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Your Ref: CB(3)PAC/R43

Ms Dora Wai
Public Accounts Committee
Legislative Council Secretariat
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central
Hong Kong

28 December 2004
(By Fax 2537 1204 and Post)

Dear Ms. Wai,

Re Chapter 3: Government Subsidies to the English Schools Foundation

Thank you for your fax/letter of December 21st requesting ESF to clarify its position within the education sector with regard to whether ESF considers itself part of the local system or the international one.

Hong Kong is an international city with ambitions to become Asia's World City. Among those living and working in Hong Kong are people from around the world, including ethnic Chinese who hold passports of other countries, people of other Asian ethnicities (e.g. from the Indian Subcontinent), Eurasians, as well as those who would traditionally have been categorized as 'expatriate'. These groups have permanent residence rights in Hong Kong; they contribute to the local economy, pay taxes and consider themselves to be 'Hong Kongers'.

ESF serves people in those categories as well as an increasing number of local Chinese families. With regard to our student population we do not regard a distinction between 'local' and 'international' as a meaningful one. In Hong Kong many international schools serve local families. In ESF schools only 18% of children are now 'Caucasian' with over 60% ethnically Chinese or Eurasian, and nearly 80% Asian. 81% of students are permanent residents. The most commonly spoken first language is English, one of Hong Kong's official languages.

ESF schools, like international schools, teach to a non-local curriculum; some local subvented schools teach to an international curriculum. ESF's curriculum, especially in the primary sector, is in fact a localized version of the British National Curriculum. Hong Kong's universities accept local students with 'overseas' examination qualifications. Again, the boundary between what is 'local' and 'international' is becoming blurred.



With regard to employment of teachers, it is true that ESF schools recruit most of their staff from the English speaking world as would be expected of a first language English school system committed to high standards of teaching in that medium.

ESF regards itself as an integral part of the local education system, providing the system with an international dimension, as befits an international city. Our mission statement commits us to serve Hong Kong and the region. ESF schools meet a need in the community for a high quality, affordable education in the medium of English. Most ESF families cannot access the local system given the competitive nature of entry into many EMI Band One schools, and the necessity in most of them for children to prove a high competency in Chinese language. While some families send their children to ESF schools by choice, because of their international flavour, high standards of English and liberal teaching methods, many families have a limited choice or no choice at all. ESF provides an affordable alternative for those for whom the mainstream system is inaccessible or inappropriate, and the purely private which is often unaffordable.

It is true that before 1997 ESF served a mainly expatriate clientele. With the growing global economy, the old distinctions between 'local' and 'expatriate' are blurred. Gone are the days when professionals from other countries necessarily enjoy generous packages that include subsidized education in ESF or international schools. ESF now serves a different 'expatriate' market, many of whom are employed on terms no different to those employed locally. Many of these families have qualified for permanent residence rights. ESF believes that it makes an important contribution to the education system, in providing this valued part of the community with an affordable, high quality education service.

As to whether ESF should be considered to be part of the international school system, we acknowledge that there are areas of comparability. Where we can claim a measure of distinctiveness is in our more inclusive philosophy. ESF schools are non-selective (except for the English admissions test) and we include in our number about 10% who are in receipt of some form of special needs support.

ESF's positioning as an integral part of the local system is underpinned by the Ordinance that established the Foundation in 1967, and which subsequently embraced 16 schools. This embeds ESF in the local system. We are grateful for the funding that accompanies this. We also gratefully accept the responsibilities that come with being part of the local system. ESF are partners of the EMB, working with them on a number of initiatives: the opening of PIS schools, work on continuous professional development, school evaluation and so on. When the Canadian Overseas International College went bankrupt, it was to the ESF that the EMB turned to launch the rescue operation that resulted in the opening of the Phoenix International School in 2002. ESF also accepts, as the recent Audit process shows, the accountability that comes from being part of the local system and in receipt of public funds.



英基學校協會
ENGLISH SCHOOLS FOUNDATION

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In summary ESF does regard itself as an integral part of the local education system but also acknowledges that other institutions, now nominally 'international', could also make this claim. We make no claim to exclusivity and would favour an evaluation of the contribution to the economy and society of Hong Kong of all schools offering an international dimension, with a particular review of the education available to English speaking children in Hong Kong.

The English Schools Foundation considers itself to be a Hong Kong institution, committed not to any other country, denomination or international movement, but to Hong Kong's future as an international city, catering to those who make Hong Kong their home and who contribute to this city's livelihood.

Yours sincerely,

John Bohan
Acting Secretary and Chief Executive

PS Please be advised that a soft copy of this letter has been emailed to cwywong@legco.gov.hk while the Chinese version will be submitted to you at a later date.

cc Secretary for Education and Manpower
Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury (Attn : Mr Manfred WONG)
Director of Audit
Chairman, English Schools Foundation