

LCQ10: Online teaching and learning

Following is a question by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (October 21):

Question:

Earlier on, the findings of a study conducted by a university have indicated that there are huge divides in digital competence performance and family support among secondary and primary school students. Of the students participating in the study, about 10 per cent have no access to desktop or laptop computers or tablets; and among those who have access to such computer devices, over 40 per cent have to share the use of such equipment with other family members. There are comments that during the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in the last school year, online learning became the only channel of teaching and learning for schools, which has highlighted the existence of digital divides among various classes, and the right to learning of students from grass-roots families has been undermined by their lack of digital devices and relevant learning resources. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the difficulties and pressure faced by students from grass-roots families and their families when such students undertake online learning; whether it has received relevant requests for assistance, and whether it has assessed the impact of schools switching to online teaching on the learning progress of such students, including whether they lagged behind others in terms of learning progress; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the extent to which they lagged behind others, and the ways to help them catch up with the progress;

(2) of the (i) details, (ii) state of implementation and (iii) number of beneficiary households since January this year of the existing measures to support students from grass-roots families in undertaking online learning; whether it has plans to devise new measures to provide more students from grass-roots families with adequate mobile computer devices and software as well as stable Internet access services to meet the growing needs for online learning; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether it will consider proactively liaising with non-profit-making organisations and providing them with relevant resources and related support to develop for students more online learning resources and activities that are free of charge; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) given the new normal of increasing popularity of online teaching and learning and the impact of the epidemic on the academia, whether it has plans to devise a long-term information technology education policy and provide schools with online teaching and learning strategies, curriculum guides as well as relevant teaching and learning resources; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Though face-to-face classes in schools were once suspended due to the COVID-19 epidemic, students are able to achieve the goal of "suspending classes without suspending learning" and maintain a certain extent of learning at home through the joint efforts of the Education Bureau (EDB) and schools to flexibly deploy various innovative methods. While schools have now resumed half-day schooling, it is believed that different extents of blended mode of learning, i.e. face-to-face classes, e-learning at home or other modes of learning, may become the new normal in teaching and learning given the volatile development of the epidemic.

During the period of class suspension and when face-to-face classes have not yet fully resumed, schools should continue to support students in their home learning through suitable modes of learning and teaching according to their own circumstances and the needs of students at different stages of learning. The modes of learning and teaching are diversified. Both online and offline learning should focus on encouraging students' self-directed learning at home and cater for students' needs and the school context. e-Learning is only one of the forms of learning. Schools may also encourage students to read extensively, carry out thematic explorations, etc. so as to enhance their ability to engage in self-directed learning and hence achieve the goal of continuous learning at home.

As far as we know, during the period of class suspension, schools generally have undertaken various electronic means, which include producing teaching videos, conducting real-time online teaching, using e-learning platforms/learning management systems to arrange teaching activities, as well as distributing learning and teaching materials to students via emails/intranets, to assist students' learning. Some of the schools have also adopted non-electronic means like encouraging students to read extensively and carry out thematic explorations.

Our reply to the Hon Kwok Wai-keung's question is as follows:

(1) The EDB has been maintaining communication with schools through various channels to better understand the arrangements of and the difficulties encountered by schools in the implementation of "suspending classes without suspending learning" during the period of class suspension, so as to provide appropriate support according to their needs.

Schools will identify students' difficulties and needs in learning through different channels. In view of the situation of some students (including those encountering technical difficulties in online learning), schools have assisted them in keeping up their learning progress by various effective means (such as sending the learning and teaching materials to students by post). Teachers also make phone calls to students from time to time to understand their learning progress and provide them with the necessary support.

For students who have encountered difficulties due to the lack of access to e-learning devices, schools have actively supported them, such as lending them mobile computer devices and assisting them to apply for relevant subsidies. Besides, during the class suspension period, schools have remained open and arranged staff to be on duty to support students who have to return to schools because of individual needs and to answer parents' enquiries. Students and parents with doubts or difficulties may also take the initiative to seek appropriate assistance from the schools. If the EDB receives any requests for assistance from parents or students, it will refer them to the schools concerned for proper follow-up.

The results of a questionnaire survey conducted by the EDB in July this year show that during the period of class suspension, schools have adopted diversified strategies to support students in their home learning, devised and implemented learning plans for different subjects at all levels so that students could continue to learn systematically. As schools and parents are particularly concerned about students' learning progress, schools have adopted different means to track their learning progress during the class suspension period and followed up on the situation after class resumption. Most of the schools considered that the progress of implementation of home learning plans for students could meet the pre-set targets. On the other hand, the EDB has always sought to understand the implementation of learning and teaching as well as student support measures and student learning in schools, through channels such as inspections and school visits; and has been providing professional advice to schools according to the school context to facilitate their continuous development.

(2) The Government is concerned about grass-roots students' e-learning and has implemented various measures to support it. Since the 2010/11 school year, the Student Finance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFO) and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) have been implementing the Subsidy Scheme for Internet Access Charges, under which Internet access subsidies are disbursed to eligible families to facilitate online learning at home by needy students. The rate of the subsidy is adjusted annually with reference to prevailing market fees of Internet access services. The full rate and half rate of the subsidy in the 2020/21 school year are \$1,600 and \$800 respectively. The number of beneficiary families under the scheme in the 2019/20 school year is around 171 400.

