

For discussion on
21 March 2016

**Legislative Council Panel on Education
Issues related to Student Suicide**

Purpose

This paper aims to brief Members on the existing measures, services and support as well as measures in response to the recent occurrence of student suicidal cases.

Background

2. Suicide is a complex behaviour with no single cause, but results from a complicated interaction of biological, psychological, cognitive and environmental factors. Every suicidal incident is unique with its own story behind, involving academic, health, family, relationship and friendship issues. Suicide of an individual usually happens with warning signs. To prevent suicide, we should aim at early detection and intervention with warning signs to be timely identified, risk factors mitigated and protective factors effectively enhanced. Regarding the various student suicide incidents that happened in recent months, the Government is deeply saddened and grieved. While conducting reflection on these incidents, we are making every effort to explore and analyse the problem in collaboration with professionals, and are also reviewing various measures provided by the Education Bureau (EDB) and other government departments, with an aim to avoid the occurrence of similar incidents.

Existing services and support

Early identification and intervention mechanism

3. The EDB recommends that schools should adopt a Three-tier Support Model to provide different levels of identification and support by teachers, guidance personnel and professional staff respectively who, with close communication with parents, help students with mental health needs and at risk of suicidal behaviour. At Tier-1 support, schools can identify students at risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties early through daily observations, review of student information/records, Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes and student surveys, etc. so that appropriate learning and teaching adjustment as well as environmental, guidance and activity arrangements can be made accordingly. If the students show no improvements despite the above efforts, they can be referred to school guidance teachers/personnel for further assessment so that the salient factors related to the emotional and behavioural problems concerned can be identified and additional support services, such as group work on self-management, emotion management, conflict management, etc. and parent training can be provided. This is Tier-2 support. If the problems of individual students persist and warrant professional assessment or consultation services, teachers may refer them to professionals, such as school-based

educational psychologists (EP)¹, clinical psychologists (CP), social workers of social welfare units or psychiatrists for in-depth assessment, diagnosis, treatment and follow-up, including medical treatment, counselling, individual support, etc., which is Tier-3 support.

4. If a student suicide case occurs, the school would promptly activate its crisis management team, and report the case to the respective Regional Education Office of the EDB to facilitate timely arrangement of professional staff and EPs for on-site support, assessing the impact of that suicidal case, formulating a crisis management plan and taking appropriate measures in response to the incident so as to provide appropriate intervention and support services to teachers, students and parents affected, including special class period, student and teacher group/individual counselling, parent briefing, etc.

Related teacher training and professional support

5. To enhance school personnel's awareness of students' behavioural and emotional changes, the EDB provides relevant training programmes annually to teachers, which include the Certificate Courses on Student Guidance and Discipline for primary and secondary teachers, the 120-hour thematic course entitled "Psychological Approach to Effective Strategies in Handling Students' Challenging Behaviour", structured training courses on supporting students with special educational needs pitched at Basic, Advanced and Thematic levels. From the 2011/12 to 2013/14 school years, the EDB also collaborated with the Hospital Authority (HA), to organize several regional seminars on psychosis for school guidance teachers/personnel. Professionals such as psychiatrists, EPs and social workers were invited to share their views on supporting students with mental health problems. In the 2013/14 and 2014/15 school years, the EDB worked with HA again to organize territory-wide seminars on depression and anxiety disorders for primary and secondary schools to enhance teachers' awareness of students' mental health needs. This year, the EDB will work with the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Community Support Project of HA in developing teaching resources on depression and anxiety disorders for teachers' reference.

6. To assist schools in supporting students with mental health needs, the EDB has produced an eBook on Student Suicide for Schools: Early Detection, Intervention and Postvention which has been uploaded onto the EDB website for schools' reference and use. A guideline entitled "How Schools can Help Students with Mental Health Problems?" is also provided in the School Administration Guide to remind schools of their role in helping these students adapt themselves to school life upon their return to school after treatment, in tandem with the medical treatment and rehabilitation requirements. In addition, schools will arrange multi-disciplinary case conferences when necessary for psychiatrists, medical social workers, EPs and school personnel (including school social workers and guidance personnel) to identify appropriate support measures for the students. These include creating a caring learning environment, making accommodations on learning and teaching, adjusting class arrangements, and providing counselling and peer support, etc. For students with significant adjustment difficulties, including those with severe emotional and behavioural problems, the EDB will consider providing their schools with a time-limited grant where appropriate for employing teaching assistants to help the students concerned follow classroom routines and learn effectively.

