

Presentation in Legco Committee (7 Jan 2016)

Submitted by: Odilon Couzin (Parent of P4 student)

As a parent, as a member of the community, I am here because I feel we must speak out and address the issue of student suicide.

The problem is not new. Suicide is one of the biggest causes of death among our youth, and has been for years.

In 2011, the EDB published an "e-book" about preventing student suicide. In fact, that publication includes much *more* information than this latest report, with more detailed and practical suggestions and resources for schools or parents to help students at risk of suicide.

I think the critical question is why **so little seems to have changed** in the last five years.

There are surely many causes - we all agree suicide is a complex and sensitive issue - but I think these two reports give us an important clue: They share one major flaw: They fail to acknowledge the overwhelming pressure students feel due to homework and tests, and that this pressure is *almost certainly* linked to - and is probably a major cause of student suicide. The 2011 report only mentions homework three times, and explains that the problem is not academic pressure but students' inability to handle such pressure.

There is plenty of evidence for this claim:

The Social Welfare Dept (SWD) published four "Child Fatality Reports" between 2010 and 2015. Those reports show that between 29% and 50% of suicides can be linked to schoolwork or test-related pressures.

Actually, these figures correspond to other research on this issue:

- A 2015 "Anxiety Survey" published by the Hong Kong Youth Federation which showed that the three biggest sources of pressure for students were tests (61%), homework (52%), and difficult classwork (48%).¹
- A 2012 study of 3,328 students found that almost 1/3 reported self-harming and more than 13 per cent had suicidal thoughts. [Daniel Shek and Lu Yu at the Polytechnic University]
- A 2006 report found that suicidal thoughts among adolescents were **strongly associated** with test anxiety and parental dissatisfaction with academic performance. [Lee, CUHK]
- A 2009 study of 3,383 students found a **strong correlation** between suicidal feelings and school failure. [Lee, CUHK]

So we are left with a question, and I think this is the critical question that must be answered before we can seriously address student suicide. Why are these studies *not even mentioned* in the latest suicide report? Why do government departments issue report after report that ignore such obvious and important evidence?

¹ That Survey included 3,950 Hong Kong students at 29 schools and was conducted by Hong Kong Youth Federation (青年協會)

In both the 2011 EDB document and this latest report, there seems to be an *almost systematic effort* to deny or at least hide the fact that school and test pressures are very important factors in student stress and suicide, despite so much evidence.

Here is one example: On page 24, this current report we read that 24% of Primary and Secondary students who committed suicide reported "worries about academic performance", but the report somehow manages to ignore this fact because many of them actually had ok marks. For me, this is actually evidence that students are under so much pressure that they think ok marks are not enough: They need excellent marks and perfect test scores. Anything else is failure.

If we are really serious about addressing student suicide, I would suggest a few simple steps to try to clear the muddied waters and create a more effective response to student suicide:

- 1) Legco should demand an independent consortium of researchers and NGOs to conduct a transparent, anonymous survey of ALL students (and hopefully parents) in Hong Kong, to see what they think are the causes of stress, pressure, and hopelessness among students. Also find out what students feel they need to help them resolve crises, find out how many consider suicide, and find out how many engage in self-harm. Such a survey could be part of an open and frank discussion of the issue in schools and among parents, which would also go a long way towards the goal of de-stigmatizing the issue of suicide.
- 2) A similar anonymous survey can be carried out among teachers, and also principals. It **must** be anonymous though, to allow people to answer honestly without fear of being punished or criticized.
- 3) Legco should demand that a thorough review of the education system be undertaken to evaluate whether it has achieved the goals of the 2000 education reform plan, especially the reduction of exam stress and stress related to secondary and tertiary school admission (which was raised at that time but if anything has become more serious)
- 4) Finally, the feeling of "hopelessness" among youth - is recognized to be a key indicator of possible self-harm and suicide, and surveys have shown that many HK young people feel hopeless. Every single student in Hong Kong should be screened for hopelessness and overall emotional health each year. This would be easy and cost nothing - a simple questionnaire could be shared with parents and teachers, and this would be a valuable part of helping adults learn to LISTEN to students and understand the immense pressures they are under.