



中華人民共和國香港特別行政區政府總部教育局
Education Bureau
Government Secretariat, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
The People's Republic of China

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To: Supervisors and Heads of all Secondary Schools

1 December 2023

Dear Supervisors / Principals,

Early Identification and Support of Students with Suicidal Risk
Three-Tier School-based Emergency Mechanism

This letter aims to inform all secondary schools in Hong Kong of the details of the “Three-tier School-based Emergency Mechanism” (hereinafter referred to as the Mechanism) established for early identification and support of students with suicidal risk.

Background

The Government has always attached great importance to the mental health of youth. Relevant international and local studies have pointed out that suicide is a complicated social problem caused by the interaction of multiple factors, including mental health issues, psychological concerns, interpersonal relationships, adjustment problems, as well as various types of pressure in life. The Government set up the Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides (the Committee) in March 2016. The Committee issued its final report in November of the same year and put forward a number of proposed measures. The Government has accepted the report's recommendations and implemented relevant measures. The Government also established the standing Advisory Committee on Mental Health in November 2017 to assist the Government in developing policies, strategies and measures related to mental health, including strengthening mental health support services to children and adolescents.

At the school level, in accordance with the recommendations of the Final Report of the Committee, the Education Bureau (EDB) strives to assist schools in adopting the Whole School

Approach at three levels, namely “Universal”, “Selective” and “Indicated”¹, to promote mental health among students and enhance support for students with mental health needs, including those with suicidal risk. EDB also reminds schools from time to time to pay close attention to the mental health of students, help them deal with emotions and stress, and cope with academic, social or emotional developmental problems in a proactive manner. Professionals of different disciplines in schools (including guidance personnel, school social workers, school-based educational psychologists) provide students with appropriate support, strengthen communication with parents, understand students’ emotional states and provide further assistance to students in need and refer students with emotional distress to professionals in a timely manner. Schools can also flexibly allocate school resources to employ additional staff and enhance support for students according to their needs.

The epidemic in the past few years has caused an unprecedented impact on the mental health of Hong Kong citizens. There was no exception with students. They faced greater adjustment challenges following the full resumption to normalcy. In view of the recent upward trend of student suicide cases, the Government has taken immediate action to strengthen the services and support provided to students, increase the protective factors for students’ mental health, and strive to reduce the impact of risk factors on students. EDB issued a circular memorandum on 9 November 2023, strongly advised schools to prioritise the protection of students’ well-being and their mental health, and encouraged teachers be vigilant of students’ mental health. Schools should review students’ homework load, schools’ assessment arrangements and lesson timetables in a practical and professional manner, to create more space for students, and to ensure that students have sufficient rest and relaxation time to engage in activities that are beneficial to their body and mind, so that students can learn and grow healthily and happily. EDB also calls on all schools in Hong Kong to launch the “Spread the Love, Care and Shine” Campaign in November 2023 to encourage students to care more about themselves and others, enhance their sense of well-being, and strengthen the protective factors of mental health. Details of the “Spread the Love, Care and Shine” Campaign are set out in EDB Circular Memorandum No. 209/2023 “Mental Health@School” Measures for Promoting of Students’ Mental Health and the “Spread the Love, Care and Shine” Campaign designated webpage.

EDBCM No. 209/2023 “Mental Health@School” Measures for Promotion of Students’ Mental Health:

<https://applications.edb.gov.hk/circular/upload/EDBCM/EDBCM23209E.pdf>



¹ Targets at the universal level are general students, teachers and parents; targets at the selective level are students at risks of mental health issues; and targets at the indicated level are students with mental health problems.

“Spread the Love, Care and Shine” Campaign designated webpage:

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/tc/promotion-at-the-universal-level/promotional-resources-for-schools/112.html>

(Chinese version only)



Details

In order to strengthen schools' support for students during this critical period, the Government has decided to establish the Mechanism through inter-departmental collaboration, including EDB, Health Bureau (HHB) and Social Welfare Department (SWD), to help schools early identify students at higher risk of suicide and provide them with appropriate intervention as soon as possible, so as to build a stronger safety net for students. The Mechanism will be implemented from December 2023 to January 2024. Details are as follows:

The first-tier mechanism

The first-tier aims to identify students with higher suicide risk at an early stage, and to provide students concerned priority for timely support and help them seek professional counselling or treatment services as early as possible.

