

The Honourable Mrs Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-Ngor
Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR
Chief Executive's Office
2 Tim Mei Avenue
Tamar
Hong Kong

17 February 2021

Dear Chief Executive,

I am writing further to my letter of 9 November. I first want to acknowledge the response from the Education Bureau on 16 December and in particular the various support measures that have been put in place in terms of the temporary relaxation of student-mix.

However, there is one specific issue concerning the reopening of schools which I would like to raise. This is top of mind for a number of our members and seen as having an impact on the enrolment position of international schools in Hong Kong.

I appreciate that almost every jurisdiction around the world is having to grapple with the reopening question and I recognise that it requires a balancing of different (potentially competing) interests. I also appreciate the intent behind the recent announcement putting forward a program allowing schools to reopen on a limited basis after Chinese New Year; and to open more fully based on a testing regime for teachers.

Whilst we support all efforts to reopen our schools in a safe and prudent manner, our members have expressed some concern about the proposals to which I wanted to draw your attention.

First, the blanket application of only allowing one third of pupils to return, essentially on a half day basis, means that in practice there will be very little in-class schooling for individual pupils until the restrictions are relaxed further. As you will appreciate, schools come in many different shapes and sizes, based on their premises, class sizes and mix of students; in addition, schools have put in place a variety of differing measures to provide a safe environment for both students and teachers. We would therefore like to explore whether more flexibility could be built into the application of the restrictions to recognise these differences such that decisions around reopening could be made on a more informed and individual school basis. We appreciate that this would be more difficult to operate in practice and will likely involve some element of subjectivity. However, clear guidance could be provided centrally from the Education Bureau as to the relevant criteria (and how it is to be interpreted) to ensure a consistent approach by REOs. We see this as a potential way to move forward with more alacrity whilst maintaining the relevant safety standards. We would be very happy to lend our assistance to the Education Bureau in developing appropriate criteria.

A second point is in relation to the proposed testing of teachers. Again, we fully understand the intent behind this proposal but a number of our members have questioned whether this may have unintended consequences. There is, of course, no general mandatory testing regime in Hong Kong across the broad population (which we think is right) and, therefore, in the absence of that, the responsibility for testing will lie with the individual teachers. This puts each teacher in an invidious position and risks pitting teachers against parents, and teachers against students; and also pitting schools against teachers. This is likely to lead to disagreement and negative publicity; and could be damaging in relation to individual schools, individual teachers and potentially to the fabric of the education system in Hong Kong which relies on its ability to attract talented teachers, including from overseas. We also see the need for clear guidelines from the Education Bureau on how schools should operate in the event that teachers test positive for COVID.

I know that education is a priority area for you and your administration. And therefore, I hope that you do not mind me writing to set out these observations and concerns. We know that these are very difficult and unprecedented issues and we all want to see them resolved in the best way for Hong Kong. We stand ready to assist.

I have copied this letter to the Education Bureau and would be very happy to join a follow-up meeting with them to discuss.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Burnett

Chairman

The British Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong

Cc: Mr Kelvin Yeung Yun Hung, JP, Secretary for Education
Ms Priscilla To Kit Lai, JP, Deputy Secretary for Education