¹ The total number of full member of Division of Educational Psychology, the Hong Kong Psychological Society at present is about 240. There are 15 and 25 EP graduates from the two local universities (the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the University of Hong Kong) respectively in alternate years.

Strengthening students' positive values and resilience through the curriculum and activities

7. All along, the EDB has attached great importance to nurturing students' positive values and strengthening their ability to cope with adversity. In Hong Kong primary and secondary schools, the content of life education, such as "understand life", "cherish life", "respect life" and "explore life", has already been incorporated into different learning themes under the comprehensive school curriculum. For example, topics on "respect and value life" have been included in General Studies at primary level while themes on "respect life" and "sanctity of life" have been included in the Life and Society Curriculum at junior secondary level. The meaning of "life and death" is explored and reflected on in Ethics and Religious Studies at senior secondary level. At senior secondary level, Liberal Studies is the core subject which aims to help students understand their personal strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to manage stress and frustration as well as how to make decisions under the pressure of challenges for a positive and meaningful life in its curriculum aims. To facilitate the implementation of life education at schools, the EDB has provided schools with diversified and practical learning materials, including Life Event Exemplars, thematic webpages, education short films, reference materials, and worksheets. Also, the EDB has been organizing talks and workshops, such as "How to Enhance Students' Values Judgement" workshop, for teachers, by inviting scholars, experts and teachers to share implementation strategies and practical experience so as to raise the attendees' awareness of life education and enhance their teaching skills. In the recent two years, EDB has been helping schools in planning life education programmes through organizing learning communities, with a view to assisting schools in formulating overall life education curriculum as needed for enhancement of students' resilience.

8. In parallel with the curriculum, EDB has also organized diversified guidance and discipline programmes, such as the "Understanding Adolescent Project" for primary school students, the "Enhanced Smart Teen Project" in collaboration with disciplinary forces and uniform groups and "Pupil Ambassador: Active, Bright and Caring" for secondary school students, etc. to enhance students' resilience through adventure-based, team-building and problem-solving training, and cultivate their sense of dignity, self-discipline, responsibility and courage to make changes and take on challenges. In recent years, EDB has also launched pilot projects based on positive psychology concepts to help students develop a positive self-image and learn how to respect life and cherish what they have. Moreover, we have been promoting a caring and harmonious school culture, strengthening the relationship between teachers and students and enhancing peer support so that students can enjoy their learning and school life.

Enhancing education policies to improve students' learning motivation

9. The EDB understands that academic performance and further studies may induce certain pressure on some students. Over the past decade or so, the curriculum reform has been underpinned by a student-centered approach, and schools have been given support to flexibly adjust and formulate their school-based curriculum as well as teaching and assessment strategies in the best interest of students to cater for their learning diversity so as to improve their learning motivation. Applied Learning provides senior secondary students with wider subject choices to cater for their different needs and interests. These cover professional areas such as Creative Studies, Services, Applied Science in which students are interested. The EDB will continue to promote life planning education and related guidance

services to help students explore their future career and life goals according to their interest and potentials. To provide more diversified study pathways, the government has been adopting a two-pronged approach to promote the parallel development of both publicly-funded and self-financing institutions. Apart from increasing the number of degree and sub-degree programmes, the government also develops the Diploma Yi Jin Programme and vocational and professional education courses as well as expands the study pathways to the Mainland and overseas. Meanwhile, the government also promotes the Qualifications Framework to encourage students to pursue life-long learning through diversified pathways for continuous development. About two-thirds of students in the different cohorts have continued to pursue post-secondary studies, which is higher than that of secondary 5 graduates under the old academic system. Ample opportunities are provided for senior secondary graduates to further their studies, for example, 77 950 places were available in local institutions for about 74 000 candidates of the 2015 Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. About 46% of our young people in the relevant cohort now have access to degree-level education. Including sub-degree education, about 70% of them have access to post-secondary education.

