

# Hong Kong SAR

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## Introduction

The Education Bureau (EDB) of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is the government bureaucracy responsible for: formulating, developing, and reviewing policies, programs, and legislation for preprimary to tertiary education; overseeing the implementation of educational programs; and monitoring the services funded by the Government budget.

Kindergarten is not mandatory in Hong Kong; however, it is common for parents to enroll their children in Kindergarten to prepare them for primary schooling. Kindertartens are required to be registered with the Education Bureau to provide services for children ages 3 to 6. All Kindertartens in Hong Kong are privately run. Starting from the 2017–2018 academic year, the Kindergarten education scheme has been implemented by the Government to provide eligible local nonprofit Kindertartens with a basic subsidy to offer three-year service (nursery classes, lower Kindergarten, and upper Kindergarten) to all eligible children.

The Government has been providing 12 years of free education to all eligible local children through public primary and secondary schools since the 2008–2009 academic year. The first nine years comprise basic education, which is compulsory for children ages 6 to 15. The mainstream schooling system in Hong Kong is provided by the public sector. In October 2020, 293,323 children (81 percent of age group) were enrolled in 455 public primary schools, and 257,673 (78 percent of age group) were enrolled in 392 public secondary schools.

In addition to free public schools, there are two types of schools in Hong Kong that are fee-based: direct subsidy scheme (DSS) schools and private schools. Direct subsidy scheme schools enjoy greater flexibility in curriculum, admission, and deployment of resources; for example, besides government subsidies, DSS schools are allowed to collect school fees. As self-financed establishments, private schools are required to bear all of their own operating expenses. In October 2020, 15,918 children (4 percent of age group) were enrolled in 21 DSS primary schools, and 45,586 (14 percent of age group) were enrolled in 59 DSS secondary schools; 55,016 children (15 percent of age group) were enrolled in 113 private primary schools, and 25,752 (8 percent of age group) were enrolled in 55 private secondary schools.

International school is a subtype in the private school system. In 2020, there were 45 international schools offering nonlocal curriculum such as the International Baccalaureate

program in Hong Kong. Among them, 22 are run by The English Schools Foundation, the oldest and largest English-medium organization in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has 22 local postsecondary education institutions that award degrees, including eight universities funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC), one publicly funded institute, two self-financing institutes, and 11 postsecondary colleges.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

### Overview of Education System

Hong Kong's education system consists of basic education (Primary 1 to 6 and Secondary 1 to 3) and senior secondary education (Secondary 4 to 6). The two layers are further divided into four key learning stages: namely, Key Stage (KS) 1 (junior primary, Primary 1 to 3), Key Stage 2 (senior primary, Primary 4 to 6), Key Stage 3 (junior secondary, Secondary 1 to 3), and Key Stage 4 (senior secondary, Secondary 4 to 6).<sup>4</sup>

There are four main types of local primary and secondary schools in terms of financial arrangement, among which public sector schools form the majority of primary and secondary education. In 2020, there were:

- Public: Government schools. There were 65 schools operated directly by the Government.
- Public: aided schools and caput schools. There were 780 aided schools and two caput schools (nonprofit private secondary schools in receipt of government subsidy) that are fully subvented by the Government; mostly run by religious, charitable, or clan organizations; and managed by their own incorporated management committees or school management committees.
- Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools. There were 80 DSS schools run by nongovernment bodies that enjoy greater flexibility in charging school fees while receiving Government subvention mainly based on enrollment.
- Private schools. There were 90 private schools that are self-financed to provide alternatives to parents.

The Government's language education policy aims at promoting students' biliterate (written Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua/Mandarin, and spoken English) abilities. As students should undertake their general education in a language that is not itself a barrier to learning, the policy on medium of instruction (MOI) therefore is to uphold mother tongue teaching while enhancing students' proficiency in both Chinese and English.

Primary schools in Hong Kong are predominantly Chinese medium. According to primary school profiles compiled by the Committee on Home-School Co-operation in 2021, 70.5 percent of schools claimed that their MOI is Chinese, 5.5 percent English, and 23.7 percent Chinese and English.

