

LCQ21: Promoting student mental health

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (May 21):

Question:

It has been reported that according to a survey, more than half of the students surveyed consider that the mental health of young people in Hong Kong is unsatisfactory, and about 14 per cent even consider the situation very unsatisfactory. In addition, between 2013 and 2023, the number of suicide deaths among students in Hong Kong increased from about 10 to 32 per year. Regarding the promotion of students' mental health, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) as a study has pointed out that 80 per cent of the students who experienced psychological crises had no record of attending psychiatric specialist services, of the authorities' plans in place to strengthen the training of teachers and school personnel, so as to increase their sensitivity to identifying students in need of support at an early stage;
- (2) as some members of the education sector have pointed out that quite a number of students do not have a proper understanding of death, and that work related to life and death education is inadequate, of the authorities' plans in place to strengthen life education in schools, so as to enable students to treasure life and further cultivate positive values and qualities;
- (3) whether it will study the establishment of additional School Life Co-ordinators and two task forces on "suicide prevention" and "bullying prevention" in schools, as well as the implementation of the "one counsellor for each school" measure to complement the work of existing school social workers by identifying high-risk students at an early stage and intervening immediately to provide comprehensive support;
- (4) as a survey has pointed out that most students do not take the initiative to seek help from others when faced with negative emotions and difficulties, of the authorities' plans in place to step up the promotion of a "help-seeking culture", reduce the labelling of help-seekers, and encourage students to take the initiative to care for others and help one another;
- (5) given that the Quality Education Fund Thematic Network on "Promoting Wellness in School" aims to help participating schools (including secondary schools, primary schools and nursery schools) develop into schools where the well-being of students is the top priority, and incorporate mental wellbeing education into the school curriculum, so as to nurture resilience of students, whether the authorities have assessed the effectiveness of such programme, and whether they will study extending similar programmes to all schools in the territory;

(6) as a study has pointed out that more than half of the students with emotional problems come from single-parent or divorced families, whether the authorities will conduct a study on strengthening support for such students in schools and establishing a mechanism for community collaboration, so as to prevent the marginalisation of students with emotional problems; and

(7) as there are views pointing out that the pressure of education progression is one of the major factors affecting students' mental health, whether the authorities will study reforming the vocational and professional education and training system and promoting the relevant programmes, so as to provide students with diversified pathways, thereby alleviating their pressure of education progression; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) attaches great importance to the mental health of students, and has been proactively providing support for schools in adopting the Whole School Approach (WSA) at three levels, namely Universal, Selective and Indicated, to promote student mental health and enhance support for students with mental health needs (including those with suicidal risks). The EDB also collaborates with other bureaux/departments and different stakeholders to take care of students with mental health needs and provide them with support in different aspects through cross-departmental, multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration. In consultation with the Social Welfare Department (SWD), our reply to the question raised by the Hon Elizabeth Quat is as follows:

(1) The EDB has been continuously enhancing training to strengthen school personnel's knowledge and skills in early identification and support for students with mental health needs. The core elements of the Guiding Framework for Teacher Education Programmes formulated since 2023 have included supporting students with various learning and developmental needs. The programmes have also enriched the content relating to special education, which includes knowledge and skills for supporting students' mental health. Regarding in-service teacher training, the EDB provides teachers with structured programmes, i.e. basic, advanced and thematic courses to enhance teachers' professional capacity in catering for students with special educational needs, including those with mental health needs. One of the thematic courses focuses on delving deeply into the characteristics of students with mental illness, practical strategies and skills, as well as effective support measures and practices. Moreover, the EDB also organises thematic teacher training for school personnel from time to time, and provides gatekeeper training for teachers on a regular basis so as to strengthen their ability to identify and support students with mental health needs.

In addition, the EDB has launched parent gatekeeper training and the

Peer Power – Student Gatekeeper Training Programme to enhance parents and students' knowledge, confidence and practical skills as gatekeepers, thereby assisting in early identification and support for students with emotional distress, enabling them to seek help when encountering difficulties. Schools also organise various mental health promotion activities to enhance all teachers and students' understanding and awareness of mental health.

(2) Life education (including life and death education) is an indispensable part of values education in schools. The Values Education Curriculum Framework (Pilot Version) published in 2021 has identified "enhancing life education" as one of the key emphases of the curriculum. It sets out the expected learning outcomes related to life education at different key learning stages, including understanding of the life cycle – birth, ageing, illness and death. The EDB has all along supported schools in integrating the learning context and content of life education into various subjects and life-wide learning activities through the approaches of organic integration, natural connection, diversified strategies, mutual co-ordination, learning within and beyond the classroom and whole-school participation. These help students cultivate proper values, understand the finiteness of life and learn to face challenges in life with a positive and optimistic attitude, as well as perseverance from an early age. Many schools have developed school-based life education curriculum and organised various thematic experiential learning activities. For instance, rearing small animals on campus, or, where appropriate, arranging for students to visit hospitals or to learn about the funeral industry. These activities help students understand the nature, values and meaning of life from the cognitive and affective perspectives with first-hand experiences, thereby learning to respect and cherish their own lives and those of others. Through these activities, students may learn to face loss and separation and handle the emotions that arise from such experiences.

The EDB seeks to understand the implementation of life education in schools and identify their needs through means such as school visits and inspections. Appropriate ongoing support is rendered to schools by providing them with learning and teaching resources, and organising professional development programmes for teachers, aiming to enhance students' understanding of the life journey and help them develop an optimistic attitude towards cherishing life so as to lead a meaningful and healthy life.

