# LCQ18: Assisting children from grass-roots families in undertaking e-learning

    Following is a question by the Hon Charles Mok and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (April 22):

Question:

    In the last school year, the Government launched an assistance programme known as "Provision of Subsidy to Needy Primary and Secondary Students for Purchasing Mobile Computer Devices to Facilitate the Practice of e-Learning" (the assistance programme) under the Community Care Fund (CCF), to subsidise students to purchase mobile computer devices. One of the conditions for applying for the assistance programme is that students are "studying in schools and classes implementing e-learning and adopting "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD).  However, only about 26 per cent of secondary schools, 22 per cent of primary schools and 18 per cent of special schools had implemented or were formulating measures relating to BYOD in the 2017-2018 school year. Based on such figures, it is estimated that the majority of students have been unable to receive subsidies through the assistance programme. On the other hand, in view of the severe situation of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Education Bureau (EDB) has earlier extended for several times the class suspension arrangements at schools and recommended that schools should provide students with learning materials through school websites, e-learning platforms, etc. during the period of class suspension, so that students can continue their studies at home. It is learnt that as some grass-roots families cannot afford to purchase computers for their children who are students or pay for Internet access charges, and that they have not received the required technical support, the students concerned are unable to learn at home through e-learning platforms. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number and percentage of public schools which implemented the BYOD policy in the past three years, together with a tabulated breakdown by type of schools (i.e. secondary school and primary school) and finance type of schools (i.e. government, aided, caput, Direct Subsidy Scheme, and special schools);

(2) of the respective numbers of students whose applications were received and approved under the assistance programme so far, and the percentage of the number of students whose applications were approved in the total number of students eligible for application, together with a tabulated breakdown by type of schools and finance type of schools (as shown in (1));

(3) whether it knows the respective numbers of grass-roots families which encountered difficulties last year in purchasing computers for their children

who were students, paying for Internet access charges, and seeking relevant technical support; given that the majority of students of public schools have been unable to benefit from the assistance programme, how EDB assists them in learning through e-learning platforms;

(4) whether it knows the number of cases in the past three months in which students from grass-roots families were unable to learn at home through e-learning platforms during the period of class suspension, and the relevant details; of the new measures to assist them in undertaking e-learning at home;

(5) whether it will conduct a review of the assistance programme, including studying the following issues: extending the coverage to schools which have not implemented the BYOD policy, setting a target rate of subsidy and a timetable, and assigning the co-ordination work to EDB, with a view to benefitting all students from grass-roots families as soon as possible;

(6) given that the Hong Kong Jockey Club has recently launched, in collaboration with two non-governmental organizations, the "Bandwidth Support for E-learning at Home Scheme" to provide grass-roots primary and secondary students (particularly those who live in subdivided units, old buildings and remote areas and thus do not have access to high-speed Internet services) with free mobile data bandwidth for four months, so that they can undertake e-learning at home during the period of class suspension, whether the Government will consider launching a similar scheme on its own in the future to be run on a regular basis, with a view to providing support for students from grass-roots families in a systemic manner; and

(7) whether it will study the establishment of regional e-learning resource centres in various public libraries and study rooms and the acquisition of the relevant equipment (including WiFi and printers), so that students from grass-roots families can undertake e-learning at such centres?

Reply:

President,

The Government has been promoting information technology in education for over 20 years, providing schools with basic infrastructure and support. Schools have been implementing e-learning to varying degrees according to their contexts. Teachers are adept at utilising the diversified teaching and learning resources available online to support students to learn. The EDB launched the Fourth Strategy on Information Technology in Education (ITE4) in the 2015/16 school year. One of the key measures of ITE4 is to establish Wi-Fi campus by phases for all public sector schools in the territory to facilitate e-learning in class. BYOD refers to students bringing their own mobile computer devices to school for learning on the advice of their schools. It is one of the initiatives for promoting e-learning but not an essential component of e-learning. To cope with the change in teaching mode and achieve the aim of enhancing e-learning effectiveness, schools planning to implement BYOD should give careful consideration to a number of questions, such as scale of implementation involving whole-school or individual levels

and subjects, the need of owning a computer device by every student, models and operating system requirements of the device, suitability of full implementation of e-learning inside and outside classroom for young students, potential negative health impact, parents' and students' awareness of the stakes involved, precautionary measures against abuse and problem of Internet addiction. These issues call for careful planning and close communication with parents for forging a consensus. Under school-based management, schools should decide whether it is necessary for them to implement BYOD according to their specific contexts, including pedagogical design, learning characteristics and needs of students, parents' views and other supporting measures (such as enhancing students' information literacy, etc.). By optimising the use of various grants from the EDB, some schools have acquired mobile computer devices for students' use in schools so that e-learning in class is possible without adopting BYOD. Some schools have implemented BYOD to enable more personalised learning. Through the Community Care Fund, the EDB has been providing subsidy to needy primary and secondary students from schools implementing BYOD to purchase mobile computer devices since the 2018/19 school year. The application for this school year has originally closed. In view of the fact that many schools have attempted to continue with teaching via electronic platforms amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the EDB will handle new applications submitted by schools for their needy students flexibly. Apart from keeping school premises open, schools are actively supporting students to learn at home during class suspension by various means, such as lending mobile computer devices to students and helping them apply for relevant assistances.