Most academic discussions and official documents on MOI policy are mainly applicable to secondary schools. Since the 2010–2011 academic year, the EDB has implemented the fine-tuned MOI framework for secondary schools. Under the framework, schools are no longer categorized

as CMI (schools using Chinese as the MOI) or EMI (schools using English as the MOI). Instead, schools have been given flexibility to plan their diversified school-based MOI arrangements by class, group, subject, session, or by adopting a mixed mode, according to the prescribed criteria of student ability, teacher capability, and school-based support.<sup>5</sup> At senior secondary level (Secondary 4 to 6), schools can select either Chinese or English as the medium of instruction on a subject basis.

### **Use and Impact of PIRLS**

Hong Kong has participated in PIRLS since 2001. In the same year, the most important and influential education reform, Learning to Learn, was carried out by the Government. One of the key tasks of the education reform is lifelong learning through Reading to Learn. Promoting a reading culture has become a key curriculum objective, with attention being directed to helping students “learn how to learn.” Fundamental education reform typically has quickly followed the publication of PIRLS results since the inaugural 2001 cycle.

As part of the initial responses to the PIRLS results, the Permanent Secretary of the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB, which became the Education Bureau) set up a Reading Task Force led by the Deputy Secretary of the EMB in May 2002. The task force was organized to develop and implement a plan for promoting a reading culture in schools, aligned with initiatives in the Reading to Learn education reforms. This high-level task force possessed great authority and included representatives from numerous literacy-related bodies in Hong Kong.<sup>6,7,8</sup> It was made up of heads of department in the EMB and included key learning areas, school-based support, the library section, and principal regional education officers.

When an interim review of the education changes and reforms was announced formally during PIRLS 2006, many of the findings from PIRLS surveys already were being used to add support to the justification of further reforms in Hong Kong. Key items in the education reforms, especially changes to the official Chinese language curriculum, were inspired by Hong Kong students’ distinctive progress in PIRLS. Many of the education reforms recommended by the EMB have been aligned deliberately with elements of PIRLS.

Following the results from PIRLS, officials provided school-based curriculum advice, school support programs, and expert consultants to schools. The Government has provided extra financial resources to primary schools to set up class libraries and a central library in each primary school to establish infrastructure for more reading time in schools and the community. The EMB/EDB funded primary schools to employ teacher-librarians to manage school libraries and to oversee and guide students’ leisure and study reading activities. School libraries and teacher-librarians thus have played a more significant and pivotal role in helping students and teachers gain access to the knowledge and information needed for the learning and teaching processes.<sup>9</sup>

Through training provided by the Hong Kong research team for policymakers, school principals, and teachers on the framework of PIRLS on reading, in particular, the 2x4 matrix of purposes for reading and processes of comprehension has been a major reference both for

researchers to design research on reading and for teachers to design school-based reading curriculum in schools.

Studies also have used data from the PIRLS surveys specifically to examine the Chinese and English reading proficiency of Primary 4 students in depth, as well as factors influencing attainment. A 2004 Hong Kong study addressed the progress that Primary 4 students had made with respect to bilingual reading in English and Chinese. The evidence prompted concern about teachers' reading pedagogy and their use of resources and procedures to promote bilingual reading competency in an era witnessing a boom in children's processing of written information on computerized devices and technology in and outside of school.<sup>10,11</sup>

Parents' education is another area on which the Hong Kong research team has been focused. Delivery of talks on promoting reading at home based on results from PIRLS has been one of the main tasks for the Government, researchers, and even social workers.<sup>12</sup>

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The language/reading curriculum operates on two levels in Hong Kong. On a macro level, language/reading is considered across disciplines and subjects; on a micro level, language/reading is discussed deliberately within the language subjects, in particular, the Chinese language subject.

### Language/Reading as a Cross-Disciplines Ability

Hong Kong's education reform has been embarked on by primary and secondary sectors since 2001. In its influential and prominent report *Learning to Learn - The Way Forward in Curriculum Development*, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) recommended that learning to learn should be promoted through Four Key Tasks, including Reading to Learn, which integrates cross-curricular learning into various subjects to develop students' generic skills and independent learning capabilities for lifelong learning. The recommendation on Reading to Learn endorses the notion of "Every Teacher Is a Reading Teacher."

