

LCQ15: Reducing homework and promoting happy learning

Following is a question by the Hon Vincent Cheng and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (December 5):

Question:

Some parents have relayed that as they need to supervise their children's completion of a large quantity of homework every day, their relationship with the children is very tense and the children have lost interest in learning. It is learnt that the phenomenon of excessive homework has spread from primary and secondary schools to kindergartens. On reducing homework and promoting happy learning, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has compiled statistics on the respective average time spent daily on homework by primary, secondary and kindergarten students in each of the past three years; if so, set out the relevant figures in a table by type of kindergartens (i.e. half-day, whole-day and long whole-day) and by type of primary and secondary schools (i.e. government, aided/caput, Direct Subsidy Scheme and private), and whether the homework load has shown an upward trend; if it has not compiled such statistics, whether it will do so expeditiously; if it will, when it will do so; if not, of the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has compiled statistics on the average number of tutorial sessions per week in primary schools at present; if so, set out the relevant figures by type of schools in a table;

(3) whether it conducted any review in the past three years on the effectiveness of the tutorial sessions of primary schools in alleviating the homework burden of students; if so, of the findings; whether it will specify in the relevant guidelines a minimum number of tutorial sessions per week; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) as the Government's Task Force on Prevention of Youth Suicides has recommended in the report it submitted earlier that the quality of homework should be improved, and indicated that the Education Bureau will provide advice to and support for schools through school inspections and visits so as to improve the quality of homework for students and make doing homework more meaningful, of the details of this recommendation, whether the Government will consult the stakeholders on this recommendation, and the implementation timetable;

(5) whether it will conduct an in-depth study on reducing homework load for secondary, primary and kindergarten students as well as promoting happy learning, so as to formulate specific and long-term policy objectives; and

(6) given that for many years, the authorities of Finland have been advocating happy learning and happy teaching, and increased the rest time in schools for both students and teachers (a 15-minute break for every 45 minutes' class time), while in general a break of just 10 to 15 minutes for every class time of about two hours in Hong Kong, whether the Government will request schools to schedule more rest time when drawing up class timetables, in the hope that students will be more concentrated in class after taking breaks?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) has all along emphasised the importance of whole-person development, joyful learning and unleashing potential. Schools should cater for students' learning diversity, adopt diversified learning and teaching materials and strategies, design interesting learning activities, meaningful and effective assessment tasks and homework based on students' abilities, learning styles and interests etc., so as to nurture and strengthen students' learning motivation, enrich their learning experiences, facilitate their learning to learn and experience the meaning and enjoyment of learning. Schools should also plan the lesson time flexibly to create a pleasant and harmonious environment for student learning and their balanced physical and mental health development.

Our reply to the questions raised by the Hon Vincent Cheng is as follows:

(1) and (5) The EDB's stance is clearly set out in the EDB Circular No. 18/2015 on "Guidelines on Homework and Tests in Schools – No Drilling, Effective Learning". The purposes of homework are to enable students to consolidate their learning in class, stimulate thinking, enhance their understanding of lesson topics and construct knowledge. The amount of homework given should definitely not be excessive, nor should it be meaningless with mechanical copying or drilling. Effective and meaningful homework can inspire students' interest in learning, and encourage active self-motivated exploration of daily life problems and application of knowledge. It can also extend learning and nurture creative thinking. Therefore, it is the quality rather than the quantity of homework that matters. Since both teachers' teaching strategies and students' learning abilities vary, setting any limit on the amount of homework for schools at the policy level not only fails to meet the needs of schools, but may also hinder students' learning and undermine teachers' work in catering for the needs of the less able students and high achievers. We should let teachers exercise their professionalism in assigning and marking homework in light of the curriculum requirements and student abilities.

The EDB has commissioned an independent academic institution to conduct questionnaire surveys on primary three students' learning attitude and motivation, and some of the questions were about homework. The findings indicate that even with similar homework arrangements for students of the same grade in the same school, the time spent on homework and revision by

students still vary significantly. This indicates that the amount of homework is neither the main nor the unique factor affecting the time spent by students on homework. The factors behind whether a student would feel that there is pressure from homework are even more complicated. Therefore, we should not simply quantify the number of hours spent daily by students on homework to measure the amount of homework. There are diversified modes of homework. Apart from paper-and-pencil exercises, there may also be reading, information collection, pre-lesson preparation, designing models or project learning, etc. It is thus not practicable to measure statistically the amount of homework or the time spent on doing homework. In fact, such statistics cannot reflect the quality of homework.

