

For discussion on

7 April 2022

Legislative Council Panel on Education
Anti-epidemic Measures in the School Sector

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the schooling and vaccination arrangements amid the fifth wave of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic in Hong Kong as well as other related anti-epidemic and support measures in schools.

Background

2. The Education Bureau (EDB) has been closely monitoring the development of the COVID-19 epidemic situation in Hong Kong, listening to the advice of health experts, maintaining communication with the school sector, implementing various anti-epidemic measures in schools to safeguard the health of students, as well as reviewing and adjusting the schooling arrangements in a timely manner.

Anti-epidemic Measures at Schools

3. Schools are places where a large number of students study and engage in activities. On-campus activities are frequent. The EDB has all along been requesting and assisting schools to put in place anti-epidemic measures through a multi-pronged approach, so as to create a safe and hygienic campus environment for students to study with a peace of mind. The major measures are as follows:

Arrangements for “Vaccine Pass”

4. Further to the vaccination or regular virus testing requirements imposed by the EDB that schools should comply with at the start of this school year on 1 September 2021, the EDB has formally implemented the “Vaccine Pass” arrangements starting from 24 February 2022. Except for

exempted persons holding a medical certificate proving that the medical condition does not permit vaccination, all teachers, school staff, persons providing on-campus services and visitors, etc., are required to present vaccination records of at least the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine prior to their entry into school premises. All teaching and non-teaching staff directly employed by schools having received only one dose of COVID-19 vaccine are required to receive the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine before 21 April 2022. With reference to the updates on the “Vaccine Pass” requirements for other premises, we will also require that starting from 31 May 2022, the abovementioned persons have to receive the third dose within 5 months after they have received the second dose of vaccine.

Vaccination

5. Vaccination is the most effective safeguard measure and it can prevent severe cases and reduce the risk of fatalities effectively. Students is one of the priority protection groups. We have been working closely with relevant Government departments to actively promote vaccination of students. At present, the first-dose vaccination rate for 12- to 19- year-olds has reached 96%, while that for children aged 3 to 11 years old is just over 60%. We will continue to encourage eligible students to receive vaccination.

6. We have been supporting and strongly advocating schools to race against time to make full use of various measures and means provided by the Government to arrange vaccination for students, including:

- (i) Schools can arrange group booking for students to Community Vaccination Centres (CVCs) or designated Student Health Service Centres of the Department of Health for vaccination. The Government provides schools booking and transportation services. At present, there are 27 CVCs in operation, with 3 of them (including The Hong Kong Spinners Industrial Building in Cheung Sha Wan, Millennium City 5 and MTR Tsing Yi Station) newly opened in March 2022, providing Sinovac vaccine to all eligible persons aged 3 years old or above. There are also four Children Community Vaccination Centres providing BioNTech vaccines for children aged 5 to 11 years old. In addition, the CVCs provides

“same-day ticket” arrangements to children, adolescents and elderly; and

- (ii) Schools may arrange onsite vaccination through COVID-19 Mobile Vaccination Stations (MVS) ¹. The Government has recently introduced an additional MVS to facilitate students, teachers, school staff, parents, and their family members to receive Sinovac vaccines. Schools may contact doctors on their own or through the EDB to match doctors under the “Vaccination Subsidy Scheme (VSS) School Outreach” to provide outreach vaccination services for students receiving Sinovac vaccines.

7. As at March 31 this year, the EDB has arranged doctors to provide VSS School Outreach Services to 110 schools (some of the schools have contacted other schools nearby to arrange students to have vaccination on their campuses), with a total of 211 schools with students receiving Sinovac vaccine. The EDB will continue to urge schools to make use of diversified means, including Parent-Teacher Association etc., to step up the promotion and encourage parents to proactively arrange vaccination for students, in order to protect the health of individuals and the community as well as to create favourable conditions for the resumption of face-to-face classes.

8. While we have no plan in principle to make vaccination a prerequisite for resuming face-to-face classes, we believe there is a need to strengthen vaccination requirements for individual groups, including students who require special care. At present, some schools (especially special schools) with boarding sections continue to operate during the special holiday and even if schools will not resume face-to-face classes after the holiday, the school premises have to remain open. In order to further protect the health and safety of teachers and school staff as well as students (especially boarders), the following individual groups of students must be vaccinated. The specific requirements are as follows:

- (i) secondary schools: students who need to go back to school to be

¹ For details of the facilitation measures, please refer to the EDB website on “COVID-19 Vaccination Programme” (<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/sch-admin/admin/about-sch/diseases-prevention/early-vaccination.html>)

taken care of should receive two doses of vaccine;

- (ii) kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres (collectively referred to as ‘KGs’) and primary schools : students who need to go back to school to be taken care of should receive one dose of vaccine and the second dose of vaccine in accordance with the relevant schedule; and
- (iii) boarding sections: boarders residing in the boarding sections of schools (including special schools) under the EDB should receive one dose of vaccination before 15 May and receive two doses of the vaccine in accordance with the relevant schedule².

