

LCQ21: Support for schools and students amid epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Dennis Leung and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (January 19):

Question:

With Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) involving the Omicron mutant strain spreading in the community, the risk of a fifth wave of epidemic outbreak in Hong Kong has been on the increase. Regarding the support for schools and students amid the epidemic, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of (i) the respective numbers of teachers and school staff as well as students who received one dose and two doses of COVID-19 vaccine, with a breakdown by school type (i.e. kindergarten, primary school, secondary school and special school), and (ii) the respective numbers of schools which resumed half-day and whole-day face-to-face classes, as at the third of this month;

(2) whether it has assessed the risk posed by the spread of the Omicron mutant strain on the health of students at school; in view of the rapid transmission of the Omicron mutant strain, what measures have been put in place by the Education Bureau (EDB) to step up and support the anti-epidemic efforts of schools in order to lower the chances of teachers and school staff as well as students contracting the virus at school; and

(3) of the criteria based on which the decision of a general suspension of face-to-face classes is made and, under such circumstances, how the EDB will render schools and students appropriate assistance (especially the learning support to be provided for schoolchildren of grass-roots families and disadvantaged groups)?

Reply:

President,

The Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been closely monitoring the development of the COVID-19 epidemic situation in Hong Kong, listening to the advice of health experts, maintaining communication with the school sector, introducing various anti-epidemic measures in schools to protect the health of students, as well as reviewing and implementing the schooling arrangements and related support measures in a timely manner. My reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(1) The EDB collected information concerning an overview of COVID-19 vaccination situation of teachers, school staff and students from around 2

000 schools (including kindergartens (KGs), primary schools and secondary schools) in Hong Kong in early January 2022. According to the information returned by them, as at January 5, 2022, around 95 per cent of teachers and school staff and 68 per cent of students aged 12 years or above had received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. The EDB has not compiled the vaccination rate by school types (i.e. KGs, primary, secondary and special schools). In addition, as at January 6, 2022, 183 secondary schools had applied for whole-day face-to-face classes for the whole school, and 213 secondary schools for whole-day face-to-face classes for individual class levels, totalling 396 schools.

(2) and (3) The EDB takes into account the latest development of the epidemic and health experts' advice and considers various factors with a view to striking a balance between the learning needs and health and safety of students when setting out the face-to-face schooling arrangements of different class levels. Taking the recent epidemic situation of COVID-19 Omicron variant as an example, the mutated virus has a high infectivity and is posing a serious threat. There was an invisible chain of transmission within the community. In addition, there were confirmed cases of young children who were infected by family members. Teachers and peers having close contacts with the infected children had to be put under quarantine. There were also outbreaks of upper respiratory tract infection in KGs and primary schools in recent months, with symptoms similar to those of COVID-19. KGs and primary school students are young and their self-care capability is relatively lower. In addition, most of them were not yet eligible for vaccination because of the age restriction. In view of the above, the EDB announced that all primary schools, KGs and kindergarten-cum-child care centres in Hong Kong should suspend face-to-face classes and all on-campus activities on or before January 14, 2022 until the schools' Chinese New Year holidays.

The EDB has adopted multi-pronged strategies and worked closely with schools to build up protection barriers for schools with a view to enabling students to study with a peace of mind. We have all along been urging and assisting teachers, school staff, students and parents to receive COVID-19 vaccination proactively. In the 2021/22 school year, all KGs, primary and secondary schools, and private schools offering non-formal curriculum (commonly known as "tutorial schools") have face-to-face classes on a half-day basis for the time being. To enhance protection, starting from September 1, 2021, the EDB requires that all teachers and school staff including those teaching and non-teaching staff directly employed by schools, persons who provide on-campus services, and persons who frequently visit school campuses (e.g. volunteers) must have at least received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, or undergo regular COVID-19 tests and receive negative results. To facilitate vaccination of students, teachers and parents, the EDB has been working with other government departments to provide support services such as school outreach vaccination service and group booking to a Community Vaccination Centre, etc. To further enhance the anti-epidemic measures, the Government has recently announced the expansion of the "Vaccine Bubble" programme for implementation in more venues with effect from February 24, 2022, and is planning to arrange outreach vaccination services for students

aged 5 to 11 years old. We will announce further details of the implementation of the above programmes in schools as early as possible.