Through the Community Care Fund (CCF), the EDB has also been implementing a three-year assistance programme on provision of subsidy to needy primary and secondary students (Note) for purchasing mobile computer devices since the 2018/19 school year to relieve the financial burden on students from low-income families under the development of the Bring Your Own Device policy on campus. For students receiving CSSA/full grant, subsidy will be provided to cover the full cost of purchasing the devices. In the 2020/21 school year, the maximum subsidy is \$4,740. For students receiving half grant, the subsidy provided is half of the actual cost of the devices up to \$2,370. In view of the COVID-19 epidemic, we handle applications flexibly and accept the applications submitted by all public sector primary and secondary schools implementing e-learning for their eligible students before the full

resumption of classes. The programme has benefitted about 34 200 students in the 2018/19 and 2019/20 school years. We expect that around 100 000 students from 800 schools will be benefitted in the 2020/21 school year. We will review the CCF assistance programme on provision of subsidy to needy primary and secondary students for purchasing mobile computer devices, including its operation and effectiveness, and will consolidate the relevant experience with a view to enhancing the measures in support of e-learning.

On the other hand, schools could also help needy students who do not have suitable computer devices through other school-based measures such as lending them mobile computer devices for home learning (as schools normally have sufficient quantities of these devices) or assisting them to apply for other assistance programmes.

Moreover, various sectors of the community have joined hands to provide support to needy students. To support students who have difficulties accessing to the Internet for e-learning at home during the class suspension period, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, through two non-government organisations (NGOs), provide internet access support (with mobile data SIM card) for 100 000 local primary and secondary school students for a period of four months.

(3) and (4) To assist schools in adopting e-learning modes to support students' home learning, the EDB has implemented a series of support measures:

(i) Training of teachers:

The EDB has set up a dedicated webpage (www.edb.gov.hk/ited/eh) with videos uploaded, elucidating the skills of using e-learning platforms, flipped classroom approach and real-time online teaching. We have been organising webinars on different topics every week since late January 2020 to share updated information and experiences of online teaching. As at July 2020, dozens of webinars have been organised. We have also launched a new series of webinars since mid-August this year, the themes of which include major findings of focus inspections and good practices of schools, e-teaching pedagogies relating to different subjects, successful experiences of supporting students in home learning, and school leaders making plans in a holistic manner as well as paying attention to students' physical and mental well-being.

(ii) Support services and strategies:

The IT in Education Centres of Excellence set up by the EDB continue to offer remote support services and share student support and home learning strategies according to school-based needs. We also continue to provide advice and support for teachers in need through hotlines, mobile communication applications and online self-learning courses. In March this year, we issued the principles of adopting e-learning to support students' home learning for schools' reference. Recently, we have also consolidated the experiences of the parties concerned, which include the questionnaire survey conducted by the EDB in July this year and the preliminary findings of focus

inspections, and updated the aforesaid principles. We informed schools of the principles by issuing letters to them and uploading such principles to the EDB's dedicated webpage (www.edb.gov.hk/ited/eh) in August this year to provide relevant guidelines to schools. Schools should make reference to the implementation principles and support students in their home learning through suitable modes of learning and teaching according to their own circumstances and the needs of students at different stages of learning. We will continue to conduct relevant focus inspections, understand schools' circumstances and share successful experiences with the sector.

(iii) Teaching and learning resources:

In view of the COVID-19 epidemic, we have launched a dedicated webpage "Online Learning 360°" (www.hkedcity.net/home/zh-hant/learning) in collaboration with the Hong Kong Education City (HKEdCity) to consolidate existing e-learning resources and propose learning schedules for the reference of schools, teachers, students and parents. Apart from providing resources for various learning areas through the "EDB One-stop Portal for Learning & Teaching Resources" (www.hkedcity.net/edbosp), the Curriculum Development Institute of the EDB has developed a series of learning and teaching resources covering various subjects at both the primary and secondary levels to support teachers in enhancing students' understanding of how to fight the virus and the related knowledge. Schools can also make use of the assessment tools and assessment items covering Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics from primary to junior secondary schools provided by the online Student Assessment Repository (STAR) (star.hkedcity.net). During the class suspension period, many IT companies, universities, charitable organisations and NGOs also offered e-learning support to students proactively and allowed the school sector to use their e-learning platforms and resources for free for the benefit of students. Some of the links to the relevant websites were uploaded to the dedicated webpage launched by the EDB during the class suspension period for schools' reference. In addition, the "Resources Depository" (resources.hkedcity.net) set up by the HKEdCity also encourages teachers and related organisations to share quality learning and teaching resources through the platform.

Schools are encouraged to continue to make use of the teaching resources provided by the EDB, including applying for funding under the priority theme of "IT in Education" under the Quality Education Fund. By utilising both the external and internal resources of schools, schools can formulate comprehensive learning and teaching strategies to cater for the learning needs of students. The EDB will continue to review and enhance all relevant measures to further support schools in implementing the blended mode of learning under the new normal.

Note: The beneficiaries are those receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) from the SWD or full grant/half grant of the School Textbook Assistance Scheme from the SF0.