

Outbreak forces education to go online

Ministries say epidemic control and prevention the priority for schools

By XU WEI
xuwei@chinadaily.com.cn

Donning her school uniform and a red scarf, He Xin took part in her primary school's flag-raising ceremony, a tradition at the start of each semester, only this time she was standing in her family's living room and watching the ceremony live online, like hundreds of fellow students.

Monday was originally planned to be the start of the spring semester for middle and primary schools in Beijing. However, as part of efforts to curb the novel coronavirus pneumonia outbreak, the start of the semester has been delayed, with Monday instead marking the start of online courses being offered to students.

To facilitate the online learning activities, Xin's family, who live in Beijing's Haidian district, helped the 9-year-old register for an account on the Tencent QQ instant messaging platform to join the online chat group initiated by her teachers.

It offers the third-grader a timetable that includes morning exercise for half an hour, reading, mathematics, English and a feedback session with the teacher at the end of the day.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said in a joint notice on Wednesday that epidemic control and prevention remained the top priority for schools nationwide.

The country will make learning resources available to primary and middle school students for free through a number of online and television channels, including cloud platforms and online schools, the notice said.

The two ministries warned that after-school training institutions must not take the place of schools during the process, saying that local authorities and schools must step up guidance to students on the selection of learning materials and the framing of study plans.

They also called on schools to refrain from increasing the burden on students, with measures to avoid long hours of studying online and learning beyond the curriculum.

Schools should not require students to register their attendance online or upload videos of their participation, the notice said, adding that students must be given a reasonable amount of rest time.

It emphasized that protecting students' eyesight must be a priority, with measures to expand rest periods and encourage physical activity.

Lyu Yugang, head of the Ministry of Education's Department of Basic Education, said schools must not use home-schooling to replace their normal curriculum.

"When the classes reopen, local authorities and schools must carefully assess the quality of the students' learning and come up with targeted teaching plans," he told a news briefing on Wednesday.

He also stressed the importance of extending more help to the children of medical workers fighting on the front line to curb the outbreak and rural children left behind by



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parents migrating to urban areas for jobs.

"We need to ensure that every student has already grasped the knowledge in online courses before starting new courses," Lyu said.

Despite the authorities' repeated reminders about the need to ensure adequate rest periods, Xin's parents are still worried about her eyesight.

To complete her online learning, Xin needs to use a laptop and a cell-phone to receive messages from her teachers.

"We do not have other options. It

was the only way to make sure she can keep up her schooling," said Zhou Ying, her mother.

"She also missed her classmates and kept asking when she could meet them. We could not give an answer."

Zhou said her daughter had already been using instant messaging tools to stay in touch with fellow students, which exacerbated their concerns about her eyesight.

"We can only hope that either I or her father can continue to be able to work from home. Otherwise we will have a babysitting problem," she said.

Chu Zhaohui, a researcher at the National Institute of Education Sciences, said it would be a better option for schools to use the time before schools reopen to encourage students to learn on their own initiative.

"The extended holiday has offered students an opportunity to make their own decisions, plans and arrangements," he said. "It will spur them to take more initiative, boost their confidence, exercise more self-control and improve their self-learning abilities."

POLICY RESPONSE

Teachers' performance during epidemic to count

By MO JINGXI
mojingxi@chinadaily.com.cn

A number of ministry-level departments, including those responsible for education, customs, and human resources and social security, have responded recently to issues of public concern.

Ministry notice outlines teachers' responsibilities

Online teaching, tutoring and assisting homework will be counted as part of the workload of teachers during the novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic and be included in performance appraisals, the Ministry of Education said in a notice published on Friday.

It said local education authorities and schools should arrange for



teachers to carry out online teaching according to their own conditions. The epidemic has seen China postpone the start of the spring school semester.

The return of teachers to schools should be arranged according to the need for epidemic prevention and control, and teachers should not attend gatherings such as concentrated offline training or conventions, it said.

The notice also said rewards and recognition for teachers making outstanding contributions on the front line of epidemic prevention should be boosted.

