

Community Care Fund
Provision of Subsidy to Needy Primary and Secondary Students for
Purchasing Mobile Computer Devices to
Facilitate the Practice of e-Learning
Evaluation Report

Background

The Community Care Fund (CCF) Task Force endorsed at its meeting on 5 February 2018 the proposal to implement the assistance programme “Provision of Subsidy to Needy Primary and Secondary Students for Purchasing Mobile Computer Devices to Facilitate the Practice of e-Learning” (the Programme), starting from the 2018/19 school year for three years. The Programme was subsequently approved by the Commission on Poverty on 23 April 2018. It is implemented by the Education Bureau (EDB) and aims at relieving the financial burden on students from low-income families owing to the implementation of “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) policy in schools. The total funding amount of the Programme is \$415.54 million, including \$404 million for disbursement and \$11.54 million for administrative fees, and is estimated to benefit 102 000 eligible students.

Programme Implementation

2. The Programme was launched smoothly in the 2018/19 school year and the eligibility of the target beneficiaries are –
 - (a) students studying in public sector schools (including government, aided, caput and Direct Subsidy Scheme primary or secondary schools); and studying in classes implementing e-learning and adopting BYOD; and
 - (b) students receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) or full grant/half grant of the School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS).

For students receiving CSSA/full grant of STAS would receive the full grant under the Programme with the maximum subsidy for each student at \$4,500 in the first implementation year. For students receiving half grant, the subsidy provided would be up to \$2,250 in the first implementation year. The maximum level of subsidy would be adjusted annually according to the movement of the Composite Consumer Price Index.

3. EDB invites all public sector schools to participate in the Programme through a circular memorandum every year. Schools having returned the application form could purchase appropriate mobile computer devices for eligible students in accordance with schools' procurement procedures. After completing the procurement, schools are required to submit a report (including the details of student beneficiaries and devices purchased) to EDB for calculating the required subsidy. EDB organised a number of briefing sessions and seminars to explain the details of the Programme for schools. A small team of administrative and technical staff¹ has been formed to provide administrative support to the Programme, and provide schools with necessary professional and technical support as well as training including on procurement, use and management of devices. EDB has also set up a dedicated website offering reference materials and frequently asked questions to assist schools in implementing pertinent measures.

4. The number of student beneficiaries in the first two years of the Programme was around 34 000 and the amount of subsidy disbursed was about \$122 million. According to the questionnaire survey conducted annually by EDB, the number of schools implementing BYOD policy has increased significantly in the past few years. Some schools implementing BYOD policy did not participate in the Programme because their students generally are with better financial background or they already have school-based measures in supporting financially needy students.

5. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in early 2020, many students need to use mobile computer devices for e-learning at home before full resumption of class. EDB handled applications for the Programme flexibly and accepted applications submitted by all public sector primary and secondary schools implementing e-learning for their eligible students. The CCF Task Force was informed of such arrangements at its meeting on 27 March 2020. EDB explained to schools these flexible arrangements through various channels and encouraged them to submit applications for their needy students. The response from schools was positive and about 870 schools have submitted applications in the 2020/21 school year. The relevant figures are as follows –

¹ The team consists of one project management officer, two assistant project management officers, one system analyst and two analyst programmers.

	2018/19 School Year	2019/20 School Year	2021/21 School Year
No. of participating school	188	281	About 870
No. of student beneficiary	CSSA: 2 868 Full grant: 8 004 Half grant: 2 984 Total: 13 856	CSSA: 3 857 Full grant: 11 306 Half grant: 5 013 Total: 20 176	CSSA: 27 040 ² Full grant: 82 930 ² Half grant: 32 270 ² Total: About 142 240 ²
Subsidy amount	\$49.2 million	\$72.8 million	About \$568 million ²

Table 1: Figures on number of student beneficiary and amount of subsidy

6. Regarding administrative fees, the expenditure as at end April 2021 is around \$8.4 million, including about \$8.18 million for staff cost, \$0.09 million for printing promotional leaflets and about \$0.12 million for general operational expenses.

Evaluation of Programme Effectiveness

7. EDB has been closely monitoring the progress of the Programme as well as schools' procurement. The amount of subsidy covers the cost of mobile computer device, mobile device management system installed at the device as required by schools, basic accessories and three-year basic device warranty. During the three-year implementation period, the maximum subsidy level and average actual subsidy amount of each year are as follows –

		2018/19 School Year	2019/20 School Year	2020/21 School Year
Full grant student	Maximum subsidy level	\$4,500	\$4,610	\$4,740
	Average actual subsidy amount	\$3,984	\$4,116	\$4,317 ²
Half grant student	Maximum subsidy level	\$2,250	\$2,305	\$2,370
	Average actual subsidy amount	\$1,972	\$2,069	\$2,145 ²

Table 2: Maximum subsidy level vs average actual subsidy amount

² Figures are calculated based on the actual data and the estimates reported by schools as at end April 2021.