Homework helps students review what has been learnt and acquire new knowledge. The education sector generally agrees that homework has positive educational functions in the learning and teaching process and should not simply be equated with study pressure. The sector considers that a suitable school-based homework policy, which can cater for the diverse abilities and characteristics of students, has a positive impact on student learning. We are of the view that it is not appropriate to set any rigid indicators for schools on an across-the-board basis. Instead, we should encourage schools and teachers to make professional decisions based on their school context and student learning needs. They can design different modes of quality homework for their students in their day-to-day classroom learning and teaching as well as during long holidays. As for individual students with learning difficulties, their schools/teachers should communicate with the parents, adapt homework tasks or make flexible arrangements. Recently before the long holidays, the Government also appealed to schools to provide more interesting holiday homework for their students.

(2) and (3) We encourage schools to allocate lesson time flexibly to provide students with suitable homework support in various ways with regard to their school context. Providing tutorial sessions is one of the many ways to support student learning. In primary schools, the main purpose of tutorial sessions is for teachers to provide guidance to students with learning needs, help them tackle learning difficulties, and let them complete part of their homework at school. Apart from providing individual tutorial sessions, teachers may also reserve some time in each lesson to guide students to tackle the more difficult parts of their homework and let them ask questions in class to solve their problems, thereby raising their confidence in learning. Some schools adopt a whole-school approach to support student learning, provide assistance to individual students with learning needs, formulate appropriate homework adjustment strategies and communicate with parents continuously. It is thus not appropriate to simply measure the time allocated for tutorial sessions or to set guidelines to specify the number of tutorial sessions.

(4) The EDB has all along encouraged schools to design homework that stimulates students' thinking and helps them consolidate and apply what they have learnt. Schools should avoid homework in the form of mechanical drilling. We will continue to maintain communication with primary and secondary school councils, regional school heads associations and major

school sponsoring bodies to remind them to give due attention to the quality and quantity of homework to be given, and further promote interesting and meaningful homework. We will also strengthen school-based professional support and continue to organise related professional development programmes for newly-appointed principals, deputy principals, curriculum leaders, middle managers, panel chairs and teachers. To enhance teachers' professional capacity, we will reiterate and elaborate on the principles and policy of setting meaningful homework in these professional development programmes. Good practices will also be disseminated for schools' reference. We gain understanding of schools' implementation of their school-based homework policy through prevailing means such as regular inspections, school visits and daily contacts. If necessary, we will provide schools with feedback to help them further refine their school-based homework policy and timetable. We will also make recommendations on improving the quality of homework so as to facilitate student learning as well as their balanced physical and mental health development.

(6) The education systems, curriculum frameworks as well as teaching and assessment policies in different countries/regions are developed based on factors such as their unique social culture, background and economy. They may be taken as reference but should not be adopted directly given the different circumstances.

When updating the curriculum documents and related circulars, the EDB has made reference to information of different countries/regions, as well as related local and overseas publications and study reports. Views of various stakeholders have also been sought extensively through different channels, including focus group interviews, questionnaire surveys, etc. with a view to developing guidelines that can cater for the developmental needs of students and align with the direction of curriculum development as well as the actual situation of Hong Kong. Regarding the scheduling of lesson time, we understand that schools generally arrange recess time for students every two to three lessons and schedule rest time in between lessons flexibly in light of students' needs. Different interactive learning activities such as group discussions, sharing and presentation sessions are arranged in class. Many schools have made use of double lessons to provide sufficient time for students to engage in life-wide learning activities. Given that schools' context and the learning needs of their students may vary, schools will arrange lesson time flexibly and professionally taking into account their actual situation and the learning needs of their students. Such flexible arrangements may include longer recess time and a combination of long and short lessons to enable the design of diversified learning activities to meet different learning objectives. We will continue to remind schools of the need to improve the school timetable and their school-based homework policy through different means, so as to give students more time to rest, develop personal interests and participate in various aesthetic and physical activities.

Lastly, we would like to reiterate that whether learning is enjoyable or not may be affected by the amount of homework but more importantly, it is the quality of the learning process that counts. An interesting and inspiring

learning process, a sense of achievement gained from completing a challenging assignment and the satisfaction from overcoming learning difficulties or finishing a piece of creative work are all possible sources of joy and happiness. We do not agree to simply equate homework with study pressure and thereby negating the positive educational functions of quality homework. This may mislead students. In the long run, this will also affect the overall educational outcome.