(i) Identify, screen and support students with suicidal risk

EDB urges school personnel to refer to “A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours” to preliminarily identify more vulnerable students and pay attention to whether they have warning signs of suicide. If necessary, schools can arrange students with higher-risk to conduct a preliminary mental health screening through effective screening tools (e.g., “Self-test Station: Depressive Mood” from the Student Health Service of the Department of Health and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) from “Shall We Talk”). After screening, school guidance personnel should launch follow-up services to identify students with different level of suicidal risk through individual interviews. Schools should first discuss with the school's inter-disciplinary team (including guidance masters/mistress, guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists) to flexibly deploy its manpower and resources to give priority to take care of and counsel students with higher suicidal risk. The school personnel are recommended to refer to the Guidelines on “How Schools can Help Students with Mental Health Problems” to provide support to students as soon as possible, for example, guiding students to consider coping skills for overcoming difficulties and the support available for them, meeting with students regularly and providing them with group training, conducting individual counselling on relaxation techniques and coping methods, and arranging appropriate school-based support and activities (e.g., peer counselling programmes), or providing students with information about relevant community resources. Schools must conduct continuous and close monitoring on students' conditions, make

good use of community resources and refer students with mental health needs to receive support services. Please refer to **Annex 1** for details.

(ii) Enhanced support for school personnel

With a view to strengthening school personnel's early identification and support of students with suicidal risk, in addition to providing the above-mentioned "A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours", the Guidelines on "How Schools can Help Students with Mental Health Problems" and other relevant information on the "Mental Health@School" one-stop student mental health information website (mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk), EDB will organise an online "gatekeeper" training course for secondary schools on **19 December 2023**. In this course, educational psychologists from EDB will share suicidal behaviours and warning signs, as well as how to respond to signs of suicide. Teachers and guidance personnel may enroll the course through EDB Training Calendar System **on or before 13 December 2023** (Course ID: SE0020230288).

The second-tier mechanism

The second-tier mechanism is for the Government to organise an "off-campus support network" through cross-departmental, cross-professional and cross-sectoral cooperation to provide schools with enhanced "external support" in the short term. Subsequent to the above-mentioned identification in the first-tier mechanism and school-based intervention, if the school confirms that it has difficulty in deploying manpower to handle the newly identified students with higher risk of suicide, the following "external support" can be sought:

- (i) Publicly-funded secondary schools² that have participated in the "Student Mental Health Support Scheme" may consult the multi-disciplinary team of the Scheme immediately to seek additional support;
- (ii) Publicly-funded secondary schools that have not participated in the "Student Mental Health Support Scheme" may seek support from the "off-campus support network" team (hereafter "the team"). Schools must first obtain the consent of the parents or guardians of students concerned, and submit the referral form and parent or guardian consent form (**Annex 2**) to the Special Education Support 4 Section of EDB. EDB will contact the school as soon as possible to assist the schools in need to refer the cases to the team coordinated and arranged by the SWD for follow-up actions;

² Publicly-funded secondary schools include government secondary schools, aided secondary schools (including the secondary section of special schools), caput secondary schools and secondary schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme.

- (iii) If other schools require assistance from the team, please contact the Educational Psychology Service (Kowloon 1) Section (telephone number: 3698 4311).

The team will contact the students concerned as soon as possible and arrange follow-up services which include emergency intervention services such as assessment, support and counselling through individual, group or online mode, and the team will also refer them to other services according to the needs of individual students. If the team determines that the student has severe mental health needs after contact and assessment, they will discuss with the school whether it is necessary to refer to the Hospital Authority (HA) psychiatric specialist services according to the third-tier mechanism below. The team will report to the school the student's condition and areas that require follow-up actions after the completion of the emergency intervention services.