In 2014, the CDC updated the Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–6) and advanced the concept of Learning to Learn 2.0. Reading to Learn is elaborated in detail in this updated version of the curriculum as enhancement of "one's overall learning capacity leading to lifelong learning and whole-person development." Through extensive and broad reading, students hopefully can achieve the following objectives:

- Acquire, construct, and apply different areas of knowledge flexibly
- Enhance the language abilities essential for communication, academic studies, and intellectual development
- Unlock potential and nurturing thinking and generic skills
- Cultivate a broad spectrum of interests, raise the quality of life, and enhance their taste

- Cultivate their temperament and moral and affective qualities to strengthen their sense of responsibility toward self, family, society, the nation, and the world
- Foster open-mindedness to accommodate different opinions, views, values, and cultures
- Extend their understanding of life and prepare them to rise to the challenges in life positively<sup>13</sup>

Various strategies have been raised by the CDC to promote Reading to Learn. Following Jeanne Chall's well-known theory on the cumulative progress from Learning to Read to Reading to Learn,<sup>14</sup> schools are advised to guide junior students to master Chinese language knowledge and basic reading skills in a meaningful context and with a wide variety of meaningful purposes to ensure that a balanced experience of Learning to Read and Reading to Learn is provided to students. It is recommended to implement Reading to Learn in a highly collaborative whole-school approach to foster a reading atmosphere in schools through incorporating reading across the curriculum to develop students' capacity for self-directed learning. Various contextual measures are suggested, such as sufficient reading time in schools; a favorable reading environment and atmosphere to raise students' motivation and interest in reading; and investment in resources for promoting reading such as a diversified range of appropriate reading materials, e-resources, and services offered by public libraries. Last but not least, high but reasonable expectations on reading are put forward to improve students' reading skills, habits, and attitudes. Junior primary students are expected to master the basic skills of reading and writing and to develop an interest in and a habit of reading. Senior primary students are expected to be able to apply their reading and writing skills with increasing fluency, to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, and to use their reading as a vehicle of learning.

In 2017, Ongoing Renewal of the School Curriculum was launched, and seven major renewed emphases (MRE) were raised. As one of the MRE, Reading to Learn is now further extended and focused on Language/Reading Across the Curriculum. Collaboration between language subject teachers and those of content subjects is advised to be strengthened further to encourage deep reading, connect students' learning experiences, and broaden their knowledge base through effective use of a variety of texts.

### **Learning Objectives of Reading in the Chinese Language Curriculum**

Under the curriculum of primary Chinese language subject, learning objectives of reading are focused on promoting students' knowledge, ability, interest, attitude, and habit of reading through a wide scope of reading materials,<sup>15</sup> which includes the following:

- Materials that cover diversified modes of discourse, namely narrative, descriptive, expressive, expository, and argumentative
- Materials in a variety of genres, such as ballads, poems, stories, fairy tales, fables, prose, fiction, and practical writing (e.g., letters, notes, diaries, notices, reports, user manuals,

advertisements, posters, leaflets, slogans, and signs) in a variety of media (e.g., textbook, children’s book, newspaper, magazine, and digital)

- Materials with different topics and themes, such as lifestyle, science and technology, history, culture, art, etc.

Exhibits 1 to 3 present the learning objectives in the Chinese language curriculum with regard to reading ability; strategy; and interest, attitude, and habit.

**Exhibit 1: Learning Objectives of Reading Abilities in the Chinese Language Curriculum**

Learning Objectives	Descriptions	
	Key Stage 1 (Primary 1–3)	Key Stage 2 (Primary 4–6)
<b>1a. Character and Word Recognition</b>	Recognize commonly used characters*	
	Identify orthographic, syllabic, and semantic aspects of characters	
<b>1b. Comprehension</b>	Word identification	Identify commonly used vocabularies for learning and daily use*
		Comprehend literary vocabularies in texts that are different from Modern Standard Chinese
	Sentence parsing	Comprehend surface meaning of sentences
	Paragraph comprehension	Understand coherence between sentences
		Comprehend the gist of paragraphs
Text comprehension/Book reading	Comprehend paraphrase, main idea, theme, implicature, author’s intention of texts, and emotion expressed in texts	
	Identify basic narrative techniques, such as chronological order and flashback	Identify modes of discourse, such as narrative, expressive, expository, and argumentative
<b>1c. Analysis and Integration</b>	Analyze and integrate text content (such as summarizing paragraphs and texts, making conclusions, and distinguishing between facts and opinions), analyze text structure and writing intention	
<b>1d. Evaluation</b>	Evaluate text content, such as action and personality traits of characters	
<b>2. Inquiry and Creativity</b>	Make inference based on comprehension of literal meaning	
	Use imagination to make associations, construct new ideas	
<b>3. Appreciation</b>	Appreciate beautiful and stylistic use of language (such as prosodic features and rhythmic structure), and vivid imagery in texts	
<b>4. Multimodal Text Comprehension</b>	Comprehend message in audiovisual materials (such as resources from internet, on video disc, and on television program)	

\* See “Lexical Lists for Chinese Learning in Hong Kong” on <https://www.edbchinese.hk/lexlist/> for more information.

