

The Policy of “Characteristic Resource Schools” Does Not Work

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A. Definitions of “Resource Schools” & “Characteristic Resource Schools” , and the Differences between them.

1. As an integral part of the School Partnership Scheme (Education Bureau) offering support for ordinary schools in catering for student diversity, the service of “Resource Schools on Whole School Approach” (“Resource Schools”) was put forward in 2003/2004. Under this service, some ordinary schools with experiences in helping students of special education needs (SEN) are invited to serve as Resource Schools. They form partners with other ordinary schools and share with them their visions, rationales, knowledge and practices in supporting students with SEN with an aim to empowering schools in catering for students’ diverse needs through cross-fertilization of expertise and networking.

In 2013/2014, there are 8 Resource Primary Schools (2 in HK Island, 1 in Cheung Chau, 2 in Kowloon, 1 in East New Territories and 2 in West New Territories), and 6 Resource Secondary Schools (1 in HK Island, 1 in Kowloon, 2 in East New Territories and 2 in West New Territories) providing these support services.

The areas of general support include Management & Organization, Learning & Teaching, Student Support & School Ethos. For focused support, partner schools join hands in an in-depth development of specific student support strategies.

2. The so-called “Characteristic Schools” are some ordinary schools (or Resource Schools) each of which is obliged to accept a particular kind of SEN (Special Educational Needs) students. With this approach the schools can accumulate its experiences in helping the respective SEN students and effectively give them supports in terms of deployment of manpower and use of financial resource.

“Resource Schools” and “Characteristic Schools” have different roles and functions. The former aims at encouraging **other** ordinary schools to admit SEN students and giving supports to these schools in providing SEN educational services. On the contrary each of the latter schools **itself** is supposed to admit students of SEN a particular kind. It follows that the latter cannot replace the former.

B. To my knowledge and from my experience, the policy of “Characteristic Resource Schools” or “Characteristic Schools” does not work for the following reasons:

1. According to the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO), a school cannot reject the admission application of a student because of his/her SEN. Therefore if a school, including the so-called “Characteristic Resource School” or “Characteristic School”, openly states that the school only accepts SEN students of a particular type and rejects the students of other types, the school will risk violating the DDO.

(In each of the following three cases, a secondary school has a chance to admit SEN students.

The present Secondary Schools Place Allocation (SSPA) System is divided into two stages, namely, Discretionary Places (DP) and Central Allocation (CA). At the DP stage, P6 students may apply to secondary schools direct during the application period which is usually in January. At the CA stage, P6 students will return their school choices to EDB by early May for the secondary school places allocation.

After the release of SSPA results in early July, parents and students are allowed to approach their favourite secondary schools for application of admission if they are dissatisfied with the allocation results.)

2. Some students might suffer from two or more types of SEN, e.g. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) cum autism, mild visual impairment cum physical handicap, etc.

Would a “Characteristic School” providing only one kind of SEN educational service admit such kind of multiple-SEN students to study in its school? Would this school be ready to provide more comprehensive SEN educational services to these students?

3. Undoubtedly in schools some kinds of SEN are more easily to handle and some are more difficult. Even if a so-called Band 1 secondary school chooses to be a “Characteristic School”, it would NOT choose as its characteristic the more “difficult” SEN types like dyslexia, mild mental handicap or emotional/behavioral deviance, which are directly related to weak academic motive and performances. If it is so, even if students with Band 1 standard but with dyslexia or emotional/behavioral deviance (no matter how few this kind of students are) have no chances to enter Band 1 secondary schools. This may give rise to disruptive mismatch of student with the school

in terms of teaching and learning, and legal action taken by parents for equal opportunity.

(It is obvious that the majority of SEN students have relatively weaker motive, abilities and academic foundation of study, and thus for a long time they have been allocated to the so called Band 2 and Band 3 secondary schools to study, and only a few percents are accepted by Band 1 schools.)

4. At present nearly all Band 2 and Band 3 secondary schools have SEN students of diverse kinds and levels of severity. These schools try hard to help the SEN students without the fear of being negatively “labeled” by people for its admission of SEN students.

However as the territory-wide student populations of secondary and senior primary keep on drastically declining, the Band 2 and Band 3 secondary schools have to face the threat of cut-down of classes or even closure of schools in the forthcoming years. None of them will dare to take the risk of choosing the negatively “labeled” SEN types like dyslexia, mental handicap or emotional/behavioral deviance as their “characteristics” (a very paradoxical and ironical term really).

The schools have important stake-holders like sponsor bodies, management committees, teachers and parents. The top-down order from the government to set up “Characteristics Schools” will certainly meet strong resistance from the schools. If the schools are given autonomy in this regard, they would either decline to join the scheme or choose the easily handled SEN types as their “characteristics”.

5. In choosing the schools for their children, the SEN students’ parents would take into consideration a number of factors like school missions and visions, ethos, facilities, location, transport, apart from the SEN support. The set-up of “Characteristics Schools” will limit the parents’ choices on one hand and violate the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) on the other.

For the educational benefits of students, it is well accepted that the banding of the secondary school in which a student is studying should match his/her academic ability and performance. (That is to say a “Band 1” student should ideally study in a “Band 1” secondary school, and so on so forth.) Any mismatch of schools and students in terms of academic level is disadvantageous to students.

The central allocation of places of secondary schools is on a district-based and there are 18 districts (school nets) in the territory. Take the HKE (Eastern District, HK Island), which has about 30 secondary schools joining the Place Allocation Scheme, as an example. Suppose there are 10 main types of SEN. It follows that the HKE district requires all of its secondary schools have to be “Characteristics Schools”, each of which has to provide education to students of specific type of SEN and of specific banding. This policy is obviously not workable.

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