    Our reply to the Hon Charles Mok's question is as follows:

(1) As mentioned above, schools may decide whether to implement BYOD and to which levels of study and subjects will BYOD be implemented based on their contexts.  The EDB does not maintain formal statistics on the number of schools implementing BYOD and the percentage of these schools in the total number of schools. The percentages of "schools (that) had implemented or were formulating measures relating to BYOD" quoted in the question are from the findings of the questionnaire survey on information technology in education conducted in the 2017/18 school year targeting mainly public sector schools which had completed the enhancement works of their Wi-Fi campuses. Taking part in the survey is voluntary. The percentage of school respondents in the total number of public sector schools varied in the past few years, not reflecting the full picture and the changes between school years.

(2) Public sector schools (including government, aided, caput and DSS schools) that implement the BYOD policy can participate in the "Provision of Subsidy to Needy Primary and Secondary Students for Purchasing Mobile Computer Devices to Facilitate the Practice of e-Learning" (the assistance programme) to purchase appropriate mobile computer devices and accessories for eligible students (Note 1) according to their needs. After completing the procurement procedures, schools will submit a report to the EDB for determining the funding required. About 190 primary and secondary schools participated in the assistance programme in the 2018/19 school year. The number of student beneficiaries is set out below:

| Type of Schools | Number of Student Beneficiaries in the 2018/19 school year | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Government Schools | Aided Schools (Note 2) | Total |
| Primary schools | 18 | 5 512 | 5 530 |
| Secondary schools | 191 | 7 665 | 7 856 |
| Special schools | Not applicable | 470 | 470 |
| Total | 209 | 13 647 | 13 856 |

In the 2019/20 school year, so far there are about 270 primary and secondary schools participating in the assistance programme. The number of student beneficiaries will only be known after schools complete the procurement procedures and submit a report to the EDB.

e-Learning is a form of learning and teaching. Schools can decide whether adopting BYOD or not according to their contexts. As a matter of fact, some of the schools implementing BYOD have not participated in the assistance programme because they have offered school-based support to students having regard to their financial needs.

(3) and (4) The Government has all along attached importance to the learning needs of students, and has implemented various measures to support the e-learning of students from grass-roots families. Apart from the CCF assistant programme stated above that subsidises students to purchase mobile computer devices, other measures include the disbursement of subsidy for Internet access charges to eligible families by the Student Finance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency and the Social Welfare Department, providing support for students from grass-roots families to subscribe to basic Internet plans provided by operators of fixed or mobile telecommunications services. The rate of the subsidy is adjusted regularly with reference to prevailing market prices of Internet access services.

e-Learning is only one of the many diversified modes of learning. During the period of class suspension, primary and secondary schools can make use of different modes of learning, such as e-learning, to help students continue their learning in an appropriate and systematic manner. As far as we know, for students who are unable to undertake Internet learning due to the lack of the necessary equipment (such as computers), schools have been actively providing support, for example, by lending them the necessary equipment for use. Homework assignments and worksheets are printed and mailed to students or collected by parents in schools according to their actual needs. All these measures can facilitate students to achieve the goal of "suspending classes but not suspending learning" at home.

(5) and (6) Ever evolving and diversified in nature, e-learning is an open and flexible mode of learning. There is no so-called best practice or

standard which schools should follow. Since schools are at different stages of e-learning, they may participate in the assistance programme after taking into account their own policy, timetable and resources for implementing BYOD. As regards of the implementation of the CCF assistance programme, the EDB is closely monitoring its effectiveness, with a view to drawing up measures to provide continuous support on e-learning to needy students. During its implementation, we will continue to flexibly process schools' applications so as to meet the needs of students.

The EDB has been providing various types of support for students from needy families, such as textbooks, extra-curricular activities and exchange activities and continuous adjustments to the mode and strength of support are being made. This also applies to e-learning. The EDB will continue to maintain communication with schools and will conduct timely review and make corresponding adjustments to the support that students need.

(7) The Leisure and Cultural Services Department currently provides over 1 900 computer workstations for public use in 70 static libraries. Connected to the Internet and printing facilities, these computer workstations allow the general public, including students, to browse the libraries' multimedia and digitised resources, e-books, online databases and other online resources for seeking of information, leisure reading and self-study, as well as facilitate students to conduct e-learning. In addition, a total of 30 libraries are equipped with Computer Information Centre/Area, providing commonly-used computer application software, printing and document scanning services, etc. Moreover, free Hong Kong Government Wi-Fi service (Wi-Fi.HK) is available at all static public libraries (including their Students' Study Rooms).

The aforementioned measures aside, the Government subsidises about 171 study rooms and youth service centres operated by non-profit-making organisations to provide free Wi-Fi service and endeavours to enhance the service level of "Wi-Fi.HK". The average connection speed of "Wi-Fi.HK" hotspots at the aforesaid facilities exceeds 20 Mbps, which is sufficient to meet general e-learning needs. Relevant government departments conduct regular reviews of the connection speed and usage of Wi-Fi service at government venues. If necessary, adjustments will be made to the bandwidth and number of hotspots at the venues to ensure the quality of Wi-Fi service.

Note 1: Eligible students refer to those students receiving the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance from the Social Welfare Department or full grant/half grant of the School Textbook Assistance Scheme from the Student Finance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency.
Note 2: Aided schools also include local schools under DSS and caput schools.