**Exhibit 2: Learning Objectives of Reading Strategies in the Chinese Language Curriculum**

Learning Objectives	Descriptions	
	Key Stage 1 (Primary 1–3)	Key Stage 2 (Primary 4–6)
<b>Mastery of Reading Strategies</b>	Connect experience and prior knowledge to comprehend texts	
	Adopt appropriate reading methods, such as close reading, silent reading, or reading aloud (with confidence), according to different reading materials	Adopt appropriate reading methods, such as skimming, scanning, topic identification, or finding keywords, according to different reading materials
	Make good use of resources available during reading, like illustrations in texts, internet, references, libraries, and museums	

**Exhibit 3: Learning Objectives of Reading Interest, Attitude, and Habit in the Chinese Language Curriculum**

Learning Objectives	Descriptions	
	Key Stage 1 (Primary 1–3)	Key Stage 2 (Primary 4–6)
<b>Willing to Read, Diligent in Reading, Attentive Reading</b>	Cultivate interest and enjoyment in reading	
	Read attentively	
	Promote reading habit, make good and frequent use of library	
	Identify information in texts, build reading habit outside of classroom	
	Communicate ideas on reading with others; integrate reading with speaking, listening, and writing activities	
	Engage in reading activities, e.g., join reading schemes/programs	

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

### Teacher Education and Requirements of Newly Appointed Teachers

Preservice and in-service teacher education programs at the nondegree and degree levels are provided by tertiary institutions funded through the University Grants Committee (UGC). From 2005 onward, all new graduates from preservice teacher education programs for primary and secondary education have been graduates who hold a degree. In 2020, some 26,500 trained full-time and part-time teachers had university degrees, with some 400 nondegree-holding trained teachers serving in primary schools.

Benchmark requirements of proficiency levels for English and Putonghua teachers have been established since 2004. Teachers wishing to teach English and/or Putonghua are required to pass the corresponding Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) before being offered a language teaching position.<sup>16</sup> Newly appointed/deployed English language and Putonghua teachers have to meet, with the exception of the language proficiency requirement in classroom language, the basic language proficiency requirement in all the core language skills (i.e., reading,

writing, listening, and speaking for English language teachers; listening and recognition, pinyin, and speaking for Putonghua teachers) before they start to teach the relevant language subject. They need to attain the language proficiency requirement in classroom language within one year of starting their teaching.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that Putonghua proficiency assessment for teachers focuses only on language, not on reading comprehension.

Starting from the 2022–2023 academic year, newly appointed teachers in all public sector schools are required to pass the Basic Law Test (BLT) to be considered for appointment.<sup>18</sup>

### **Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers**

In-service professional development courses for teachers are provided by the EDB, universities, and other professional organizations. Training programs also are provided to enhance teachers' professional knowledge and their ability to provide for students' learning needs. These programs also help teachers to keep abreast of new teaching techniques and curriculum innovations. The Committee on Professional Development of Teachers and Principals recommends the completion of 150 hours of linked professional development over a three-year period, including time spent on structured learning and other professional development activities that contribute to school development.<sup>19</sup> The 150-hour recommendation has never been a demanding goal for teachers to meet.

The EDB also organizes various training courses for teachers throughout the year that include curriculum development and implementation, and courses on teaching children with specific learning difficulties in reading and writing. Training Calendar System, a centralized web platform, was launched in 2011 to send information on training courses and activities organized or co-organized by the EDB to school administrators, curriculum leaders, and teachers. Registration can be done through the platform, which automatically stores records.<sup>20</sup>

### **Monitoring Student Progress in Reading**

All schools assess students' reading abilities regularly as part of language instruction provision in the classroom. Apart from classroom assessment and school examinations, standardized tests have been run by the authority to monitor student progress in reading upon completion of each of the four key stages of learning. The standardized tests are operated by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), the only statutory body that is not a government body. The HKEAA is self-financing but receives nonrecurrent grants from the Government to run public assessments in Hong Kong.<sup>21</sup>