For boarders who could produce medical certificates certifying that they are unfit for vaccination or have been infected with COVID-19, this restriction will not apply.

“Health Protection Measures for Schools”

9. Schools have been strictly putting in place the various anti-epidemic measures stipulated in the “Health Protection Measures for Schools” issued and from time to time updated by the EDB and the “Health Advice to Schools for the Prevention of COVID-19” issued by the Centre for Health Protection, including observing the testing requirements, making follow-up arrangements for “confirmed” or “close contact” cases, wearing masks all the time within school campuses, maintaining appropriate social distances, and measuring temperatures of teachers and students at school entrances, in order to safeguard the health of teachers and students. Schools should also always keep the school environment clean and hygienic.

10. In response to the recent development of the epidemic and the corresponding updates on testing and vaccination requirements, the EDB

² The EDB has arranged a number of vaccinations for special schools in August 2021, February and March 2022, and is now arranging a new round of vaccinations from April to May 2022. For children and adolescents aged 3 to 17 years old, the interval between of the first two Sinovac vaccines should be 28 days, for children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 years old, the interval between the first two BioNTech vaccinations should be 56 days. Please refer details to https://www.covidvaccine.gov.hk/pdf/FAQ_children_adolescents_ENG.pdf

is maintaining close contact with the relevant Government departments to revise the contents of the “Health Protection Measures for Schools”, with a view to providing clearer and more detailed guidelines to meet the actual operational needs of schools, and will promulgate the same timely before the resumption of face-to-face classes.

Anti-epidemic Support Measures for Schools

11. In order to help schools better implement their anti-epidemic work, the EDB has provided additional support for schools in terms of financial resources and materials, and some measures have also benefitted the relevant trades that provide services to schools.

Special Grant

12. In order to help schools cope with the epidemic and get prepared for resumption of face-to-face classes, the EDB disbursed in March and April 2022 a one-off Special Anti-epidemic Grant to all schools offering a full and formal curriculum in Hong Kong (i.e. all public sector schools, Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools, private primary and secondary schools, and KGs) for them to purchase equipment/items for epidemic prevention, or procure the relevant services and items for cleaning the school premises and pay for the relevant expenses for student vaccination arrangements. An additional expenditure of about \$62 million is involved, benefitting about 2 200 schools.

Enhancement of Ventilation Facilities

13. The EDB announced in March 2022 the provision of one-off grants to KGs joining the kindergarten education scheme, as well as DSS schools and caput schools to conduct ventilation assessments and enhance ventilation conditions on the school premises. The total expenditure involved is about \$70 million. Besides, the EDB has completed the ventilation inspections in aided schools and has been following up on the necessary enhancement measures. The EDB has also initiated ventilation inspections and related works for Government schools.

Distribution of Anti-epidemic Materials

14. Noting that needy families may have difficulties when acquiring additional masks for their children, the EDB has been providing masks to needy students through their schools since May 2020. The EDB has distributed 93 million masks to schools so far. Besides, the EDB distributed around 30 000 COVID-19 rapid antigen test kits, 40 000 face masks and 16 000 protective gowns to 23 special schools with boarding section from February to March 2022.

Provision of Relief Grants

15. The EDB assists the following education-related trades and its stakeholders who are seriously affected by the epidemic through the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF):

- (i) One-off relief grant to providers of catering services for schools as well as post-secondary education institutions, interest classes, and school bus services for schools

The EDB has provided relief grant to school-related service providers through the second to sixth rounds of the AEF. As at 1 April 2022, the numbers of benefitted operators of catering outlets, lunchbox suppliers, instructors of school learning/interest classes and providers of school bus services, by cumulative number of approved cases, are 4 400, 4 400, 85 000 and 49 000 respectively, involving a total amount of about 1.56 billion.

- (ii) One-off relief grant to private schools offering non-formal curriculum (PSNFCs) (commonly known as “tutorial schools”)

The EDB has provided one-off relief grants to PSNFCs under the second to the sixth round of the AEF. Around 2 700 PSNFCs have been benefitted from the grants, and the total expenditure involved is about \$400 million.

(iii) One-off grant to private day schools

The EDB has provided a one-off relief grant to private primary and secondary day schools under the third to the sixth round of the AEF. Around 165 private day schools have been benefited with a total amount of about \$40 million.