The third-tier mechanism

The third-tier mechanism is for schools to refer students with severe mental health needs to the psychiatric specialist services of the HA. After triage and screening, HA will give priority to students with urgent needs. After discussing with the parents of the students, the school may issue a referral letter from the principal for the suitable students (please refer to **Annex 3** for a sample referral letter from the principal). The parents can then take the students to their respective child and adolescent psychiatric outpatient clinics to receive treatment and support services provided by qualified and experienced clinician. Before making a referral, schools must carefully consider whether the students concerned have a relatively urgent need, so as not to affect the opportunity of other people on the waiting list of HA's psychiatric specialist service system to receive treatment. If a student is seriously injured, life-threatening or needs immediate support, the school should immediately activate the crisis management procedure and take prompt action, including calling the police for help or sending the student to hospital for treatment. In addition, HA will also set up a telephone consultation hotline specifically for principals (telephone number: 2742 4508) to provide them with professional advice.

For the early identification of students with mental health needs and at risk of suicide, EDB will continue to provide "gatekeeper" training for teachers, parents and students. EDB will organise face-to-face parent seminar on 9 December 2023 to help parents support their children's mental health. Moreover, a series of workshops for teachers, school social workers and guidance personnel will be conducted in the first quarter of 2024 to enhance their knowledge and skills for taking care of students with mental health needs. We urge schools to take note of these programmes and encourage parents and school personnel to actively participate in relevant training programmes.

The Government hopes to bring all sectors of the community together to support students to cope with different problems and challenges along their growth journey. The Government will

continue to introduce measures and resources related to enhancing students' mental health. Schools are reminded to pay attention to and actively participate in the up-coming events.

For enquiries, please contact Ms Mandy YEUNG of the Educational Psychology Service (Kowloon 1) at 3698 4311.

Ms Mandy HO
for Secretary for Education

- Annex 1: Recommendations for early identification and support for students with suicidal risk (Secondary Schools)
- Annex 2: Referral form for “off-campus support network” team
- Annex 3: Referral letter from the principal - Referral of a student to receive the psychiatric specialist services of the Hospital Authority

**Recommendations for early identification and support for
students with suicidal risk (Secondary Schools)**

In order to early identify and support students at risk of suicide, school teachers and social workers can refer to “A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours” published by EDB and identify students at higher risk:

A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours:

https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/uploads/mh/content/document/Resource_Handbook_for_Schools_Eng_Mar_2017.pdf



(1) Preliminary identification of students in need

Identify students who may be more vulnerable, such as those with the following risk factors:

- Social support: Poor family or peer relationships, or weak support network.
- Emotional regulation: Emotions are more sensitive, more reactive, or easier to lose control of.
- Coping skills and attitudes: Tend to use passive and avoidant coping style to cope with significant events or traumatic events.
- Recent major stressful events: such as repeating a grade, changing schools, parental divorce or relationship deterioration, or experiencing the death or suicide of someone close to them.
- Repeated self-harm behaviours or past suicide attempts.

Pay attention to warning signs of suicide

Pay attention to the possible suicide warning signs of these more vulnerable students through daily observation, for example:

- Physical aspect: e.g., fatigue, increasing symptoms of physical discomfort, and abnormal inattention to personal hygiene or appearance.
- Behavioral aspect: e.g., increased absenteeism, sharp decline in grades, and becoming socially isolated.
- Emotional aspects: e.g., mood changes or remarkable unstable emotions, loss of interest and motivation in daily activities.
- Cognitive aspect: more difficult to stay focus than before or keep their mind clear, and have frequent self-critical thoughts.
- Words or behaviors related to death and suicide: such as mentioning negative or hopeless thoughts in conversation or on social media, sending beloved items, and saying goodbye to family or friends as if they were saying goodbye.

(2) Use mental health screening tools

If necessary, schools can also arrange mental health screening for students in need after discussing with school guidance personnel (including social workers, school-based educational psychologists or relevant mental health professionals). School teachers and social workers can refer to the following commonly used mental health screening tools and arrange the students concerned to complete the self-test scales:

- Student Health Service “Self-Test Station: Depressive Mood”:
https://scics.one.gov.hk/forms/dhs005/dhs005_en.html
- “Shall We Talk” Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10):
<https://www.shallwetalk.hk/en/mental-health-information/psychological-distress-testing/>
- “Student Mental Health Support Scheme” Screening Tool (only applicable to schools that have participated in the Scheme)

(3) Provide follow-up services

Schools should note that the scores of mental health screening tools are only used as one of the references. School guidance personnel should consider students’ responses to individual items on the scale, their background, and behavioral patterns to make decisions on prioritising individual interviews and follow-up actions. School guidance personnel must conduct individual interviews with these students for further preliminary assessment of suicidal risk. For details, please refer to Chapter 3 “Responding to Suicidal Behaviors” in “A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours”.

