

Dear Honourable Legislative Councillors,

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to respond to some major issues raised at the Bills Committee Meeting on 8 October regarding the proposed amendments of the ESF Bill.

**1. Adding a clause to the Objects of the Foundation to include "without regard to disability", apart from "race or religion"**

**1.1. Resource implication: A bottomless pit?**

We understand that one argument against this proposal is the resource implication that the added clause may carry. However, the added clause does not mean that the ESF will have to admit all SEN students, since the Foundation has its own admission quota and therefore has every right to turn away students when the quota is filled. Every child has a right to education, including English-speaking SEN children who can't possibly find suitable placements in local schools. Amending the ESF Bill is a matter of putting the ESF's commitment to special education on paper. By taking the lead, the ESF can encourage other international schools to follow suit.

**1.2 Resource implication in terms of provision of facilities**

There is a concern that the proposed amendment fails to recognize the wide range of needs that the ESF may fail to meet, e.g. students in wheelchairs. However, let's not forget that currently ESF schools already have provision for a range of needs, including children in wheelchairs. It is a matter of placing SEN students in the right schools - e.g. putting students in wheelchairs in an ESF school with appropriate facilities, and placing students with more severe needs in Sarah Roe School. The amended clause does not mean that every single ESF school will have to cater for a wide range of special needs. Neither does it mean that students / parents can choose the ESF schools they want to study in, as the power still rests with the ESF to assign students to suitable schools.

**1.3 Placement of SEN students and impact on learning environment**

There are concerns about the impact of the admission of SEN students on the learning environment, as shown in the extracts below.

*ESF schools are full to capacity... At the moment simple things like the movement of students around school at break and lunch-times is very difficult with duty staff having to control hundreds of students in corridors, on stairways, and in canteen queues to maintain order and safety... Simply placing students with a physical disability in some of these rooms will put them at risk. [Source: Staff Council paper, CB(2)2815/06-07(01)]*

*We cannot provide for children with such needs [e.g. extreme behaviour problems] in a mainstream school and to attempt to do so would put at risk the safety as well as the educational progress of both the child concerned and other children in the class. [Source: ESF paper, CB(2)2780/06-07(01)]*

To think that the amended clause will result in chaos in the learning environment, as described above, is to suggest that the amendment will require the ESF to admit SEN students and place them in any ESF school irrespective of availability of facilities and staff. It should be noted that the proposed amendment is “without regard to disability” NOT “without regard to disability and in all circumstances”.

## **2. Adding a SEN parent representative to the Board of Governors**

### **2.1 Divisive effect on other parent groups**

It has been argued that it is inappropriate to allow SEN parents dedicated representation on the Board of Governors and that this will have a divisive effect on the parents' group. However, we very much doubt if other groups will envy SEN parents' representation. Unless parents have SEN kids, they won't have a chance to be a SEN parent representative on the board. Who will be envious of this?

What other parent groups are there? Although we can be very creative in trying to come up with a range of parents' groups according to race, religion and what not, what remains clear is that when it comes to student learning, which should be our focus here, there are only two major groups: mainstream and SEN, irrespective of race and religion. Even though parents may belong to other parent groups, their students still belong to either the mainstream or SEN group. It is important that we cater for the needs of both groups in order to treat them "equally".

## 2.2 SEN parent representation not an impartial party acting for the good of all ESF students

One argument against this proposed amendment is that children with special needs represent only a small proportion of students and the board would need to consider the interests of all children. Please remember that SEN students make up about 10% of the total student population in the ESF. They are a minority but definitely not a **small** minority. It is true that the board would need to consider the interests of all children. This is exactly why SEN parent representation is needed because “all children” include both mainstream and SEN students. Mainstream parents know very little about SEN students’ needs. Including SEN parent representation does not mean that the board will then address issues only relevant to SEN education; instead it will help achieve a better balance and enable the board to consider the interests of **all** children in a real sense and set up clear educational policies for all of them. If objection to SEN parent representation implies that mainstream parent representatives are an impartial party acting for the good of all students, we would like to ask why the “good of all students” excludes SEN students, who are part of the ESF community.

## 2.3 Independent SEN expert representation as an alternative

Because of the concern that SEN parent representation may not be an impartial party acting for the good of ALL ESF children, it is proposed that an independent third party with SEN frontline and management experience be an alternative route if indeed representation is needed. It is argued that a professional would also bring understanding to other staff and council members who may not have experience with SEN. However, we believe that SEN parents are the best “frontline experts” for SEN education and the best representatives for SEN students. Who knows the needs of SEN children better than parents? Who has first-hand knowledge of the specific needs of SEN children?

SEN professionals, on the other hand, are those who have acquired their theoretical knowledge from studies and practical knowledge from field experience. SEN parents may not have as much theoretical knowledge about SEN but their practical knowledge far exceeds that of experts. They are in the field, day in and day out, and their practical knowledge grows day by day as

they interact with their children. In our experience as SEN parents, the “experts” we have worked with have kept commending SEN parents for their deep insights into SEN children’s needs. SEN parents are therefore in a much more advantageous position than SEN experts when it comes to understanding the needs of SEN children. SEN experts definitely have an important role to play in SEN students’ education, but they cannot replace parents. If mainstream students can be represented by their parents, we don’t see why SEN students cannot and should not be represented by their own parents. To suggest that SEN students are best represented by SEN professionals / experts is an insult to and discrimination against SEN parents.

### **3 Adding a SEN parent representative to the School Council**

It is argued that opportunities already exist for SEN parents to be involved with School Councils. Although SEN parents can be invited to particular meetings or co-opted onto working groups convened by the School Council, especially when issues such as SEN are being discussed, this is not a formal and effective communicational channel. In KGV School, although some SEN parents made a formal complaint in March 2007 , the School council did not invite them to their meetings. To make sure that communication is effective, designated SEN parent representation on the School Council is necessary.

### **4. Other concerns**

#### **4.1 Punishing the ESF for its contribution to special education??**

Currently only the ESF carries the responsibility of SEN education for English-speaking SEN students. It seems that we are asking the ESF to do more and hence penalising the ESF for its good work. This is an entirely wrong message. In fact, the ESF’s commitment to SEN education is highly commendable. We hope that the bill amendments will awaken the educational community, particularly other international schools, to the need of sharing the responsibility of SEN education. This is not a burden but a social responsibility. We urge the Government to provide funding for other international schools in Hong Kong so that they can follow the good practice of the ESF and reform their curriculum to cater for the needs of SEN students. More importantly, the Government should strengthen teacher training in special education for frontline teachers so as to enhance the quality of SEN education.

4.2 Highlighting parents of Special Educational Needs children as a separate group is against the ESF's philosophy of inclusivity and anti-discrimination [see paper by the principals of Beacon Hill School and South Island School, CB(2) 2780/06-07(2)]

Singling out any SEN group (be it student or parent) to ridicule them is absolutely discriminatory. But doing so to maximize their opportunities with a view to improving the quality of SEN education is a noble cause.

4.3 Singling out the SEN group is not fair to other groups

With the board consisting of only mainstream parents, who is going to speak for the interests of SEN students? Is this "fair" to SEN students then? When it comes to student learning, there are two main groups: mainstream and SEN, irrespective of race and religion. When we are accused of singling out SEN as a specific group, we should also be aware that mainstream students also constitute a group, though a much bigger group. If mainstream parents speak can for the mainstream group, why shouldn't SEN parents advocate for the SEN group? In fact, why should we polarize the two groups as if they were enemies? Mainstream and SEN students study together in the same school and learn from each other. While SEN students can benefit from being integrated into the mainstream, mainstream students can also learn from the SEN students, develop a sense of responsibility, and enlarge their sympathy for those who are less fortunate. In order to the "fair", we have to cater for the needs of both mainstream and SEN groups, which makes it imperative to include SEN parent representation on the Board.

4.4 Quality of SEN education provided by the ESF

There has been contention over the progress the ESF has made since the SEN Review in 2005, as well as the quality of its SEN education. See extracts from SCMP, 13 October 2007 SCMP.

*Ms Liu said a 2005 report had pointed out deficiencies in the ESF's provision for special needs children. She said the ESF had not implemented most of the report's recommendations and had no timetable to do so.*

*But this was strongly denied by ESF chief executive Heather Du Quesnay, who said there had been a "clear series of achievements", including the establishment of three new learning support classes.*

*"I'm absolutely certain that there's clear evidence of the amount of new work that has been done," she said."*

We think it is not appropriate for us to get into a detailed discussion of this issue here. What we want to stress is that in education it is quality that matters more than quantity, though we appreciate that quantity still counts especially given the long queue of applicants waiting to get admitted into the Learning Support Class of ESF schools and the Jockey Club Sarah Roe School. . However, setting up learning support classes is one thing, but making sure that there is quality teaching and learning is quite another. Also, the establishment of three new learning support classes indicates that there is an increasing need for the ESF to cater for SEN students – and hence our proposed amendments.

4.5 Administratively difficult to identify a separate constituency of SEN parents?

It has been argued that the needs of children lie along a spectrum and change over time so they do not form a fixed group, and therefore it is administratively difficult to identify a separate a SEN parent group. We think this is a pseudo argument. Currently, all students are registered as part of the mainstream, Individual Needs, Learning Support Class, or Sarah Roe School. A SEN parent constituency can be easily identified.

The above is our attempt to address some of the major concerns about the proposed amendments of the ESF Bill. We wish to extend our gratitude to the Honourable Legislative Councillors for your understanding and support.

A group of KGV SEN parents  
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