

A Reply to EDB's Response to the Legislative
Council Panel on Education Regarding
Progress of Support Measures for Non-Chinese
Speaking Students including Ethnic Minority
Students

Hong Kong's Forgotten Child:
The Non-Chinese Speaking Child with
Special Educational Needs

By Growing Together: Hong Kong's Special
Education Needs Community
for language and ethnic minorities

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In their June 2008 response to the Legislative Council Panel on Education regarding the progress of support measures for non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students including ethnic minority students, the Education Bureau (EDB) also reports on the support for NCS students with special education needs (SEN).

EDB states that the Government has been providing ordinary public-sector schools with additional support and resources to cater to the needs of students with SEN, including those who are NCS. Stated future plans include a new Learning Support Grant to public-sector secondary schools to further strengthen their SEN support. There are no details offered about the provisions of this grant or about the programming and continued necessary for it to be successful. Following are some of the pertinent policies that support the SEN programming offered in other developed countries:

- Individual adapting of teaching methods and programming for students from linguistic and cultural minorities
- Entitlement to instruction adapted to the child's prerequisites
- Differentiated teaching methods as an overall principle of schools
- Accommodations in place to meet unique needs of students
- Programming best adapted to meet the child's individual needs
- Accessibility to special arrangements and activities
- Freedom to learn at individual pace

What is the curriculum in place for NCS students with SEN? The EDB must supply details about what specific programming will be supported and what types of students/SEN said programming will address. By their own admission, the EDB is struggling to develop and implement a unified curriculum for typically developing NCS students (LC Paper No. CB(2)2164/07-08(03)). What is the realistic expectation that a unified and appropriate curriculum for NCS students with SEN can be developed?

Additionally, the EDB states that the funding arrangements for the learning support grant under the New Funding Mode (NFM) for primary schools will be enhanced. There is no specific mention of this enhancement benefitting NCS students with SEN. Does the EDB intend to follow the previous recommendation of Hong Kong's International Special Education Needs Community and provide parity under the NFM for NCS students with SEN (CB (2) 1971/07-08(01) currently not attending local schools due to lack of appropriate curriculum?

EDB's response gives particular emphasis to NCS children and the remedial support offered to help them integrate into the local system. Scant attention is given to the

support offered to NCS students with SEN. The report does recognize English as one of the official languages in Hong Kong and also notes that studying under the local system does not mean NCS students are forced to learn in Chinese at all costs. Again, the primary focus here is on NCS students, with SEN as a secondary concern. It is interesting that the report highlights 18 designated schools for NCS students which have students with SEN enrolled. 11 of these schools are either English-medium or are offering English medium classes serving some 70 students with SEN. 22 of these students are also NCS. These numbers are puzzling. International equivalents indicate that up to 7% of school age children have SEN. The 2006 By-Census identifies 28,722 full time ethnic minority (NCS) students in Hong Kong. Even if a lower rate of students with SEN was stipulated, say 5%, there would still be in excess of 1400 NCS students with SEN in Hong Kong. The EDB is now serving 22 of them. One would correctly question where the balance are receiving the services they so desperately need and deserve.

The EDB goes on to report that there are other English-medium schools that, while not designated schools, do receive additional resources for supporting students with SEN. The report lists an assortment of miscellaneous and disconnected programs designed to support NCS students with SEN. There is no mention of a dedicated curriculum for these students or a set of defining principles that would guide the development of any future programming. Without the establishment of guidelines and a well defined curriculum, NCS students with SEN will not receive the level of programming necessary.

The report references opportunities available outside the public system for NCS students with SEN, specifically, 38 private international schools that provide alternatives for NCS students. In this context, there is no mention of the specific services for NCS students with SEN. Additionally, these alternatives are cited as being outside the public sector to provide choices in an open market, with a minimum of interference from the government. Is the implication that international schools are viewed as business concerns, not to be viewed as providers of a fundamental public service – one which is a basic right for all children? EDB states that while it is the policy of the administration not to micro-manage international schools, international schools should provide equal opportunities for all students in terms of admission, teaching curriculum and assessment. If the EDB, by virtue of its policies, does not have any managerial oversight regarding international schools, through what mechanism are they holding these schools accountable for providing equal opportunities?

The final issue the report deals with is ESF and its current and future support for NCS students with SEN. The implication is that ESF should be the sole purveyor of services to NCS students with SEN. Assuming that one institution can adequately solve this problem ignores its scope and magnitude as well as the resources that could be mobilized

to solve it. The paper does mention the possibility of further enhancements within the ESF system for NCS students with SEN. Will these enhancements be substantial enough to address the needs of the current students on the ESF waitlist as well as those who have simply not applied due to the daunting wait list situation? Has the EDB determined that ESF has the facilities and resources, i.e. teachers, in place to absorb all of these students?

The lack of gravity and concern afforded this issue by the EDB and the administration are reflected in the paucity of attention given in the report: 4 paragraphs out of 11 pages. There is nothing more blatant to underscore the fact that NCS students with SEN are truly Hong Kong's forgotten children, relegated to the realm of all those who are the victims of direct discrimination. Scattershot, substandard policies and implementation are sadly the norm for these vulnerable citizens of 'Asia's World City.' To redress this discrimination and provide the appropriate programming for NCS children with SEN, the International Special Education Needs Community calls for the recommendations included in their April 2008 position paper to be implemented with all due haste.

Clearly, the current priority is the immediate need of Hong Kong's SEN community. Firstly, to implement funding and coordination services that will improve the existing services being provided by international education institutions. This should lead to the creation of working models that will then facilitate the expansion of these models to other institutions willing to implement SEN programs within mainstream classrooms.

Hong Kong's Social Welfare and Education policy makers will need to review the type of society to which Hong Kong aspires. The development and implementation of strategies will ultimately determine what type of inclusive options Hong Kong will be able to provide the SEN members of our community.