

(Translation)

**Concern for the learning environment in general mainstream schools
for the integration of physically handicapped children**

Introduction

The Education Department has been actively promoting the integration of physically handicapped children into general mainstream schools by launching an Integration Pilot Project. We welcome this move as a step towards the right direction. As a matter of fact, some of the children who can still move without great difficulties are studying in general mainstream schools. However, in order that the Integration Pilot Project can be successful, not only should the provision of special facilities for the disabled be enhanced, the teachers and staff should also work in collaboration with students in creating an amicable environment.

1. Learning environment and facilities

1.1 It is learnt that the Education Department has pledged to provide such facilities for the disabled as lifts, washrooms for the disabled, ramps, widened exits and passageways in all primary and secondary schools throughout the territory. We very much hope that these projects will be completed as soon as possible.

1.2 Moreover, in order to facilitate the integration of students using wheelchairs, we suggest that schools should provide one or two seats with adjustable heights and more space around in special rooms such as computer rooms and laboratories.

1.3 The Education Department should specify in the school selection forms for allocation of primary one and secondary one school places the facilities available in each school for easy reference by parents to help them make a suitable decision when choosing schools.

2. Assistance from teachers and staff

2.1 In providing teacher training and on-the-job training for teachers, greater emphasis should be laid on facilitating their understanding of the needs of physically handicapped students and enhancing their skills of handling such students.

2.2 The Education Department should also consider setting up a special education resource centre for physically handicapped students, with a view to offering assistance to teachers in catering for the needs of such students and

developing their potentials.

2.3 In order to create an amicable school atmosphere that foster mutual help, the school management should offer assistance as much as possible, such as to make arrangement for classes with physically handicapped students to use classrooms on lower floors, arrange for these students to take part in suitable sports, give them more time to finish their classwork assignments, tests and examinations, or encourage them to use computers to do their homework.

2.4 The school management should also allow parents of physically handicapped students to come to schools during breaks or lunch hours to attend to the personal hygiene needs of their children.

Conclusion

There are altogether nine schools which have participated in the Integration Pilot Project. Although no school is genuinely admitting wheelchair-bound students, the feedback on the performance of these schools is encouraging. We suggest that these schools should share their experience with other schools in order to expedite the full implementation of this project.

(Summary Translation)

A group of parents whose children are physically handicapped have written to voice their concerns about special education. Although their children are suffering from Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy ("DMD"), Spinal Muscular Atrophy ("SMA") or other forms of Neuro-muscular disease, which have seriously affected their ability to move and walk around and their cardio- pulmonary functions, they have developed a normal level of intelligence.

As medical statistics show that one in 3 000 persons suffers from DMD and one in 10 000 persons suffers from SMA, this group of parents demand that the Government should make more resources available to improve special education in Hong Kong, so that this group of school children will be given equal opportunity. These parents are particularly concerned about the provision of physiotherapy and school bus service.

They point out that poor quality in physiotherapy has seriously affected the maintenance of physically handicapped school children's physical capability. Currently, the ratio of physiotherapist to school children in special schools is 1 to 30. These school children attend a total of 40 lessons per week, which already include all academic subjects and supplementary therapy, such as physiotherapy, vocational therapy and speech therapy. In other words, each physiotherapist has only about 30 lessons per week for 30 school children, meaning each school child can only have one or two sessions on average per week for physiotherapy with each session lasting 30 to 35 minutes. Physically handicapped school children require regular training and therapy on a daily basis to maintain their physical capability, residual ability and cardio-pulmonary functions.

What has worsened the situation is that, for many years, the number of physiotherapists in special schools has never reached full strength and they have a very high wastage rate. Whenever the Hospital Authority recruits physiotherapists, many of those working in special schools will apply and join the Hospital Authority if selected. Although the Education Department has encouraged the institutes concerned to train more physiotherapists, these efforts will be futile if special schools continue to pay little attention to their physiotherapists' promotion prospects, fringe benefits, on-the-job training and professional status. Working as a physiotherapists in special schools is only a stepping-stone for new graduates. Their lack of long-term commitment to their jobs will deal a heavy blow to the morale of their colleagues who are committed to their jobs, with the physically handicapped school children being the ultimate victims.

This group of parents therefore hope that the Education Department and the authorities concerned will review the current ratio of one physiotherapist to 30 school children, and adopt measures to retain and attract more people to work in special schools in order to make a long-term commitment to physically handicapped school children.

This group of parents also refer to the problems of inadequate school bus service and run-down facilities. As physically handicapped school children have difficulties in using public transport facilities, they have to rely on school buses to take them to schools. There are currently 7 special schools throughout the territory for physically handicapped children, who depend heavily on the school bus service.

However, school bus is not listed by the Education Department as a standard subsidized item. Special schools have to turn to charity organizations in the community for donations to purchase school buses, which has resulted in a significant discrepancy in the equipment of school buses, such as lifting platform, seat-belt and air-conditioner. Special schools are reluctant to replace old school buses with run-down facilities. As school buses are a self-financing item, their maintenance and operation expenses (excluding the driver's salary) are borne by the parents.

One can image the hardship that a school child wearing rehabilitation equipment has to endure in a non-air-conditioned school bus for up to 4 hours a day travelling between school and home during summer. As the Government has shown concern about the hardship that these school children have to go through in classrooms and promised to make provisions for the installation of air- conditioners in classrooms, it should also consider funding the installation of air- conditioners in school buses and the inclusion of school buses equipped with such facilities as lifting platform, seat-belt and air-conditioner as a standard subsidized item.

This group of parents hope that, apart commissioning a consultancy study next year on physically handicapped school children's various needs for resources, the Education Department will also reconsider the importance of hydrotherapy equipment to the maintenance of physically handicapped school children's physical capability, cardio-pulmonary functions and the ability to move.

In conclusion, this group of parents point out that "teaching" and "taking care" have always been the mission for special education. If the community can take adequate care of the special needs of physically handicapped school children and enhance their ability to lead an independent life, their intelligence, social skill

and other potentials will be developed to a greater extent. As a result, they will rely less on and contribute more to society in the future.