

LCQ21: Works for substandard aided schools

Following is a question by the Hon Ip Kin-yuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (June 19):

Question:

Earlier on, the Education Bureau indicated that it had set aside \$1 billion for implementing a programme under which funding would be provided, for carrying out minor internal conversion works, to those aided schools whose premises had facilities not up to the current standards for school premises. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the objectives and the following details of the aforesaid programme:

(i) the respective numbers of secondary schools, primary schools and special schools expected to benefit from the programme, and (ii) the number of conversion works projects in respect of which each school may apply for funding and the maximum amount of funding which may be allocated to each school;

(2) of the specific differences in the nature of the works projects carried out under the programme and those under the regular Aided Schools Applications for Capital Subventions: Major Repairs/ Alterations (major works); the number of schools which applied for subvention for major works, the number and nature of the alteration works projects involved in such applications, the number of alteration works projects for which subvention was granted and the total amount of subvention involved, and the percentage of that amount in the relevant estimated expenditure of that year, in each of the past five school years, together with a breakdown by type of schools (namely secondary school, primary school and special school);

(3) whether that \$1 billion funding was included in the budgeted expenditure for the 2019-2020 financial year; if so, of the head and subhead of the expenditure, and the percentage of the funding in the total amount of expenditure under the relevant subhead; if not, the financial resources from which the funding was drawn and whether approval by the Finance Committee of this Council is required;

(4) why it is stipulated that schools may submit applications for the programme only within this year and next year; whether it has assessed if the contractors concerned can cope with the conversion works to be carried out by a large number of schools in these two years; if it has assessed, of the outcome; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) of the expected number of schools whose premises will meet the current standards for school premises upon completion of the conversion works, as

well as the types of school facilities that can be upgraded up to the current standards (together with a breakdown by type of schools); and

(6) whether the priority accorded to, and the success rate of, the schools' applications for (i) subvention for major works and (ii) redevelopment/reprovisioning will be affected as a result of the funding allocated to the schools under the programme?

Reply:

Mr President,

The reply to the six questions asked by the Hon Ip Kin-yuen is as follows:

At present, there are about 900 public sector schools (including special schools) in the territory. Their premises were built in different periods in accordance with the building standards at the time of construction and facilities in the premises vary. While the standards have been changing over the years, existing school premises in operation are required to comply with prevailing statutory requirements. As at May 2019, about 200 of them were built according to prevailing standards.

Over the years, the Education Bureau (EDB) has put in place various measures to enhance school facilities. These measures include the School Improvement Programme implemented between 1994 and 2006, where over 700 public sector schools built according to the planning standards when the schools were constructed have their school facilities enhanced (e.g. through provision of additional or conversion of classrooms and special rooms) as far as technically feasible. The EDB have also sought to address shortfall in space and school facilities through reprovisioning and redevelopment programmes.

In addition, the EDB is providing school premises maintenance and repair support to some 840 aided schools (including special schools) through the annual Major Repairs (MR) and Emergency Repairs (ER) mechanism. For the scope of works under the mechanism, apart from providing repairs to impaired items, the EDB also seek to improve school premises facilities through, for example, retrofitting of lighting systems, paving of non-slip floor tiles, improvement of ventilation systems, replacement of surfacing materials, etc. In the recent five financial years (i.e. 2015/16 to 2019/20), an annual average of about 840 aided schools submitted MR applications. When the EDB considers the allocation of funding for taking forward MR requests from schools, priority will be accorded to those works items that are required under the law and ought to be carried out from the repairs angle (i.e. must-repair items), e.g. items related to safety, health and hygiene or those that are statutorily required. During these five financial years, applications for must-repair items have all been approved. And, with the increase in resources allocation in recent years (the relevant non-recurrent subvention provision has increased from \$1 billion in 2015/16 to \$1.5 billion in 2019/20), on average, about 50% of the MR applications for other repairs and improvement works were approved in the recent two years. The total approved project

estimates of approved MR works has increased from some \$560 million to over \$1 billion in the recent five financial years.

The EDB understand that the community is concerned about the conditions of facilities at old school premises. As provided in our response to the Legislative Council (LegCo) Education Panel on March 19, 2019 (Note 1), as well as in our reply to the question raised by the Hon Ip Kin-yuen about improvements to existing school premises in examining the Estimates 2019-20 (Note 2), based on the consensus reached with LegCo and the sector earlier on, the EDB is carrying out improvement works for those primary schools operating in "matchbox-style school premises" (Note 3), with a focus on addressing the problems arising from the unique architectural design of those premises. Under this programme, our works consultants have also explored technically feasible means for more flexible use of existing space, such as minor internal conversion and installation of movable partition walls to turn existing facilities into temporary special rooms, with a view to improving the teaching and learning environment. Such minor internal conversion works were well received by the schools concerned.

Taking into account the experience from the aforementioned "matchbox-style school premises" improvement programme and views of different stakeholders (including the Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association and the Subsidized Primary School Council), the EDB are working on a programme to conduct similar minor internal conversions at the other 600 odd aided school premises (including special schools) constructed according to past building standards to facilitate more flexible use of existing space by schools, thereby enhancing the teaching and learning environment and efficacy.

The EDB have reserved \$1 billion under the Capital Works Reserve Fund (CWRF) to take forward this time-limited minor conversion works programme (the Programme). Individual schools may submit works proposals to the EDB this year and next (i.e. 2019 and 2020) having regard to their premises conditions and school-based needs. The works consultants and contractors engaged by the EDB will continue to help take forward the Programme. They have sufficient capacity and experience in handling the works concerned. The EDB arranged briefing sessions in April 2019 for the schools concerned to explain the detailed arrangements of the Programme and to share the experience from similar improvement works in "matchbox-style school premises" for the schools' reference. Over 480 schools attended the briefing session and the feedbacks were very positive. The 2019 application period was just closed on June 6. Since the premises conditions and school-based needs of individual schools vary, the conversion works applied for and in turn the related works schedule and costs would vary. The EDB are now processing the applications received, and will follow up with the schools concerned on the proposed works and related arrangements as soon as practicable. The EDB will also follow the established mechanism to seek the LegCo Finance Committee's approval with regard to the annual cashflow requirements for the Programme under the CWRF Block Votes allocation.

Meanwhile, the EDB will continue to enhance school facilities and improve the teaching and learning environment in accordance with the schools'

needs through the various on-going measures, including the annual MR and ER mechanism, reprovisioning and redevelopment arrangements.

Note 1: Re LC Paper No. CB(4)666/18-19(01).

Note 2: Re Reply Serial No. EDB506.

Note 3: The so-called "matchbox-style school premises" are cuboidal-shaped premises constructed between mid-1960s and 1980 in public housing estates for primary school use. Following the reprovisioning of one public sector primary school previously operating in "matchbox-style school premises" to a vacant school premises (VSP) in September 2018, there are at present 27 public sector primary schools operating in "matchbox-style school premises". Among these 27 schools, 6 have been allocated with new school premises or VSP through School Allocation Exercises for reprovisioning or expansion.