(3) The EDB cultivates a healthy, harmonious and safe school environment through the implementation of the WSA, multi-disciplinary collaboration (including teachers, student guidance personnel (SGP), school social workers and school-based educational psychologists) and home-school co-operation. Currently, public sector primary schools and secondary schools implement the measures of "one school social worker for each school" and "two school social workers for each school" respectively. According to students' needs, schools may also flexibly deploy grants provided by the Government or pool together other school resources to employ appropriate SGP outside the regular staff establishment (such as employing teachers or professionals with qualifications in guidance or other equivalent qualifications) to provide additional guidance services or procure related services from organisations.

Prevention of school bullying and student suicide are both important components in cultivating a healthy, harmonious and safe school environment. The EDB has all along been adopting a "zero tolerance" policy, requiring all public sector schools to implement proactive measures and adopt the WSA in formulating and implementing anti-bullying policies, as well as handle and follow up cases in accordance with the School Administration Guide and EDB circulars. In addition, the EDB adopts a multi-pronged approach, including school curriculum, teaching materials, diversified activities, teacher training and sharing of successful experiences, to assist schools in implementing their anti-bullying measures more effectively.

Regarding the prevention of student suicide, the EDB has all along been encouraging schools to adopt the WSA in taking care of students' mental health at three levels, namely Universal, Selective and Indicated. In addition, the Government has implemented the Three-tier School-based Emergency Mechanism in all secondary schools in Hong Kong since December 2023. By working together with schools, parents and other stakeholders in the community as well as pooling together the schools' multi-disciplinary teams, the off-campus support network organised by the SWD and medical services provided by the Hospital Authority, relevant support measures are enhanced with a view to preventing suicide more effectively. In addition, the EDB has been implementing the "4Rs Mental Health Charter" (the 4Rs Charter) to promote mental health in schools in a more comprehensive and systematic manner since the 2024/25 school year. The 4Rs Charter encourages schools to take concrete actions to implement measures and organise activities to help students develop healthy habits and positive interpersonal relationships, strengthen their resilience, thereby improving their physical and psychological well-being.

As the WSA and multi-disciplinary collaboration can provide comprehensive student counselling and support services, and each school has its own multi-disciplinary team, together with the establishment of social workers, off-campus support, and provision of grants, the existing arrangement enables schools to provide professional services on the one hand, and also provides schools with sufficient resources and flexibility to hire or procure additional guidance services. Thus, the EDB has no plans to create posts of "school life co-ordinators", "suicide prevention" and "bullying prevention" task forces, or implement the "one school counsellor for each school" measure in schools.

(4) Starting from the 2023/24 school year, the EDB has launched the Mental Health Literacy Resource Packages suitable for students at different key learning stages. Two important themes in the resource packages are reducing the stigmas attached to people with mental illness and encouraging peers to seek help when they have mental health needs. With reference to the resource packages, schools and parents can promote mental health literacy to students in a systematic manner, guiding students to learn about help-seeking knowledge, attitude and methods, which includes getting to know the resources available in school, community and on the internet. In addition, the EDB has collaborated with the SWD to arrange for non-governmental organisations to

visit secondary schools in need and organise mental health activities since February 2024, so as to enhance students' awareness of mental health and help-seeking.

(5) The Quality Education Fund (QEF) has all along been establishing professional sharing platforms for schools to share their good practices with a view to promoting the professional exchange amongst teachers, by implementing the QEF Thematic Networks (QTNs). The QTN on "Promoting Wellness in School" was one of them. Its aim was to develop and strengthen students' resilience and promote their mental wellness. According to the evaluation data collected from surveys, observation forms, teacher and student focus group interviews, etc, the project had been well received by the participating schools. The QEF will continue to implement a variety of QTNs to dovetail with the latest curriculum development and the needs of students.

(6) The Government attaches great importance to supporting children, young people and their families (including single-parent/separated families) and adopts an integrated approach to provide those in need with prevention, early identification, as well as timely intervention and rehabilitation services to enhance their mental health. Relevant bureaux/departments (including the EDB and the SWD), non-governmental organisations and other community stakeholders provide support services for children and young people with mental health needs through multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration. School social workers will also collaborate closely with relevant service units in the community, such as Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres and Integrated Family Service Centres and refer students and their families to appropriate support services having regard to their needs.

(7) The Government has been promoting the development of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) through the strategy of fostering industry-institution collaboration and diversified development under a multi-pronged approach to provide a high-quality and diversified pathway with multiple entry and exit points to young people. Amongst others, to enhance the VPET articulation pathway and strengthen the status of VPET at degree level, the Government has been promoting the establishment of universities of applied sciences (UAS), to provide applied degree programmes with an applied focus blending theory and practice, and closely collaborate with professional skills sectors to incorporate substantial internship and work-based learning opportunities in other degree programmes to help students develop applied skills. The Government announced in March and November 2024, respectively, that Hong Kong Metropolitan University and Saint Francis University had become the first two UAS in Hong Kong after having gone through stringent procedures and reviews. The Government has also allocated \$100 million to support UAS and VPET institutions to establish the Alliance of UAS in November 2024 to embark on joint promotion with the supporting organisations and stakeholders, in order to elevate the recognition of VPET and promote its development.