To: Principals and Special Educational Needs Coordinators of All Schools  
(Including Members of Student Support Team and Guidance Team)

Dear Principals and Teachers,

Integration and Application of Knowledge, Experience and Resources  
Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in the Epidemic

In recent months, the Government has decided to suspend classes of all schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the community. In this period, some students may feel disturbed and students with special educational needs (SEN) may even face different challenges. We are thankful for your professionalism and concerted effort in supporting our students and accompanying them through the difficult times.

In this school year, the Education Bureau (EDB) has provided each public sector ordinary primary and secondary school with a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). The SENCO is responsible for coordinating and promoting integrated education, and leading the Student Support Team (SST) to provide support for students with SEN. We appeal to the school principals and vice-principals to continue supporting the SENCOs in carrying out appropriate support measures and activities basing on the Whole School Approach to cater for students’ learning, social, emotional and behavioural needs.

During the class suspension period, schools’ support plan for students with SEN shall be adjusted according to the changing needs. The SENCO shall lead the SST to review and adjust the content of support plans, and continue to provide various means of support for students with SEN, including regular communication with the parents to understand the students’ learning and emotional needs and changes, provision of
appropriate learning materials and adjusted schoolwork, and reviewing of students’ progress with their parents jointly. Besides, the SST may contact outsourced service providers to follow up the arrangement of support services during and after class suspension, work with professionals (such as educational psychologists (EPs), speech therapists and social workers, etc.) to support individual students with special difficulties and their parents, discuss with the subject teachers and class teachers on the learning difficulties encountered by students with SEN during the suspension period, and to prepare for the arrangement of teaching accommodations and support services upon class resumption.

Meanwhile, the EDB has released some resources and recommended support strategies, including supporting students with autism spectrum disorders in adaptation to the suspension and resumption of classes, helping students with attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder in time management and handling online learning, and activities designed to improve the literacy skills of students with specific learning difficulties in reading and writing. We have sent the above resources to the SENCOs and school-based EPs via e-mail for their reference and use.

**Gearing up to Enhance the Support for Catering Students’ Mental Health**

In addition to taking care of students with SEN, we encourage schools to pay more attention to the overall mental health of students. In last September, we issued letters and guidelines to all schools and parents to lay out the basic principles for managing students’ emotions in response to the social unrest, and provided teachers and other school professionals with information on mental health and professional support services. In addition, we organised different thematic workshops and talks. Schools gave very positive feedback and opined that the training content was concrete as well as practical.

In response to the mental health support needs of students, we will further collaborate with professional bodies to produce a series of short psychoeducational videos in layman’s terms with a view to equipping teachers and parents with methods to deal with the negative emotions of their students and children when facing a number of stressful events. We are also planning to organise regional-based workshops for teachers and guidance personnel at a later appropriate time, where experts (e.g. psychiatrists, psychologists, etc.) will be invited again to share practical skills for supporting students and discuss case studies with participants. Details will be announced separately.

**Support Services provided by Non-Governmental Organisations**

The Government has liaised with some non-governmental organisations to provide professional support services for people (including children and adolescents) with
emotional distress in reaction to the social unrest and epidemic through their mental health support programmes. These professional support services include the “Care4ALL” programme implemented by the Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists. Eligible citizens can receive a maximum of 8 sessions of free psychiatric consultation and a medication subsidy of up to HK$6,000. The Hong Kong Council of Social Service is also implementing a programme called “Time To Heal” to provide 4 to 8 sessions of free psychological assessment and intervention; and subsidy on psychological intervention as well as medical treatment. If long-term clinical follow-up is needed, participants of the aforesaid programmes can be referred to the Psychiatry Specialist Outpatient Clinics under the Hospital Authority (HA) or other settings for further treatments if appropriate. School personnel may refer to the Appendix to learn more about mental health information and professional support services provided by the government departments and other organisations.

Integration of Experience, Making Good Use of Resources

The EDB has been encouraging schools to adopt the Whole School Approach directed at three levels, namely “Universal”, “Selective” and “Indicated” to promote mental health amongst students and enhance support for students with mental health needs. We also provide schools with additional resources, teacher training and professional support to help them cater for students with SEN. Here we outline the main points of the measures so that schools can review, integrate and make good use of different resources and experiences to cater for students with mental health needs.

