

On 3/13/08, **John Greene** <\_\_\_\_\_> wrote:

- Special Education Needs (SEN) for Non-Chinese Speaking is a progression within English Schools Foundation (ESF) schools and is long over due and very welcome, however, the number of students each normal school can cater too (only a couple to a few per school) is far below what the special needs demands are for full time or even limited main stream interaction.
- SEN in ESF schools can, at best, only look after the top of the range of the SEN students, the higher functioning and higher cognitive group of SEN children. Mainstream schools are not special needs schools and are not capable or designed to take care of all the varied aspects of special needs children.
- Children of lesser abilities than that which qualify for placement in a normal school with SEN service are in need of services that are not adequately available from the government or from other schools, those needs can be divided into two categories which need to overlap in their schooling environment:
  - Functional - Medical and Therapeutic Needs
  - Educational - Learning and Self Care.

**Functional – Medical and Therapeutic Needs:**

- The government does not offer adequate special needs services for non Chinese speaking or even for Chinese speaking children. Services that are offered are limited and sparse. For example speech therapy, if one is so fortunate to get allotted government assistance, it is meted out as one 30 minute session once a month and Occupational Therapy (OT) once a week, where to be effective such therapy needs to be on a daily basis and for longer a period of time. Government services in other therapeutic areas such as Occupational Therapy and Physio Therapy, Sensory Integration Therapy etc. that the government does have to offer are done so similarly in a sparse and frugal manner.
- The government therapists themselves are of a mixed quality. Some have such great experience that they can interact creatively and get good and positive responses from the child quickly, but again this is good work which too little and too far between to be constructive in the long term. On the other hand, some therapists show signs that they really don't care for the child, for the parents or for themselves, with demeaning attitudes towards the children and their guardians. We have experienced government speech therapists demand - "Do you speak Cantonese, my English is not good, what do you want me to do? Your child can't even sit down to do some work, how can I teach him?"- This particular speech therapist has since left government and gone to the private sector and is seeking to service English speaking clients, on another occasion we have experienced a government speech therapist make an opening statement - "you are a bad mother, you don't even know how to play with your son" ... stories like this abound those that have fought to get the meagre assistance from government, and most have abandoned government services, as hard as they are to get, simply because they are only a TOKEN service.

- There are many other therapies, professional and recognised for treating the various ailments of special needs, which are not available from government and are only available in the private sector. Such therapies would include hyperbaric chamber treatment, acupuncture, and various methods of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) etc. In many other countries, USA, Australia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Ireland etc. all of these basic essential services are supplied by the State. They are good quality and professional services applied on a regular basis and professionally monitored. They are also provided locally, being that such services are standard and available throughout the government health network. Many of the categories of special needs, for some reason, are not recognised by health insurance companies as being "medical" issues, and as such are not covered by health insurance. Until the government recognises the Special Needs problems and combatively addresses special needs as a medical issue, then and only then will the private sector follow.
- Private therapies are available but there is a long waiting list. A family that has been fortunate to get to a point in diagnosis where they can identify and concentrate on their child's special needs from the private sector will incur private costs of between HK\$15,000 – HK\$40,000 per month just on extra curricular therapies and treatment for their child. Extra curricular ... assuming they have a school that will take them, let alone a school that will take them and be able to cater to their special needs.

### **Educational – Learning and Self Care**

- The drive to gear up schools to be able to adequately capable of taking on special needs children is a good one and at last a beginning. Let it not be just a token gesture. There is a desperate need for special needs facilities, services and qualified staff in normal schools to cater to the few special needs students the school may be able to take in. Again, only the top performers may get in to these schools, and the only way in is by being channelled in from "feeder" special needs centres or special needs schools. Ironically, there are not enough special needs schools available to non-Chinese speaking in Hong Kong and there is definitely a clear and present danger that special needs children at any age are being deprived of education, therapy, correct analysis and treatment of their condition simply because the system of government care, government education and government intervention is negligible. Government leadership is not apparent.
- From what special needs "centres" there are, placements are limited and the waiting list is long. Of these centres the numbers of special needs children that have been nurtured to a level where they are ready for and need integration into normal schools far out numbers the placements the normal schools are presently preparing to cater for. While we talk about gearing up main stream schools for special needs, we also need to take care of the feeders i.e. the special needs centres, of which there are few, that filter up prospective special needs students that may be able to adjust and progress in main stream school, under specialised supervision of course. These feeder centres are themselves few and far between to adequately service the demands put upon them. If the special needs in main stream schools is going to work well i.e. serve the best interests of the child, then it needs to also work properly in that the child is adequately prepared by the feeder centres. However, if there are insufficient feeder centres in the territory to service the educational and

learning needs of all the non-Chinese speaking special needs children in Hong Kong then ultimately we are failing. Failing to serve the special needs of the child ... the ones we cannot offer any service at all to start with.

- The creation of exemplary Special Needs Schools, taking sample from the Jockey Club Sarah Roe School (JCSRS) needs to occur on a grand scale throughout Hong Kong on a regional basis (Hong Kong Island, New Territories North, New Territories South, Kowloon), in adequate numbers to address this growing problem. The Education Department extends some consideration to the English Schools Foundation (ESF) to the fact that ESF does have under it's wing one special needs school, the JCSRS. In reality, there needs to be many more identical and even improved similar ESF special needs schools through out the territory. JCSRS is probably the best special needs school in Far East Asia and is a big feather in the cap of ESF and the Education Department, and Hong Kong. However, many more feathers are needed before the Hong Kong Government can wear the crown of feathers that would befitting of a responsible and caring and pro-active government in the little spoken arena of Special Needs. Do we and the people of Hong Kong have to wait until a senior government official or celebrity of huge political influence suddenly has a special needs child of their own before and reasonable initiative is taken by government to the pandemic that it is well aware of but to which it presently chooses to ignore.
- To summarise, special needs demands are growing and are not going to go away. Special needs has already reached **pandemic proportions** and simply cannot be ignored any longer.
- It is time for schools to be special needs capable; it is time for more special schools like JCSRS to be established through out the territory of HKSAR and for both non-Chinese and Chinese speaking fraternities.
- It is high time that the government recognised this pandemic and directly got involved by adopting a leading manner financially and directly in catering to the special needs of society (as opposed erring it's greater responsibilities through broad spectrum educational sub-contracting licenses and grants).
- It is time legislative councillors put special needs high on their agenda and at the top of their list of mandatory targets to be achieved.

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*- Raising Funds for JCSRS Essential Needs*

*- Enhancing parental support, friendship and bonding amongst JCSRS families*

*- <http://www.jcsrs.edu.hk/>*