8. Schools would determine device specifications based on their pedagogical design and use of e-learning resources. From the analysis on the reports submitted by schools (see Figure 1 below), the subsidy provided could generally cater for student’s need on the whole. Only a few schools adopted devices of higher specifications rendering the cost exceeding the maximum level of subsidy of that school year. In the 2020/21 school year, about 1.5% of the student beneficiaries are involved in such situation.

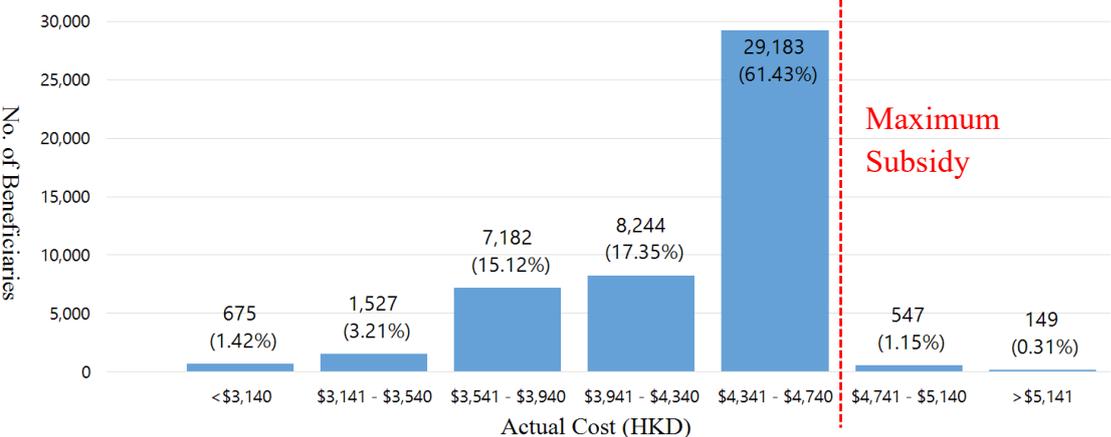


Figure 1: Actual cost of device and accessories purchased in the 2020/21 school year (as at end April 2021)

9. EDB has been maintaining communication with the education and trade sectors, and gathering views through schools visits, focus group meetings, questionnaire survey (please refer to the Appendix for details), etc., with a view to evaluating the effectiveness of the Programme. Schools agreed with the Programme’s objectives and directions in effectively supporting the financially needy students when implementing BYOD policy for e-learning. Schools were also of the view that the amount of subsidy provided was adequate and its coverage was appropriate, allowing schools to purchase suitable equipment for needy students to cater for schools’ e-learning needs. In terms of administrative work, more schools encountered difficulties in the following areas: (a) verification of students’ eligibility; (b) communication with parents; (c) handling technical issues of mobile computer devices. On the whole, schools reflected that the administrative workload for implementing the Programme was acceptable and they agreed that the reference materials provided by the EDB were useful.

10. Under the COVID-19 epidemic when face-to-face classes have not yet fully resumed, primary and secondary schools have deployed diversified strategies, including e-learning, in supporting students to learn at home systematically, achieving “suspending classes without suspending learning”. Many practitioners in the education sector and researches of universities³ pointed out that schools’ participation

³ “eCitizen Education 360” (https://360-cms.ecitizen.hk/uploads/bulletin01_v9_en_0868d8d54b.pdf)

in the Programme to implement BYOD policy was very helpful for schools in implementing effective online learning during the epidemic.

Conclusion and Way Forward

11. The Programme has not only achieved its objective in relieving the financial burden on students from low-income families under the development of BYOD policy, but also supported needy students in their learning at home amid the COVID-19 epidemic. To conclude, the Programme has provided appropriate support to needy students to practise e-learning, which is in line with the objective of the CCF.

12. Looking forward, a blended mode of learning, i.e. face-to-face classes, e-learning at home or other modes of learning, may become the “new normalcy” in teaching and learning. The Government will further support schools in implementing a blended mode of teaching and learning under the “new normalcy”. As announced in the 2020 Policy Address, \$2 billion will be set aside in the Quality Education Fund to launch a three-year programme starting from the 2021/22 school year, under which schools could apply for funding to purchase mobile computer devices for loan to needy students and to provide Wi-Fi routers and mobile data cards to students who do not have access to appropriate Internet services due to the constraints in their living environment. EDB will refine the relevant operational measures based on the mode and experience of this Programme to ensure all students will have equal opportunities in accessing e-learning.

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