Schools should first discuss through the school’s inter-disciplinary team (including guidance masters/mistress, guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists) to flexibly deploy manpower and resources within the school to help and provide counselling to students who have been identified and need support. We recommend that school personnel refer to the Guidelines on “How Schools can Help Students with Mental Health Problems” to support students with mental health needs.

Guidelines on “How Schools can Help Students with Mental Health Problems”:

https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/ENG_Guidelines_to_help_MI_students_20200717.pdf



The school's multi-disciplinary team must give priority to care for and counsel students who are at higher risk of suicide, such as guiding students to consider coping skills for overcoming difficulties and the support available for them, meeting with students regularly and providing group training, conducting individual counselling on relaxation techniques and coping methods and arranging appropriate school-based support and activities (e.g., peer counselling programmes), or providing students with information about relevant community resources. Schools must conduct continuous and close monitoring on students' conditions and make good use of community resources to refer students with mental health needs to receive support services. Through mental health educational activities or promotional leaflets, let all students aware of different help-seeking channels, including community helplines and counselling platforms.

Community Resources and Helplines:

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/early-identification-at-the-selective-level/helplines-and-community-resources.html>



To: “Off-campus support network” team ()
(via: Special Education Support 4 Section of EDB, Fax: 2307 0472)

**“Off-campus support network” Team Referral Form
(Applicable from December 2023 to January 2024)**

[*Schools should submit this form and parent or guardian consent form to
Special Education Support 4 Section of EDB]

Our school _____ (school name) has not participated in the “Student Mental Health Support Scheme” and confirmed that our school has difficulty in deploying manpower to handle the newly identified student with higher risk of suicide. The student concerned is now referred to receive services rendered by the “off-campus support network” team arranged by the Social Welfare Department. Our school has obtained and enclosed with this form the parent consent form signed by the parent or guardian of the student concerned for this referral. Our school will help arrange the “off-campus support network” team to meet with the student concerned at school, including finding venues suitable for in-person or online interviews.

Student Name	Gender / Age	Class	Contact phone no.	Areas that require special attention (Please tick the appropriate box(es))	Name & contact no. of student's guardian in case of emergency
1.				☐ Learning performance ☐ Family situation ☐ Special educational needs ☐ Interpersonal relationship ☐ Emotional/mental health needs ☐ Others (please specify):	

Remarks: This referral form contains personal data of the student, which shall be properly kept by the school and ensure that the purpose and manner of data collection, use of data, data security and access, etc. comply with the requirements of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.

School Chop:

Special Education
Support 4 Section
of EDB Chop:

Signature of school
personnel in charge: _____

Name: _____

Post: _____

Contact no.: _____

Date: _____

“Off-campus support network” Team
Parent Consent Form

I _____ (Name of Parent / Guardian*) give consent to
_____ (Name of School) to refer my child /
ward* _____ (Name) _____ (ID No.) to receive
services rendered by the “off-campus support network” Team arranged by the
Social Welfare Department.

Signature of Parent / Guardian*: _____

(Contact Phone No.: _____)

Date: _____

*Delete as appropriate

[Please use school letterhead]
Three-tier School-based Emergency Mechanism

**Referral of a student to receive the psychiatric
specialist services of the Hospital Authority
(Applicable from December 2023 to January 2024)**

Our school _____ (Name of School)
would like to refer _____ (Name of Student)
_____ (ID No.) who is currently studying in _____ (Class) to
receive psychiatric specialist services of the Hospital Authority (HA). Please arrange risk
assessment and follow-up services for this student as soon as possible.

Reason(s) for referral to the third-tier support services:

**[Remarks: If the student's situation is urgent, the school may consider taking the student to the
Accident and Emergency Department for treatment.]**

Contact Information:

	<u>School</u>	<u>Parent</u>
Name:		
*Post/ Relationship:		
Telephone no.:		

*Please delete as appropriate

Signature of Principal: _____

Name of Principal: _____

School Chop: