

Hello everyone

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be here. I am a parent at Bradbury School. Both my children were born in Hong Kong, one is Autistic and attends the Learning Support Class (LSC), and the other is in mainstream. I was also born in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is my home, and I attended ESF as well, so the issues being addressed today are very close to my heart.

I would first like to state that I am representing myself, not the SEN Parent Advisory Committee as such, because the committee did not come to a consensus as to the position of SEN parents as a group. Hence you already have the presentation by KGV parents.

The ESF (Amendment) Bill addresses many issues and SEN is only one of them. I will try not to lose sight of that as I proceed. Firstly, I will address the representation of parents with Special Educational Needs on the Board of Governors. The JCPTA, which is the official representing body of all ESF parents, states quite clearly that they would not support the amendment to have a SEN parent on the Board. I would also support this view. The fact is that any Board Member should act on behalf of the greater good of the whole ESF community, rather than any individual constituency. A governing body should not intentionally seek to be a subject to the foibles of human nature. Unless the parent taking up this position is a very grounded individual, the danger remains that a parent representative is not an impartial party acting for the good of ALL children being educated by the Foundation. I would propose that an independent third party with SEN front line and management experience be considered as an alternative route if indeed representation is needed. A professional would also bring understanding to other staff and council members who may not have experience with special educational needs. This might be a first step in the right direction to open up communication and foster better understanding and trust. In terms of individual school councils having SEN representation, this is the same issue of constituency representation again. School councils can have non-voting members of any constituency attend meetings and address issues, which would include SEN.

The other amendment is the proposed wording “irrespective of disability or special educational need” to be added to the ordinance. Both sides have already addressed the legal wording to this matter, so I would just like to bring a more realistic side to your attention. As a parent of a SEN child, ESF **was and is** my only choice of schooling. My son was lucky, because we were actually offered one of the highly coveted spaces in the Learning Support Class. The reality is, if my son did not get into the ESF, I would have been forced to leave Hong Kong as many of my friends have. Others are contemplating leaving, many hoping to relocate to Singapore.

So the problem is not what wording is used, it is in the spirit of implementation. The ESF has made many changes these past two years to improve the SEN situation across all of the Foundation schools, and they should be commended for their efforts. Of course there is much that still needs to be done, but the framework is their.

Where I have been the most disappointed is in the Education Department (EDB). I recently had a conversation with a representative from the EDB regarding private and government schools admitting SEN students. The EDB quoted the DDO to me, and said no school can refuse admission to a child with SEN. But if the school uses another reason to deny entry, for example, they are full, then nothing that can be done. What good is wording if the spirit is crushed?

So I ask you this, if Hong Kong is Asia’s World City, if the Chief Executive wants to increase the population to ten million, how are you going to educate those children? Drawing from current Hong Kong statistical equivalents, 19.5 % of the 3 million would be under 19 years of age and require schooling, that’s 585,000 students. And drawing from international equivalents an average of 7 %, 40,950 students, would have special educational needs. What are you going to do with those children?

Luckily the antiquated 9 years of free education policy might be addressed this Wednesday, but how about education under one ministry? What about questions like, why are other international schools not required by the EDB to be a part of our community by providing for SEN students? Did you know that most international schools do not accept SEN

children? The only other school that has a comprehensive English language program is located at the Korean International School. A healthy inclusive setting is 10% SEN and 90% typical. Why are schools, both government and private not required to provide for our inclusive society?

I understand that answers to these questions have many implications in terms of manpower and resources. These questions are much bigger than ESF, so why are we only asking ESF to carry the burden? These questions are the fundamental issues with how education is perceived in Hong Kong today. So I would rather see ESF commit to continue to refine their SEN programs and schools for **appropriate inclusion** rather than crush the spirit with words that even the education department indirectly admits has loopholes.

Please remember, our children do not have disabilities. They just have different abilities and require different learning techniques. Thank you very much for having me today.

Virginia Wilson

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