

LCQ6: Prevention of school and cyber bullying

Following is a question by the Hon Lam So-wai and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (May 24):

Question:

According to the report of the Programme for International Student Assessment 2018 published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the prevalence of Hong Kong students being bullied at school is as high as 29.3 per cent. Moreover, with students becoming increasingly reliant on the Internet for learning, cyber bullying incidents have also increased. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of requests for assistance, complaints and reports about school bullying received by the authorities since January 2020; whether they have studied the underlying causes for the occurrence of such cases and formulated corresponding plans, such as strengthening investigation and punishment, setting up a dedicated 24-hour reporting hotline, as well as stepping up efforts in holding teachers and school authorities accountable; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) focusing specifically on cyber bullying, whether the Government will, in response to the call of society, consider afresh the establishment of a "commissioner for online safety for teenagers" to follow up on cases of cyber bullying in collaboration with the School Liaison Officers of the Police; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) given that some jurisdictions such as Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States have made cyber bullying a criminal offence, whether the Government will enact the relevant legislation in the light of the worsening situation of cyber bullying locally; if so, of the details; if not, the new measures in place to address the problem of cyber bullying and prevent young people from becoming the victims of cyber bullying?

Reply:

President,

All along, the Government has been adopting a zero tolerance policy on bullying in schools. The Education Bureau (EDB) has provided schools with clear guidelines to facilitate them to adopt the Whole School Approach in formulating and implementing school-based anti-bullying policies, as well as handling school bullying incidents in an appropriate manner. We also nurture students' positive values including respect for others as well as inclusion and friendship through the curricula, learning and teaching resources, diversified activities and teacher training. The EDB has also collaborated

with different government departments to cultivate a harmonious and caring school environment. With regard to a study on bullying among students in the report of the Programme for International Student Assessment 2018, we noted that the findings were mainly based on students' perception and, as stated in the report, may be affected by cultural and social norms in different regions as well as students' ability in distinguishing bullying. When compared with their counterparts in other regions, a higher proportion of students in Hong Kong indicated that "other students made fun of them". This may include innocent jokes among peers. Therefore, only with a thorough understanding and careful analysis can we find the right remedies to the problem.

Our reply to the Hon Lam So-wai's question is as follows:

(1) According to the information collected from the EDB's annual questionnaire survey on guidance and discipline cases in public sector primary and secondary schools, the number of student cases handled by schools related to school bullying in the past three school years was about 380 on average per year.

In fact, schools have all along been responsible for maintaining a harmonious environment in schools and handling incidents of bullying at schools. With reference to the School Administration Guide, the Guidelines on Teachers' Professional Conduct and related circulars issued by the EDB, schools are required to formulate school-based anti-bullying policies and handle school bullying incidents properly with education, guidance and protection of their students as the prime concern. Schools would refer to relevant guidelines of EDB for immediate intervention, mediation, in-depth investigation and follow-up, handle school bullying actively and seriously and provide appropriate guidance and education for the students involved. For cases of a more serious nature, schools are required to report to the EDB. If child maltreatment or illegal act is involved, schools should consult the Social Welfare Department (SWD) or report to the Police for assistance immediately.

Schools have all along been handling bullying incidents properly and explaining the incidents to parents in accordance with the school-based policies. Parents and other people may also seek assistance from the EDB as necessary. From 2020 to 2022, the EDB had received a total of 35 requests for assistance, complaints and reports in relation to school bullying, and all were followed up and handled seriously.

The occurrence of school bullying can often be attributed to factors such as the personalities and social skills of the students involved, as well as the awareness towards bullying and tolerance. To resolve the problem at root, we must start with values education. As such, the EDB has encouraged schools to build a caring school culture, continuously organised programmes and activities on students' growth to develop students' positive values and good moral character, launched the resource packages on prevention of school bullying and promoted the "Harmonious School – Anti-bullying" Campaign, with a view to helping schools further strengthen their anti-bullying work. In respect of cyber-bullying, we have provided schools with the "Information Literacy for Hong Kong Students" learning framework, teacher training,

information kits and video series to support them in undertaking relevant education. In addition, we have co-operated with other government departments and non-government organisations (NGO) to arrange student activities and parents' talks for teaching students not to initiate and participate in cyber-bullying. An NGO has also been commissioned to provide one-stop telephone and online support and counselling services to help teachers, students and parents of all primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong deal with various problems including cyber-bullying. We believe that with the efforts of different stakeholders and co-operation among various sectors in the community, we can surely build a more harmonious and caring school environment where our students can grow up healthily.

(2) The Hong Kong Police Force (the Police) attach great importance to the problem of school and cyber bullying, and have been actively adopting a multi-agency approach to closely liaise with young people by working with stakeholders such as schools, parents and NGOs through the School Liaison Officers in various police districts. To prevent youth crime, the Police have organised crime prevention talks and diversified youth activities in various districts to raise the law-abiding awareness of youngsters. Furthermore, a large-scale educational publicity campaign "Child Protection Campaign" was launched by the Police in 2021 and 2022 to promote, among other things, the messages of preventing school and cyber bullying. The Police arranged for mobile publicity vehicles to visit schools in various districts to provide virtual reality scenarios on bullying for young people to experience the harm of bullying. There were also anti-bullying animations to remind children and adolescents that school bullying may involve illegal acts, as well as to show them where they could seek help. Art workshops for children were also organised to remind children to say no to bullying through creative activities and encourage them to help victims of bullying with empathy. The Police plan to organise the "Child Protection Campaign" again in 2023.

The Police have been striving to strengthen the liaison and co-operation with primary and secondary schools, the EDB and the SWD through the Police School Liaison Programme to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency in tackling juvenile delinquency. Through inter-departmental and cross-sector co-operation, the Police establish good relationships with students, teachers and parents and instil a sense of discipline and positive values in students. In 2022, the School Liaison Officers of the Police paid more than 10 700 visits to primary and secondary schools and organised over 1 400 school talks.

In addition, the Police has continuously disseminated the latest information on anti-crime and related legislation to the general public and our youths through online social platforms and the "One-stop Child Protection Web Application", which was launched last year, with a view to enhancing the anti-crime awareness in the community on an on-going basis.

(3) The Internet is not an unreal world that is beyond the law. As far as the existing legislation in Hong Kong is concerned, most of the laws enacted to prevent crimes in the real world are applicable to the online world. All bullying activities, cyber or not, are governed by relevant legislation if they involve criminal offences. If a bullying incident involves a criminal

offence, such as criminal intimidation or blackmail, the Police will follow up and investigate.

In view of the potential for information technology, the computer and the Internet to be exploited for carrying out criminal activities, a sub-committee under the Law Reform Commission (LRC) has initiated a study on cybercrime to review existing legislation and other relevant measures, examine relevant developments in other jurisdictions, and recommend possible law reforms in accordance with the findings. The Government will pay close attention to the progress of the LRC's study.

Thank you, President.