### **Basic Competency Assessment at Completion Points of KS1, KS2, and KS3 (Primary 3, 6, and Secondary 3)**

In 2004, the Government prepared a set of assessments for use in education, namely, the Basic Competence Test. The test involved two components, the Territory-Wide System Assessment



(TSA) and the Student Assessment (SA). The TSA was reviewed and restructured into the Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) in 2015 after concern was raised by numerous educators and parents regarding the drilling pressure placed on children.<sup>22,23,24,25,26,27</sup>

At present, the Basic Competency Assessment comprises three components: Territory-Wide System Assessment (TSA), Student Assessment Repository (STAR), and Web-Based Learning and Teaching Support (WLTS).

At the territory-wide level, TSA data enable the Government to review education policies and focused support provided for schools. An annual report gives an account of the overall performance of Primary 3, Primary 6, and Secondary 3 students participating in the assessment. At the school level, to serve the purpose of assessment for learning, the TSA provides four types of school reports with different coverage for schools' selection. The TSA helps teachers identify the strengths and weaknesses of students and formulate plans to improve effectiveness of learning and teaching in light of the assessment data and their schools' development needs. After analyzing students' performance on the TSA, schools need to follow up through various measures such as adjusting the teaching content, revamping the design of worksheets and assessments, and arranging afterschool remedial programs to provide for learner diversity.

The SA platform was upgraded to STAR in 2017. STAR is an online assessment item bank covering assessment items of Chinese Language, English Language, and Mathematics from Key Stages 1 to 3. The platform provides instant assessment reports on the performance of participating students for teachers' reference through an online back-end system. Primary and secondary schools can use it any time on a voluntary basis. The related feedback helps teachers review individual students' learning progress and difficulties with reference to the key learning objectives, and set the next learning objectives for the students.

Web-based Learning and Teaching Support (WLTS) for KS1 to KS3 is an online platform of ready-made learning and teaching resources developed to address students' learning difficulties. Teachers can use the resources to devise follow-up plans and adjust strategies and plans in learning and teaching. There are also interactive games designed for students to learn in a pleasurable way.<sup>28</sup>

### **Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE)**

The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority organizes annual public examinations for students who have completed six-year secondary schooling. Developed from the long-established Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, the HKDSE was administered for the first time in 2012 to measure the attainment of students who completed 12-year free education before entering tertiary education or the labor market. While the TSA is formative and a low-risk assessment, the HKDSE is summative and is used for placement in tertiary education; therefore, it is the highest-risk examination.

Chinese language is one of the four core subjects in the HKDSE. Reading shares the heaviest weight in the blueprint of the HKDSE Chinese language examination, which consists of three

components: reading, writing, and school-based assessment on reading.<sup>29</sup> Due to the backwash effect, there are primary schools introducing text written in literary language into the KS2 reading curriculum to prepare their students for secondary schooling.

### **International Large-Scale Educational Assessments (ILSA)**

In addition to the standard monitoring of student progress in reading conducted regularly by the authority, the Government jointly with tertiary institutions have been encouraging schools to take part in international large-scale education assessments. Since 2001, Hong Kong SAR participated in the 2001, 2006, 2010, 2016, and 2021 cycles of PIRLS organized by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). PIRLS outcomes provide participating countries with valuable information to monitor and evaluate the impact of their reading literacy education endeavors.

Since 2003, Hong Kong also has participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) organized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PISA is held every three years to measure 15-year-olds' knowledge and skills in reading, mathematics, and science.<sup>30,31</sup> PIRLS and PISA are the two main ILSAs that provide evidence-based findings for various stakeholders in education to evaluate students' progress in reading in Hong Kong.

### **Special Reading Initiatives**

Education reform was introduced in 2001 and has been reviewed from time to time since then. The EDB plays a role in initiating collaboration with schools to develop evidence-based projects to provide a foundation for curriculum reform reviews. To promote the use of reading as a vehicle of learning and as a source of pleasure to meet the goals of recent curriculum reforms, seminars and training programs on various aspects of reading have been conducted regularly as well as strategically.<sup>32,33</sup>

### **Quality Education Fund (QEF)**

The QEF was established by the Government in 1997 to finance projects for the promotion of quality education in Hong Kong. Generous funding from the QEF has been allocated specifically to encourage schools to experiment with reading projects and initiatives. Since 2005, over 60 projects to enhance the learning and teaching of reading have been funded to applicants from primary, secondary, and tertiary schools.

