

**For discussion on  
4 April 2018**

**Legislative Council House Committee  
Subcommittee on Children's Rights**

**Follow-up Measures on Students' Non-attendance Cases**

**Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the measures taken by the Education Bureau (EDB) to follow up non-attendance cases of kindergarten (KG), primary and secondary school students.

**Background**

2. The reporting mechanism of non-attendance cases established by EDB originates from the consideration of administrative purposes. Regarding secondary and primary schools, EDB has to enforce the Education Ordinance (Cap 279) to ensure that parents cause their children aged between 6 and 15, who have not completed Secondary Three, to attend school regularly. EDB issued Circular No. 1/2009 "Upholding Students' Right to Education" requesting secondary and primary schools to report non-attendance cases to EDB on the 7th day of the student's continuous absence (regardless of their age, class level, sex, ethnicity or reasons of absence) in order to uphold students' right to education. As regards kindergartens (KGs) joining the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) or new KG education scheme (new Scheme), the PEVS subsidy and basic unit subsidy under the new Scheme are calculated on the basis of student enrolment. Hence, for safeguarding the use of public funding, these KGs are required by EDB to report absentees for an entire

month for consideration if the subsidy should be released. To facilitate handling of non-contact cases more effectively and thoroughly, EDB has recently revised the procedures in handling non-attendance cases of secondary and primary schools. As regards the reporting mechanism for absentees in KGs, in light of the need to holistically raise school personnel's alertness to suspected child abuse cases, EDB also decided to capitalize on the reporting mechanism of absentees to achieve this purpose, and support KGs in early identification of students in need of support or suspected child abuse cases so that early intervention and appropriate support and services can be timely provided. In this connection, EDB Circular No. 4/2018 "Reporting Mechanism for Absentees in KGs" was issued on 23 February 2018, requiring KGs to report to EDB on students' absence for seven consecutive school days without reasons or under doubtful circumstances.

### **Mechanism for handling non-attendance cases of primary and secondary schools**

3. Regarding primary schools, non-attendance cases are handled either by Student Guidance Officers stationing at schools deployed by EDB, Student Guidance Teachers or Student Guidance Personnel (including social workers) in schools. These professionals would provide necessary support to non-attendance students through the Comprehensive Student Guidance Services. Through telephone contacts, home visits, interviews, case conferences with relevant stake-holders (including teachers, multi-disciplinary professionals and parents of the students), etc., the needs and difficulties of non-attendance students are identified to facilitate their resumption to school.

4. As regards secondary schools, non-attendance cases of junior secondary level are handled by Student Guidance Officers of Non-attendance Cases Team (NACT) of EDB. Officers of NACT would handle non-attendance cases by conducting case analysis, collaborating with non-attendance students and their parents, schools and relevant

service organisations to help non-attendance students resume schooling, and follow up their adjustment after school resumption. For non-attendance students of senior secondary level (those aged 15 or above), NACT would contact parents or students concerned and arrange schools for their resumption or make referrals for them to participate in short courses organised by non-governmental social services organisations according to the choices of parents and students, with a view to preparing them for school resumption, joining vocational training or engaging in employment.

5. In handling non-attendance cases aged under 15, if it is confirmed that the student is suitable for school resumption and the parent insists not to cause his/her child to attend school without any reasonable excuse after EDB has made necessary inquiries, EDB may serve upon the parent an attendance order according to the Education Ordinance (Cap 279), requesting the parent to cause the child to attend school. In the 2017/18 school year, EDB served an attendance order to a parent of a non-attendance case and the student resumed schooling subsequently. Nevertheless, among non-attendance cases in recent years, quite a number of them were not owing to parents' insistence of not allowing their children to attend school, but due to problems encountered by the families or students themselves (for instances, parenting problems, mal-adjustment in learning or social interaction, acquiring undesirable behaviors, or suffering from mental or psychological distress, etc.). Serving attendance order to the parents could not address the students' problems. As such, EDB or schools would take into account the situation of the cases and refer them to the Social Welfare Department (SWD) or relevant social services agencies including the Hospital Authority, Integrated Community Centre for Mental Wellness, non-governmental social services organisations for offering appropriate professional services. EDB would collaborate with other departments to facilitate non-attendance students to resume schooling as soon as possible by addressing the root of the problem leading to their non-attendance.

## **Procedures of handling “non-contact” non-attendance cases**

6. EDB has been reviewing the handling procedures of non-attendance cases whenever necessary, with a view to enhancing the mechanism concerned. In 2013, EDB revised the procedures of handling “non-contact” non-attendance cases. According to the modified procedures, when NACT of EDB and school personnel could not make contact with parents or relatives of non-attendance students through home visits, telephone contacts or mails, case workers would, depending on the situation and needs of non-attendance cases, approach other departments for relevant contact information. For instance, NACT would liaise with the Housing Department to enquire about the latest residential address of the families for follow-up of cases residing in public housing estates. If the students have family or parenting problems, NACT would refer the cases to the Integrated Family Service Centre of non-governmental organizations/ SWD, Family and Child Protective Services Unit or Social Security Field Unit of SWD to enquire about information on the situation of the students and work out follow-up plan. NACT would also request the Immigration Department for departure check as appropriate for necessary follow-up arrangement. NACT would consider closing the cases only if no valid contact address or telephone number of the students or parents concerned is available.

