any place at which the employee is in attendance for the purpose of doing work or receiving training in accordance with the contract of employment or with the agreement or at the direction of the employer.

On the premise of not contravening the EO and MWO, employers and employees may draw up the terms and conditions of employment including working hours and compensation arrangements for overtime work.

The modes of operation of various industries and enterprises, the job nature and responsibilities of employees as well as the terms set out in employment contracts and the like may bring about different requirements or agreements on employees' online work outside normal working hours. The Labour Department (LD) encourages employers to adopt good human resource management practices through different channels including the human resources managers' clubs and the industry-based tripartite committees. The good practices include advising employers to draw up reasonable and fair terms in employment contracts, and reminding them to fully consult and agree with their employees on working hours, compensation arrangements for overtime work, when working remotely using telecommunications equipment like internet and telephone.

The LD will continue to discuss relevant subjects at the human resources managers' clubs and the industry-based tripartite committees, and keep in view of the development and experience of other places in the handling of online work of employees outside normal working hours, and promote good employment practices to safeguard the rights and benefits of employees.

(3) The CSB expresses that according to the Civil Service Regulations, overtime work is work undertaken over and beyond a civil servant's conditioned hours. Under the prevailing policy, overtime work may be undertaken only when it is unavoidable and should be kept to the minimum. Overtime should normally be compensated by time off in lieu. Where this is, or is likely to be, impracticable within one month of the date on which overtime is worked, overtime allowance may be paid to eligible officers. The bureaux and departments will, within the confines of the prevailing policy, make appropriate arrangement and compensation for civil servants' overtime work.