Authorities ensure supply of labor for key industries

Local authorities have taken multiple measures to ensure the supply of labor for companies producing urgently needed goods and materials, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security said on Friday.

The demand for labor by most companies that had resumed production had been satisfied, it said in a statement.

Local human resources departments had made contact with enterprises to help coordinate their use of workers and solve related problems.

In Tianjin and Guangdong province, the recruitment of local unemployed people and rural workers had been organized to support the resumption of production in priority companies.

Policies had been implemented to help reduce companies' labor costs during the Spring Festival holiday and recruitment agencies had been encouraged to provide services for companies, it said.

The ministry said coordinated services covering transportation and the prevention of novel coronavirus pneumonia were helping people employed in other provinces return to work.

Customs takes tough line of local pressure

The General Administration of Customs will take a tough line on

local governments or companies' unreasonable requests to seize or withhold legally imported materials for epidemic prevention and control, it said in a notice released on Thursday.

In a recent inspection of 42 local customs offices, the administration found that several local governments had asked the customs offices to seize or withhold legally imported epidemic prevention supplies.

The customs offices had firmly resisted such unreasonable requests, it said.

Customs statistics show that 957 million items related to epidemic prevention worth 3.07 billion yuan (\$439 million) were examined and released by customs offices nationwide from Jan 24 to Feb 12.

Policy digest

Vehicles carrying farm produce given priority

China will continue to strengthen the supply of farm produce to cope with shortages caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak, the State Council said in a notice issued on Thursday.

It said local governments should be responsible for the supply of vegetables, meat, eggs, milk, aquatic products and other produce in areas under their administration.

They were also urged to pay attention to the production, sale, transportation and quality control of farm produce, it said.

The notice said local authorities should publish details of channels for receiving complaints, such as hotline numbers, and resolve problems concerning the supply of farm produce in a timely manner. Formalism and bureaucratism should be strictly avoided, it said.

To guarantee farm production, the notice said efforts should be made to coordinate large farming entities like cooperatives and large private businesses to solve labor shortages.

Hog production should be restored as soon as possible, it said, asking for full-on efforts to prevent major infectious diseases such as African swine fever and bird flu.

The country will ensure the smooth transport of farm produce through "green channels" set up for epidemic control and prevention supplies, with vehicles given priority and exempted from highway charges.

The notice said distribution companies and e-commerce platforms should fully play their roles in promoting the distribution and sale of farm produce.

It also called for stricter management on live poultry markets, including timely disinfection and cooperation with supervision, while strengthening supplies of other types of meat.

Production of animal feed, veterinary drugs and other livestock products should be restored as soon as possible, the notice said.

Companies that make products related to key epidemic prevention materials should be offered credit support in a timely manner, it said.

Support for medical workers on front line

China will take measures to improve the working conditions of medical workers on the front line of the battle against novel coronavirus pneumonia and care for their physical and mental health, a document issued by the General Office of the State Council said on Feb 11.

As epidemic prevention work enters a critical period, medical workers are facing difficulties including heavy workloads, high infection risks, a lack of rest and great psychological pressure.

The measures, jointly taken by the National Health Commission, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Ministry of Finance, are necessary to support front-line medical personnel during epidemic prevention and control work, the document said.

To improve working and rest conditions, it required efforts to renovate facilities in medical care and health institutions to meet the demands of receiving and treating patients.

Local governments above the county level will be allowed to requisition hotels near hospitals as rest places for medical workers and should guarantee their supplies of daily necessities, it said.

To ensure that medical staff members are physically strong in battling the virus, time should be reasonably split between their work and rest. Shift schedules must consider their physical limitations in a scientific way.

It also stressed minimizing in-hospital infections through the use of essential protective supplies and materials.

The document also called for the enhancement of psychological crisis intervention and counseling for medical workers to relieve their mental stress.

Financial support will be offered to medical workers in the form of temporary work subsidies and merit pay for overtime, especially to outstanding performers, it said.