(1) Additional Resources

In recent years, the EDB has been continuously organising and allocating more resources in optimising diversified development programmes, such as the “Understanding Adolescent Project”, “Enhanced Smart Teen Project” and “Pupil Ambassador Scheme on Positive Living”, etc. The resilience of the participating students should have been enhanced. The EDB and the Department of Health jointly launched the “Joyful@School Campaign”, which provided resources for schools to organise mental health promotion activities. Meanwhile, schools have accumulated much experience and good practices in the promotion of mental health. Many schools have also continued using school-based resources and other funding in organising activities to promote the whole-person development of students. We encourage schools to consolidate and make good use of relevant experiences, to continue the promotion of students’ mental health and resilience at the Universal level (such as curriculum, guidance and discipline work, and developmental activities). The Quality Education Fund is also available for schools’ application to organise relevant activities at appropriate period.
Starting from the 2017/18 school year, the Learning Support Grant (LSG) covers students with mental illness. Many schools have used the LSG to employ teaching assistants to assist teachers in designing learning materials and supporting students in classroom learning activities, hire professional support services, implement school-based teacher training and parent education, etc., so as to enhance their abilities to cater for the needs of the students concerned. Starting from the 2019/20 school year, schools can have additional regular teaching post(s), namely Special Educational Needs Support Teacher (SENST), converted/provided on account of LSG reaching the specific threshold and the SENST shall be a member of the SST. Riding on the established foundation, we appeal the Guidance Team and the SST of school to actively review the collaboration experience over the past two years, make better use of the stabilised teacher manpower and flexibly deploy the additional resources, and to select the effective support strategies for enhancing specifically the support for students with mental illness.

(2) Teacher Training

Starting from the 2007/08 school year, the EDB has been providing serving teachers with structured training courses on supporting students with SEN pitched at basic, advanced and thematic levels (BAT Courses). Some modules of the BAT Courses cover mental illness in order to enhance teachers’ understanding in supporting students with mental health needs. The current training cycle will end in the 2019/20 school year. We have reviewed the experiences in commissioning tertiary institution to organise teacher training on special education and have consulted relevant stakeholders on the current teacher training on special education. We are now formulating the special education training arrangements for the next training cycle, including the development of an online basic course.

From the 2017/18 school year onwards, the EDB organises the “Professional Development Programme for Mental Health”, including 3-day (18 hours) elementary training and 5-day (30 hours) in-depth training for teachers. Moreover, the EDB organises talks, seminars and experience sharing sessions, etc. every year to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills in supporting students with mental health needs. In the first term of the current school year, we have invited psychiatrist and psychologist to conduct a series of workshops and thematic talks to assist schools in acquiring the skills to communicate with students and handle mental health crisis, and to provide psychological support for teaching staff and students after the occurrence of an emergency incident. Schools should make good use of the knowledge and skills of the teachers who have participated in the training to help students with mental health needs. Teachers can also refer to the practical manuals that were published and uploaded onto the EDB website, including “A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting
and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours” and “Teacher’s Resource Handbook on Understanding and Supporting Students with Mental Illness” which was developed in collaboration with the HA, to deepen the understanding of mental health so as to enhance the effectiveness in catering for the students in school.

(3) Professional Support

Starting from the 2016/17 school year, all public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools have been provided with the School-based Educational Psychology Service. Through regular school visits, EPs provide preventive, developmental and remedial services at the school system, teacher and student levels in order to cater for students with diverse educational needs. In the same school year, the Food and Health Bureau, in collaboration with the EDB, the HA and the Social Welfare Department, has launched the “Student Mental Health Support Scheme” to provide appropriate support services to students with mental health needs through the interdisciplinary teams at schools. With the support of the professional team, participating schools of the Scheme can further step up the support for the students concerned.