### **Promotion of Reading and Literary Arts by Public Libraries**

Public libraries play an important and active role in encouraging children's reading and literacy development. For instance, in 2020, libraries launched the Discover and Share the Joy of Reading publicity campaign and conducted over 4,300 activities, including 4.23 World Book Day with

celebratory events, Reading Programme for Children and Youth, and Fun Reading at Hong Kong Historic Buildings, among others. During the pandemic, libraries promoted e-reading and online activities to encourage reading at home. The Joyful Reading at Your Neighbourhood: Library-on-Wheels pilot project was launched with a specially designed truck bringing books to different communities.<sup>34</sup>

### **Hong Kong Book Fair**

The first Hong Kong Book Fair was held in 1990. The book fair has become a major event in Hong Kong every year and has attracted more than 800,000 visitors. During the weeklong fair period, hundreds of events, exhibitions, and seminars are held onsite and virtually to promote reading culture for both teenagers and adult readers. According to a survey conducted by the organizer during the event in July 2021, 98 percent of respondents stated that they had read printed books in the past month, spending an average of 20 hours reading. More than 70 percent of respondents had read ebooks in the past month, spending an average of 15 hours reading.<sup>35</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hong Kong Book Fair was canceled in 2020.

### **Learning and Teaching Expo**

Supported by the EDB, Learning and Teaching Expo is an annual event for educators to share their experience and insight, and to stay current on the most up-to-date learning and teaching trends. Though its focus is not specifically on promotion of reading culture, the event features hundreds of talks, seminars, and exhibition booths to showcase innovative education resources for reading instruction all over the world, which benefits children's reading as well.<sup>36</sup> Due to the pandemic, Learning and Teaching Expo was canceled in 2020.

## **Response to COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Up to May 2022, Hong Kong has experienced five waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face teaching was suspended four times for Kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and special schools in academic years 2019–2020 and 2021–2022 as follows:

- January 23, 2020, to late May 2020 (first and second waves)
- September 1 to September 29, 2020 (third wave)
- December 2, 2020, to after the Lunar New Year holidays in 2021 (around February 23, 2021, for most communities) (fourth wave)
- January 24, 2022, to April 18, 2022 (fifth wave)

Between these suspension periods, schooling partially resumed with usually only a half day of face-to-face teaching allowed. As of April 2022, the EDB announced that schools were allowed to

resume full-day in-person teaching in late April if all staff and 90 percent of students have received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>37</sup>

Statistics on the number of school days with class suspension and resumption for Primary 4 students in academic years 2019–2020 (year of PIRLS field test) and 2020–2021 (year of PIRLS main study) are shown in Exhibit 4. The number of school days suspended in the two academic years are about 81 days (41.5 percent) and 62 days (31.8 percent), respectively.

**Exhibit 4: Number of School Days with Class Suspension and Resumption in Academic Years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021**

Face-to-Face Instruction Method	Number of School Days	
	2019–2020 Academic Year	2020–2021 Academic Year
Regular school days stated in school calendar	195 days	195 days
Whole-day face-to-face classes (normal schooling)	91 days (46.7%)	0 days (0.0%)
Face-to-face classes suspended, with students learning from home	81 days (41.5%)	62 days (31.8%)
Face-to-face classes under certain conditions	0 days	56 days (28.7%)
Half-day face-to-face classes	23 days (11.8%)	77 days (39.5%)

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The HKSAR Government has progressively introduced whole-day primary schooling since 1993. Currently there are more than 400 whole-day primary schools in Hong Kong.<sup>38,39</sup>

For the 2021–2022 academic year, to prevent possible infection during partial resumption of in-person classes, the EDB has asked primary schools to arrange for all students to attend face-to-face classes for no more than half a day and take examinations in the morning only. Schools should not arrange in-person learning or other activities for students for the rest of the day.<sup>40</sup> With many schools racing to recover teaching hours due to half-day schooling, afternoon remote classes usually are provided. Students have to be back home for lunch right after school and join virtual classes in the afternoon.<sup>41</sup>

During the pandemic, schools have been advised not to organize mass events or extracurricular activities involving large numbers of people, such as parents’ days, open days, campus visits, performing arts shows, or speech days. Therefore, nonacademic activities are minimized.