(iv) One-off Grant to KGs

Further to the provision of a one-off grant to all KGs in March and April 2020 by using the EDB's resources, the EDB has provided several rounds of one-off relief subsidies to KGs under the third to sixth rounds of the AEF. About 1 000 KGs have been benefited, incurring an expenditure of about \$480 million.

Arrangements for Resumption of Face-to-face Classes

16. The fifth wave of COVID-19 epidemic is very severe, and the Government has taken decisive measures and announced that the summer vacation of all schools in the current school year be brought forward from July / August to March / April so that efforts and resources from all sectors can be concentrated to fight the epidemic. Schools may start the special vacation on 7 March 2022 (but not later than March 17) while the last school day in the current school year is 12 August 2022 in principle.

17. The Government announced in the mid-March that according to the latest development of the epidemic, all schools in Hong Kong can resume half-day face-to-face classes in an orderly and phased manner after schools' Easter holidays, that is, the earliest on 19 April 2022, as originally planned. We plan to allow primary schools, schools offering non-local curriculum (including international schools) and KGs to resume face-to-face classes by phases first, while secondary schools will wait for the completion of the core subjects of the 2022 Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) (i.e. after 29 April this year) before resuming face-to-face classes by phases. During the period of core subject examinations, if schools can still deploy manpower in addition to handling work related to the 2022 HKDSE, they can consider conducting online lessons. The abovementioned face-to-face classes will remain on a half-day basis to reduce the risk of infection.

18. While we announced earlier the timetable for class resumption, we have also stated that when the teachers and school staff as well as students have achieved a high vaccination rate, an effective anti-epidemic barrier will be built. Such schools concerned may arrange more learning time for their students. The EDB will, taking into account the actual circumstances of schools, allow them to arrange whole-day face-to-face classes of the whole school, or allow the schools concerned to arrange whole-day face-to-face classes for students in individual class levels with high vaccination rates. Besides, schools can arrange non-academic extra-curricular activities (e.g. music and physical activities) in the other half days for individual students having received vaccination. As testing is helpful to monitor the epidemic situation in schools, we are considering stepping up the testing requirements. We will continue to monitor closely the epidemic development in Hong Kong, listen to the views of health experts, maintain communication with the school sector and announce the detailed arrangements before the Easter Holidays.

Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination

19. The EDB and the Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority (HKEAA) announced on 4 April 2022 that the 2022 HKDSE will commence from 22 April under a compressed timetable. Around 60% of the candidates would have sat for exam of all subjects applied within the first two weeks and the exam period would last till 14 May 2022. The release day for the 2022 HKDSE Exam Result would remain on 20 July 2022. The HKEAA will enhance its precautionary measures to safeguard the health of the candidates and examination personnel, including provision of Rapid-Antigen Test (RAT) kits for every examination day to candidates and examination personnel. Moreover, on discussion with the relevant Government departments and with their collaborative effort and support in making available the Community Isolation Facilities (CIFs), the following special measures would be adopted for the 2022 HKDSE:

- (i) to facilitate HKDSE candidate to timely sit for exam in the morning, they would be accorded priority for testing and obtaining PCR test results under restricted testing declaration operations;

- (ii) a Special Examination Centre would be set up at the Penny's Bay Community Isolation Facilities (PBCIF) for candidates who are not a confirmed case but under quarantine order; and
- (iii) subject to the health condition of the candidates who have been infected with COVID-19, they may opt for sitting for examinations at the special examination centre in the PBCIF.

The EDB will arrange point-to-point transportation for candidates to commute to PBCIF for quarantine or isolation and attend the HKDSE examinations. We are working to enhance the logistics with relevant departments and stakeholders for the convenience of the candidates, as well as to minimise the risk of confirmed candidate patients and close contact candidates in spreading the epidemic in the community.

Supporting Students' Learning

20. During the suspension of face-to-face teaching, schools flexibly deployed different learning and teaching modes to assist students in learning from home (including e-learning) to sustain their momentum in learning, and thus achieving "suspending class without suspending learning". Schools have accumulated many valuable experiences. Other than providing schools with a wide range of online resources, the EDB also provide support to teachers in need through hotline, mobile applications and webinars. The Government has also implemented different measures to support grass-roots students' e-learning. In respect of electronic devices, the EDB has, through the Community Care Fund, implemented a 3-year assistance programme from the 2018/19 to 2020/21 school years to subsidise needy primary and secondary school students to purchase mobile computer devices. This is to relieve the financial burden on students from low-income families under the development of the Bring Your Own Device policy in schools and to support their e-learning at home amid the epidemic. During the 3-year implementation period, the programme benefited 176 000 students and the subsidy amount involved was about \$670 million. The Student Finance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency and the Social Welfare Department have implemented the Subsidy Scheme for Internet Access Charges (Scheme) since the 2010/11 school year to disburse Internet access