7. In end-2017, EDB reviewed the procedures of handling “non-contact” non-attendance cases again to further step up the relevant follow-up procedures. According to the enhanced mechanism, EDB adopts more stringent procedures to handle non-attendance cases, including increasing the number of contacts and home visits, and strengthening collaboration with other departments. If EDB still could not make contact with the students or parents after paying frequent home visits and making enquiries to other departments (including SWD, Immigration Department, Housing Department, etc.), EDB would refer the cases to other departments, for instance, the Hong Kong Police (the Police) or SWD for appropriate follow-up. More importantly, EDB

would follow up every non-attendance case thoroughly, repeat the above procedures regularly, and would not close any cases because it is unable to contact the school aged students or their parents.

### **Mechanism for reporting absentees in kindergartens**

8. As for KGs, starting from 15 March 2018, they must report to EDB on students' absence for seven consecutive school days without reasons or under doubtful circumstances. The objective of this arrangement is to raise the alertness of school personnel and support KGs in early identification of students in need of support or suspected child abuse cases so that early intervention and appropriate support and services can be timely provided.

9. Upon receiving the report from KGs, EDB will contact the school for details and, taking into account the situation of individual student and family, remind the school to handle the case according to the EDB circular (or guidelines) and SWD's "Procedural Guide for Handling Child Abuse Cases" (Guide), and discuss with the school how to handle the case, including approaching SWD for professional advice or support. KGs should continue to liaise with relevant departments after reporting the non-attendance cases, follow up on the latest development and report the progress of follow-up by completing a simple follow-up form in seven working days after reporting the absentee to EDB. EDB will keep in view progress of the schools' follow-up on the case, and discuss with the schools concerned for further necessary actions.

10. EDB's latest requirement for KGs to report students' absence for seven consecutive school days without reasons or under doubtful circumstances is considered in light of the need to enhance the alertness of school personnel regarding suspected child abuse cases. The key to early identification of child abuse cases in fact is not the number of days of absence as specified by EDB in the mechanism of reporting absentees. Children suffering from child abuse are not necessarily absentees from

schools. To facilitate relevant personnel's early intervention to suspected child abuse cases, KGs should not be limited by reporting to EDB only or rigidly bound by reporting to EDB first. We have emphasised in our circular that should they find, or suspect, any child abuse cases, they should not be limited by the number of days of absence in reporting to relevant departments. Even if a student is absent for less than seven school days, or even attending school as usual, or absent intermittently, should the school personnel notice any wounds or any signs of child abuse, it should immediately refer to the SWD's Guide, complete the Report Form as appropriate for reporting to EDB, and in parallel seek assistance from SWD and/or the Police.

11. The key to early identification and early intervention of child abuse cases is to enhance the awareness of the school personnel in identifying child abuse, their ability in crisis assessment, and multi-disciplinary collaboration. In this connection, EDB will continue to collaborate with SWD and the Police in organising talks and seminars. In late January and early February this year, EDB jointly organised four seminars with SWD and the Police, introducing how to identify and make referrals for suspected child abuse cases, strengthening teachers' ability and sensitivity in identifying the symptoms of child abuse, and enhancing their understanding of the procedures in handling child abuse cases. Another round of seminars were/would be held in March and April this year to introduce early identification, mechanism for reporting absentees in KGs, and support provided by relevant departments.

12. As regards the mechanism of reporting students' absence for an entire month by KGs joining the new Scheme, its function is different from the above-mentioned mechanism for reporting KG students' absence without reasons or under doubtful circumstances. The former serves to confirm whether subsidy for the students concerned should be released for that month, while the latter serves to help KGs identify students in need of support or suspected cases of child abuse. Therefore, after the implementation of the above-mentioned reporting mechanism,

KGs should continue with the prevailing practice of reporting students' absence for an entire month<sup>1</sup>.

### **Concluding remarks**

13. EDB has proactively stepped up the measures for reporting and handling non-attendance cases in KGs, primary and secondary schools. We will keep reviewing and enhancing relevant mechanisms whenever necessary as well as strengthening collaboration with other departments so as to uphold the students' right to education and safeguard their safety.

14. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper.

**Education Bureau**

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<sup>1</sup> This arrangement is also applicable to the 7 KGs joining PEVS in the 2016/17 school year, but not joining the new Scheme in the 2017/18 school year. Their eligible students admitted before the 2017/18 school year and remaining in the eligible classes (i.e. Lower and Upper KG classes in the 2017/18 school year, and Upper KG classes in the 2018/19 school year) will continue to receive the voucher subsidy until they leave the KGs concerned.