Cross-border students (CBS) are students residing in Shenzhen and attending preschools, primary schools, or secondary schools in Hong Kong, thus having to travel back and forth every school day. CBS mainly attend schools in districts close to the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border. During the partial class resumption period, CBS were not able to attend schools for face-to-face teaching due to the infection control measures in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

Impacted by the pandemic, the Territory-Wide System Assessment (TSA) 2020 and 2021 were officially canceled, including all oral and written assessments.<sup>42</sup> However, schools have been allowed to request HKEAA to implement school-based TSA as school assessment. For HKDSE, speaking assessment of both Chinese Language and English Language were canceled in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Schools have been required to arrange school-based assessments for their students in Primary 5 (P5) second term, Primary 6 first term, and Primary 6 second term to determine the order of merit of students. The assessment scores are required to be submitted to the EDB to participate in the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA), which is the place allocation scaling mechanism for entry to public secondary schools.

In 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, schools with Primary 5 CBS were allowed to conduct only one internal assessment, instead of the usual two, before promoting students to Primary 6. The EDB also allowed schools with CBS to combine the two score submissions in Primary 5 second term and Primary 6 first term as one, and to submit only one set of scores or order of merit for students.

### Policy and Practice Changes

“Suspending classes without suspending learning” was the slogan used by the EDB to express the idea that students should make good use of their time and keep learning remotely during school suspension. To facilitate teaching and learning outside classrooms, schools and teachers were encouraged to use various e-learning platforms and strategies, such as videoconferencing platforms, groupware, learning management systems, emails, instant messaging applications, and school websites, to deliver learning materials and instruction.<sup>43</sup>

During the class suspension period across two academic years, schools inevitably adopted diversified modes of learning to facilitate student learning at home. Schools suitably adjusted their teaching and learning arrangements to assist students in maintaining their learning progress, such as rescheduling school activities as well as arranging supplementary lessons for individual students.

In Hong Kong, it has been common for some primary schools to regroup students into different subject-specific class sets taught by different subject teacher(s) instead of the general education class. Such arrangements aim to regroup students with similar proficiency levels to study together, or to form a small group supporting students in need. Schools usually adapt such practices only for core subjects (i.e., Chinese language, English language, and mathematics). During the pandemic, more schools applied this rearrangement to provide flexibility for online teaching and small-group teaching to students with different backgrounds and needs.

When face-to-face learning was suspended, it was inevitable for schools, teachers, students, and even parents to have a crash course on e-learning that included technological knowledge of various online platforms and apps, and design of interaction and experience in virtual classes. On about 1/3 of school days during the pandemic, e-learning was the only channel to organize learning and teaching activities. Looking on the bright side, the pressure to expedite the rise of e-learning

was driven by the class suspension. However, digital accessibility became the necessary condition of learning and also a barrier to students with low socioeconomic backgrounds. The pandemic is widening the digital divide among students from families with different levels of socioeconomic status, and inequality will be caused if the issue is not properly addressed.<sup>44</sup>

### Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in spring 2020, the field test period in Hong Kong was compressed and postponed to June 8 to July 13. In spring 2021, schools suspended face-to-face classes again; therefore, the main study test period in Hong Kong was shortened and postponed to April 12 to July 15, 2021.

During the partial class resumption, face-to-face teaching was allowed only in the morning session. To facilitate the two-hour reading assessment and student questionnaire sessions, numerous participating schools had to cancel all regular lessons of the sampled class on the test day.

During the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person class for Primary 4 students was suspended in February 2020. The EDB announced that Primary 4 students would resume classes in early June 2020. Due to the short period of class resumption before the end of the 2019–2020 academic year, complicated class arrangements (half-day class, short class period, etc.), and tight teaching schedule, only eight sampled schools were willing to join the field test. Unfortunately, Hong Kong faced a third wave of the outbreak in early July, and face-to-face classes were suspended again. Despite the exceedingly difficult situation, 226 students from four schools eventually took part in the field test.

In 2020, there were 1,206 Primary 4 CBS students living in Shenzhen and attending 55 schools in Hong Kong. They were eligible to participate in PIRLS; however, they were not available to join due to the border control and quarantine measures.

### Suggested Readings

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