The Government has issued to schools "Health Protection Measures for Schools" and the "Health Advice to Schools for the Prevention of COVID-19" prepared by the Centre for Health Protection. The guidelines are updated from time to time. We also issue letters to schools from time to time, informing them of the latest requirements and arrangements of anti-epidemic measures, as well as requiring schools to strictly comply with the above guidelines and put in place the health precautionary measures, including wearing masks all the time within school campuses, maintaining appropriate social distances, measuring temperatures of teachers and students at school entrances, so as to safeguard their health.

Regarding arrangements and support during the suspension of face-to-face classes, since the outbreak of the epidemic, schools have implemented a blended mode of teaching and learning as necessary so as to achieve the goal of "suspending classes without suspending learning". The EDB has provided support measures, including e-learning resources and webinars, to assist schools and teachers in adopting e-learning modes to support students' home learning. In this school year, the Quality Education Fund has set aside \$500 million to support the necessary e-learning ancillary facilities, for example, development of platforms for sharing learning and teaching resources and encouraging teachers to share quality teaching materials. We require schools and boarding sections (applicable to special schools) that they should remain open to look after students who lack carers to take care of them at home during the period of face-to-face class suspension.

Regarding supporting grass-roots students, the Government subsidised about 176 000 needy primary and secondary students to purchase mobile computer devices from the 2018/19 to 2020/21 school years by implementing an assistance programme through the Community Care Fund, and also provided public sector schools with extra funding to purchase portable WiFi routers and mobile data cards for needy students to have e-learning. Besides, in 2021, the Quality Education Fund reserved \$1.5 billion to implement a three-year programme for lending mobile computer devices and Internet access facilities to needy students through their schools. It is anticipated that about 310 000 students could be benefitted. The Government has been disbursing subsidies under the Subsidy Scheme for Internet Access Charges via the Student Finance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency and the Social Welfare Department to eligible families in order to provide support to needy students on e-learning. Besides, many social welfare organisations and schools also donate or provide mobile computers on loan to needy grass-roots students.

On emotional and psychological support, professionals of different disciplines in a school (including guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists) have all along been providing students with appropriate support, such as keeping in contact with and showing care to students through telephone and other means of electronic communication as well as understanding whether students need further

assistance through close observation of students' performance and enhanced communication with parents. If students are found to display emotional disturbance, teachers will refer them to professionals with a view to supporting them to cope with difficulties encountered in academic, social and/or emotional development domains. The EDB has specially launched on-line resources to help parents and teachers guide students with special educational needs (SEN) to pick up more skills in learning at home and in social adaptation. Furthermore, the EDB has been maintaining communication with the SEN Coordinators of schools and reminding schools to understand the learning performance and emotion of students with SEN and to communicate with parents on a regular basis so as to review and adjust the support strategies and details at different stages.

As regards KGs, since it is not desirable for young children to use electronic screen for a long period of time, e-learning in the form of real-time online teaching is not suitable for KG students in principle. KGs will adopt alternative modes to help KG students learn at home, such as encouraging children to read at home, devising learning activities in line with children's abilities and interests, and providing guidance and learning materials to parents according to their needs. The EDB issued a letter to all KGs in May 2020 to share the principles and strategies for supporting KG students' learning at home. Additional subsidies were also provided to KGs joining the KG education scheme in early 2021 to facilitate schools in implementing programmes to support learning at home.

The EDB will closely monitor the epidemic situation, take into account the advice from the health experts, and timely review the related measures. We will maintain close liaison with the school sector to understand their needs so as to provide appropriate support.