10. On the other hand, the EDB has also been striving to remove drills and unnecessary pressure. Regarding the student workload, in the “Guidelines on Homework and Tests in Schools – No Drilling, Effective Learning” issued to schools in October 2015, we urge schools to formulate an appropriate and transparent school-based homework policy, conduct holistic review on it regularly, and also coordinate the amount of homework at different class levels. In the New Academic Structure Review from 2012 to 2015, recommendations on curriculum and assessment have been implemented by stages. These included increasing the flexibility of lesson time to enable schools and teachers to better deploy lesson time to suit the needs of their students and the school contexts; trimming, streamlining or updating curriculum contents; clarifying the breadth and depth of subject curricula for students and teachers to better understand curriculum contents and requirements; streamlining School-based Assessment (SBA) in most subjects and not implementing SBA in 10 subjects; and maintaining the whole-school curriculum framework as well as public examination grading mechanism to provide a stable environment for teachers to focus on teaching and provide pastoral care for their students. These measures were well-received, as supported by survey results which indicated that student and teacher workload has been reduced. At primary and junior secondary levels, the Curriculum Development Council is renewing the curricula of Key Learning Areas to respond to the changing needs of students and society. And the Coordinating Committee on Basic Competency Assessment and Assessment Literacy has completed a comprehensive review on the Territory-wide System Assessment. The Government is putting in place the Coordinating Committee’s recommendations progressively.

Support for post-secondary students

11. As for post-secondary students, all institutions funded by the University Grants Committee have established dedicated units to conduct mental health screening for students, promote mental health and provide students with professional counselling and related services. Some institutions incorporate positive psychology concepts in their teaching materials to strengthen resilience among students. Institutions also provide training for students to become mental health ambassadors and organise peer counselling activities.

Enhancing home-school cooperation and parent-child communication

12. Family plays an important role in prevention of student suicide, and students' ability to cope with adversity will be enhanced if parents maintain a good communication as well as a harmonious relationship with their children. To enhance parents' parenting and parent-child communication skills, parent-teacher associations (PTA) serve as a bridge between parents and teachers to foster their communication and understanding for the benefits of students. The EDB has been providing financial support to PTAs for organization of home-school co-operation and parent education activities on topics covering students' positive values and life styles, home-school cooperation and parenting skills. We also encourage parents to discuss with schools the specific needs of their children so that appropriate support will be offered according to individual student's needs. The EDB will explore how home-school co-operation could be further strengthened to better support students in learning and healthy development.

Cross-sector collaboration and whole community involvement

13. All along, the EDB has maintained communication and collaboration with related departments (including the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the Social Welfare Department (SWD), the HA, etc.). The Government also subvents the Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention of the Hong Kong University to conduct scientific and evidence-based researches. This Centre strives to develop effective strategies on suicide prevention, explore social and health policies to prevent suicide, and provide related training on suicide prevention for professionals.

14. The EDB has been working closely with HA to review and discuss ways to strengthen the existing notification, referral and support mechanism to ensure effective cross-disciplinary collaboration and communication. The EDB has already reached a consensus with the seven district centres of the Early Assessment Service for Young People under HA, in which schools can call the respective district service centres direct for expert advice and support, including assessment, thematic seminars/workshops and ongoing treatment services. To enhance the procedures of referring students to the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services of HA for psychiatric assessment, schools and EPs will obtain parental consent for making the referral and psychiatric assessment, as well as parental consent for HA to pass the psychiatric report to the school or EP for follow-up actions after the psychiatric assessment so as to ensure appropriate and timely treatment and support services provided to students with mental derangement.

15. The SWD has been subventing the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) of the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong to provide different dedicated services including outreaching, crisis intervention and intensive counselling for people who are at risk of suicide including children and youth. In recent years, SCIC has been implementing the cyber services and Web-engagement service of regular searches on blogs and social media with wording of suicide and reaching out to internet users with suicidal ideation to facilitate their ventilation of negative emotions. Currently, there are three non-governmental organisations providing 24-hour suicide prevention hotline services, namely Suicide Prevention Services Suicide Prevention Hotline, The Samaritans telephone hotline and The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong hotline). Besides, the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups has set up the "Hotline Service for Youth at Risk" for young people, which helps stabilise the emotion of young people facing crisis. The SWD has all along been promoting positive messages to the public and encouraging persons in distress to seek help early. In 2014, a series of short

animations titled “Wisdom of Parenting” were produced and uploaded onto Youtube to share key elements on how to promote children’s resilience. Besides, the SWD has just launched a new TV/Radio API promoting the message of “There are always more solutions than problems Love Yourself Love Your Family“.