subsidies to eligible families to facilitate needy students' online learning at home. In the 2021/22 school year, the full rate and half rate of the subsidy for each family each year are \$1,600 and \$800 respectively. As at 31 January 2022, the Scheme benefited about 175 600 families and the expenditure involved was about \$237 million. In addition, to strengthen support for needy primary and secondary school students who are unable to acquire appropriate Internet services due to the constraints in their living environment, the EDB provided a one-off top-up grant from late 2020 to early 2021 for schools in need to meet the additional expenses incurred in purchasing portable WiFi routers and/or mobile data cards. In the 2020/21 school year, the initiative benefited over 15 400 students and involved an additional expenditure of about \$14 million.

21. To further support schools in implementing the blended mode of teaching and learning under the “new normal”, the Quality Education Fund (QEF) has implemented a 3-year programme, namely, the Quality Education Fund e-Learning Funding Programme - Provision of Mobile Computer Devices and Internet Services Support (Funding Programme) starting from the 2021/22 school year. Under the Funding Programme, public sector primary and secondary schools (including special schools) and DSS schools may apply for funding through simplified procedures to purchase mobile computer devices for loan to needy students. The maximum amount of funding for each student is \$4,700. Schools may also provide portable Wi-Fi routers and mobile data cards for students who are unable to acquire appropriate Internet services due to the constraints in their living environment. The maximum amount of additional funding for each student in this regard is \$1,700. Apart from students receiving the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance or the School Textbook Assistance, beneficiaries also include students with genuine financial needs as identified by schools according to their school-based criteria. The QEF has reserved \$1.5 billion for this 3-year Funding Programme and it is expected to benefit some 310 000 students. In the 2021/22 school year, about 710 schools have participated in the Funding Programme so far.

Supporting Healthy Growth of Students

22. The EDB is committed to the healthy development of students, and has been assisting schools in adopting the Whole School Approach to

promote mental health among students and enhance support for those with mental health needs at three levels, namely Universal, Selective and Indicated. Since the outbreak of the epidemic, professionals of different disciplines in a school (including guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists have been providing students with appropriate emotional and psychological support. During the time when the epidemic was less severe and schools resumed half-day and/or whole-day face-to-face classes, teachers and designated school personnel would pay attention to students' emotion and behaviour and render support as necessary. When face-to-face classes were suspended, the physical and mental health of students would be addressed through other means. For example, teachers and designated school personnel would keep in contact with, and show concern for, students through telephone and electronic communication, and find out whether they need further assistance through close observation of their performance and enhanced communication with their parents. If students are found to be emotionally disturbed, teachers will refer them to professionals, with a view to helping them cope with difficulties in studies, social interaction and/or emotional development.

23. The EDB has been maintaining communication with schools and reminding them of the need to keep track of students' learning performance and emotion and communicate with parents on a regular basis, so as to review and adjust the support strategies and initiatives at different stages. The EDB also issues online resources from time to time, including launching the one-stop student mental health information website "Mental Health @ School" (mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk) in August 2021 and fully utilising the "Smart Parent Net" website (www.parent.edu.hk) to disseminate a wide range of mental health information to schools and parents, with a view to taking care of students' and parents' mental health by different means. In addition, in April 2021, the EDB provided the first set of PowerPoint slides and resources for school-based EPs to conduct school-based workshops for teachers on early identification of students with mental health needs. In November 2021, the EDB also organised two large-scale seminars, which were attended by more than 1 750 principals, guidance teachers and school social workers of primary and secondary schools in total. Upon gradual resumption of face-to-face classes after the special holiday and Easter holiday, students have to make

adjustment and may require additional support. In response to this, starting from April 2022, the EDB will roll out a new round of events for promoting students' mental health, including conducting two territory-wide seminars for schools in April; providing a new set of reference materials for school-based EPs in April, which are richer in contents and comprise case studies, to facilitate their arrangement of respective school-based workshops; and launching the "Start the Day Full of Energy" Slogan Design Competition for students in May, etc.

Way Forward

24. The EDB is thankful to school staff, parents and students for their efforts in preventing and fighting the epidemic in the past, actively dovetailing with the Government's health protection arrangements, flexibly adapting to changes and joining hands together with the community. We will announce detailed arrangements for resumption of face-to-face classes to all schools in Hong Kong in due course. The EDB will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation, seek professional advice of health experts and maintain communication with the school sector, with a view to reviewing the anti-epidemic measures and schooling arrangements in a timely manner.

Advice Sought

25. Members are invited to note the content of this paper and provide comments.

Education Bureau
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