

LCQ8: Putonghua proficiency of civil servants

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Lau and a written reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, in the Legislative Council today (May 18):

Question:

The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening Language and Writing Work in the New Era (the Opinions), which was issued at the end of last year by the General Office of the State Council, puts forward a goal of achieving a national Putonghua penetration rate of 85 per cent by 2025. On the other hand, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has indicated that its target is to develop and maintain a civil service that is proficient in both written Chinese and English as well as conversant in Cantonese, Putonghua and spoken English. Regarding the Putonghua proficiency of civil servants, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the number of Putonghua training programmes provided by the Government for civil servants and the number of participants, in each of the past five years; what measures are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of such training programmes;
- (2) whether it has assessed the current Putonghua proficiency of civil servants; if so, of the details and their proficiency as assessed; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (3) in view of the aforesaid goal put forward in the Opinions, whether the Government will include civil servants' participation in Putonghua training and their Putonghua proficiency as assessed in the considerations for promotion of civil servants; if so, of the details; if not, how it ensures that civil servants are proficient in Putonghua in order to achieve that goal?

Reply:

President,

Chinese and English are both the official languages of Hong Kong. It is the Government's policy to maintain a fully biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) civil service to ensure effective communication with the public in discharging their official duties. Heads of Department/Grade would, having regard to the job requirements of the grades under their purview, specify appropriate Chinese and English language proficiency requirements (including Putonghua) as part of the entry requirements of the grades concerned.

In fact, since 1998, Putonghua has become one of the compulsory subjects at the primary and junior secondary levels. It is stipulated that the subject should be taught by teachers who meet the Putonghua language proficiency requirements. From our overall observations, recruits to the civil service in recent years have in general attained a certain level of Putonghua proficiency. In assessing whether the candidates can meet the Putonghua proficiency required by the grade concerned, the recruiting department/grade may, having regard to its operational needs, decide on the appropriate assessment method(s), such as requiring candidates to answer questions in Putonghua during selection interviews, or requiring candidates to attain specific results in designated Putonghua proficiency tests.

Notwithstanding the above, the Civil Service College (the College) under the Civil Service Bureau is making on-going efforts to promote Putonghua training for civil servants to enhance their ability in using Putonghua. Taking into account the different needs of civil servants, the College provides training at different levels, including courses at basic, enhanced and professional levels, as well as those on enhancing customer service and communication. The College also organises thematic seminars on Putonghua, covering comparisons between Cantonese and Putonghua, presentation skills, ways to enhance Putonghua proficiency and workplace applications. Elements related to social developments in the Mainland have also been incorporated into the training, such as new things and topics involved in daily lives in Mainland cities, as well as differences between Cantonese and Putonghua in common expressions. In addition, the College provides civil servants with a wealth of e-learning resources, which cover correct pronunciation, similarities and differences between Cantonese and Putonghua, frequently-used terms, and common phrases, conversations and exchanges for official occasions etc.

In the past five years (from 2017 to 2021), the Civil Service Bureau organised nearly 500 Putonghua training courses and seminars for about 13 000 participants. We would collect participants' feedback on the programmes by means of evaluation questionnaires, and would keep in view the learning effectiveness of the programmes through class observations and exchanges with participants, commissioned institutions and trainers. The feedback of participants on the Putonghua programmes has been very positive. They generally considered the training useful to their work, and 95 per cent of the participants have rated the programmes as "outstanding" or "very effective". In addition to the training offered by the College, individual departments/grades also provide in-house Putonghua training to meet their operational needs.

Under the existing performance appraisal system, the ability of civil servants (particularly those of degree/professional grades) in using Putonghua at work is one of the competencies subject to assessment. The language-related qualifications acquired and training programmes attended during the appraisal period would be recorded in the appraisal. The appraising officer would also make recommendations on the appraisee's training needs (including those on language training).

The promotion of civil servants is based on the criteria stipulated in the Civil Service Regulations, including the officer's character, ability (both performance and potential), experience and qualifications prescribed for the promotion rank, and is subject to the selection and recommendation of the promotion board. The most meritorious and suitable officers would be selected for filling the posts in the promotion rank. Civil servants' language proficiency (including that of Putonghua) is reflected in their job performance, which in turn is one of the important factors to be considered for promotion.

The Civil Service Bureau will continue to strengthen Putonghua training for civil servants, and encourage them to actively participate in training programmes and make good use of e-learning resources for continuous learning, with a view to enhancing the overall ability of the civil service in using Putonghua.