16. The consecutive student suicide incidents appear to reflect some ‘contagious effect’. The widespread of continuous guesses and disturbing negative feelings may trigger more suicidal behaviors through imitation. We are therefore appealing to the community as a whole to look at this problem with a positive and active attitude. We should show more concern to people around us, disseminate more positive energy, and encourage people with suspected emotional problems to seek professional support. We should not spread out negative messages. As pointed out by a scholar studying the suicide issue, the media should also be prudent in reporting related news which may affect those who are emotionally vulnerable.

Student health service

17. Student Health Service (SHS) of Department of Health has been promoting the health, including psychosocial health, of primary and secondary school students and to increase their resilience and ability in facing adversity and managing stress. In the SHS Centre, services provided to primary and secondary school students include assessment of psychosocial health and behaviour through health assessment questionnaires. Students with emotional or behaviour problems will be referred to appropriate service units for further management according to actual situation and individual need. These include referral to clinical psychologists of SHS for detailed assessment, or referral to hospitals, specialist clinics, Social Welfare Department or other welfare agencies for further management of their problems. SHS also conducts health talks on topics of psychological health. Leaflets containing messages on psychological health are distributed to students. Promotion materials on mental health are also available on the SHS website.

18. Regarding outreach service, the Adolescent Health Programme (AHP) of the Student Health Service outreaches to secondary school students, their parents and teachers in school setting through a team of doctors, nurses, clinical psychologist and social workers, to provide Basic Life Skills Training and Topical programmes. Contents covered topics on emotion management, interpersonal relationship, communication skills, stress management, building self-image, knowledge on harmful effects of drinking and drug abuse, knowledge on psychosocial development and behaviour, goal setting, facing adversity and building up healthy lifestyle. These aims to enhance positive thinking and attitude towards life in adolescents and empower them to face adversities, challenges and changes encountered in the process of growing up..

Review on Mental Health

19. To ensure that our mental health regime can meet the service needs, the Food and Health Bureau has embarked on a review of the existing mental health policy and services through the setting up of a Review Committee on Mental Health in May 2013. Apart from reviewing the mental health services for adults and the elderly, the Review Committee has set up an expert group to review the existing mental health services for children and adolescents.

20. The expert group will soon conclude its review and submit its recommendations on how to improve the services to the Review Committee. One of the recommendations of the expert group is the setting up of a school platform where a multi-disciplinary team comprising educational, social welfare and healthcare professionals will be formed to follow up cases of students with mental health needs, and to provide support to their parents and teachers. The Food and Health Bureau is working with the EDB, SWD and HA on the recommendation with a view to enhancing the relevant support services.

Measures in response

21. Having regard to recent student suicide incidents, the EDB immediately held an urgent meeting with representatives of different educational and professional organizations on 10 March 2016, and put forward five measures right away as follows:

- (a) The EDB will set up a committee as soon as possible to study the problem of the issue and make recommendations on appropriate preventive measures. The committee will include school and parent representatives, professionals, and officials of different government bureaux and departments, and submit a report to the Secretary for Education in six months. If needed, the committee will submit an interim report in three months;
- (b) The EDB will arrange EPs and student guidance personnel to deliver 5 regional-based seminars with 4 for schools and 1 for parents in March and April in order to enhance the awareness and skills of the school personnel and parents on suicide prevention and intervention;
- (c) The educational psychologists of the EDB and school sponsoring bodies providing School-based Educational Psychology Service (SBEPS) will arrange school-based talks for teachers in March and April to enhance their identification of students with suicidal warning signs as well as knowledge on help-seeking resources, with a view to early identifying and supporting students with suicidal risk;
- (d) The EDB will also form a special team with EPs and guidance personnel as members to, in coordination with the school-based educational psychology service, provide additional support to individual schools on a need basis; and
- (e) The EDB will develop information kits for teachers, parents and students in order to facilitate their early identification of students with emotional difficulties and seeking of professional support.

22. We issued a letter to schools on 15 March to encourage schools to enhance their life education through various school-based activities according to their own circumstances and needs, and to conduct sessions on life education highlighting stress and coping strategies as well as positive values and attitudes, and information on seeking assistance for primary 5 and primary 6, and secondary school students in the earliest possible opportunity. Related teaching materials were provided for schools for reference.

23. The EDB will continue to collaborate closely with related government departments and organisations to heighten schools' awareness of students' mental health needs, so as to identify as early as possible students in need of assistance to avoid tragedies.

Advice sought

24. Members are invited to note and advise on the existing measures, services and support as well as measures in response to the recent occurrence of student suicidal cases.

Education Bureau

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