Furthermore, starting from the 2018/19 school year, the Government has provided public sector primary schools with additional resources to enable them to implement the policy of “one school social worker for each school” according to school-based circumstances. To enhance the mental health and resilience of adolescent, the Government has provided additional resources in the 2019/20 school year to implement the policy of “two social workers for each school” in secondary schools, so that school social workers can have sufficient capacity to provide students with more in-depth guidance and support. Schools can make good use of the professional services of EPs and school social workers to jointly enhance students’ mental health and resilience.

As shown from the above measures, schools have accumulated a fund of knowledge, experience and resources at different levels to take care of students with SEN and those with mental health needs. We hope that schools will integrate and apply them flexibly as well as holistically, so as to ensure that students will receive appropriate support and grow in a caring environment.

Yours sincerely,

(Godwin LAI)
for Secretary for Education
Appendix

Mental Health Information and Professional Support Services

**Related Information**

1. Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health – Mental Health Infostation
   The Mental Health Infostation serves as a one-stop portal clustering useful information related to mental well-being, mental distress and resources for seeking help.

2. Student Health Service, Department of Health – Emotional Health Tips
   This webpage provides children and adolescents with tips for maintaining emotional health through a series of infographics.

3. Student Health Service, Department of Health – YouthCan
   The webpage explores different challenges that students face as they grow up based on school-related events. It promotes mental well-being through multi-media approach including short videos, moving images and infographics.

4. Education Bureau – Prevention of Student Suicides and Promotion of Student Mental Health
   The webpage includes relevant resource packages and guidelines, infographics, videos, reports and related documents, community resources and helplines on counseling and prevention of suicides.
5. Education Bureau – Smart Parent Net
   The website provides information on parent education. It enables parents with children from kindergarten to primary and secondary school levels to easily access useful information on supporting the physical and mental development of students, which includes parent-child relationship, parenting skills and children’s mental health.
   https://www.parent.edu.hk/en

6. Hospital Authority – Mental Health Tips
   This webpage introduces tips on maintaining mental health, common mental problems in different age groups and treatment methods.

7. Social Welfare Department – 2020 Psycho-education Information Hub for Combatting the Novel Coronavirus
   It provides psycho-education and self-help information for persons of different age groups and persons in quarantine to maintain mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

**Professional Support Services**

8. Education Bureau – Teachers’ Helpline
   The Teachers’ Helpline is set up to provide teachers and principals with professional counseling services, including telephone counseling and face-to-face counseling, etc. The counselors of the Teachers’ Helpline will do their best to understand the situation of the callers and render appropriate assistance. All information given will be kept strictly confidential.
The project serves to promote public education on child and adolescent anxious and depressive emotions. It also aims to early identify children and adolescents with anxiety and depressive mood problems so that appropriate support would be provided to help them overcome their mood problems, prevent the problem from escalating and resume their normal learning, social and family life.
(Chinese only)

10. Social Welfare Department – Community Support Service Scheme
The Scheme aims at providing supporting services to children and youth cautioned under the Police Superintendent's Discretion Scheme, the arrested youth and their peers so as to assist them to be re-integrated into the community. The service content includes individual and family counselling, therapeutic groups, skill training/educational groups, community services, crime prevention programmes, etc.

11. Social Welfare Department – Integrated Community Centre for Mental Wellness (ICCMW)
The ICCMW provides one-stop community support and social rehabilitation services ranging from early prevention to risk management for ex-mentally ill persons, persons with suspected mental health problems, their families / carers and residents living in the serving district. The target group has extended to secondary school students with mental health needs, and services including individual counseling, therapeutic group work and psycho-education are available for them and their parents.
12. Social Welfare Department – Hotline Service for Youth at Risk
The hotline service is to support children and youth in distress through telephone contact by offering emotional support, counseling and referral to services.

13. The Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists - 「Care4ALL 香港精神－同舟共行計劃」
This volunteering programme aims to provide initial mental health assessment and consultation for people who are suffering from mental health issues triggered by the social unrest or COVID-19 outbreak.

14. The Hong Kong Council of Social Service - 「港講訴 Time To Heal」 Project
The project aims to provide comprehensive psychological support to people being affected by the social unrest or COVID-19 outbreak, including those who experience family or parent-child dissension, community conflicts, psychological and mental health problems, and social trauma.
http://www.timetoheal.org.hk/ (Chinese only)