

Submission from Mr David TANG

Submission to Subcommittee of Lego to study issues relating to the Provision of Boarding Places, Senior Secondary Education and Employment Opportunities for Children with Special Educational Needs on March 26 at 10:45 a.m.

My submission is confined to those with significant disability, mental or physical. I have no definition for “significant”. Suffice it to say that I refer to those who clearly need special attention or care at school or at work. And so I exclude those whose disabilities will not obviously and immediately undermine their education or employment. For example, those with a finger missing or have a limp or a bad back or just one-eye vision do not constitute the group I’d like to address. Rather, I refer to those with, for example, down syndrome or permanent mental illness, or without one or more limbs or blind. The main point is that we have to accept what we mean by “significant disability” without having to define it precisely in terms of mental or physical abilities. This is an important point as government and NGOs are likely to “hide” behind this lack of precise definition and excuse themselves from articulating a policy of help.

Indeed, there was clear evidence of this when I tried to promote employment of down syndrome young people within the government. In a number of meetings and exchanges, it transpired that whilst the government and NGOs were able to claim the employment of thousands of “people with disabilities”, the great majority of them were not people with “significant” disabilities. It suggested to me a very unsatisfactory state of affairs at best, and simple disingenuousness at worst.

My submission is that government and NGOs must take a lead in providing for those with significant disabilities in both education and employment. In a civilized society such as Hong Kong, which is not in want for the label of an affluent city, we all have a duty to help those in clear need. And for the private sector, which forms the core of our workforce, to take note and become engaged with those with significant disabilities, it is important for it to look up to government and NGOs for doing so.

Time has come for government to legislate the provision of such help in education and employment. Apart from giving those with significant disabilities a decent chance of livelihood, government must now insist on certain specific targets. This could be by way of numbers or percentages to existing classes, as in school, or workforce, as in employment. Even a token intake of a school child or employment of someone with significant disability should be mandatory by law. This will bring the whole issue to focus.

Without legislation, we have seen that mere persuasion or even encouragement are too loose to make any real difference. We should not hesitate to use the law to stop the prevailing prejudices against those who are unfortunate enough to be inflicted by significant disabilities, mental or physical.

I urge the subcommittee to recommend strongly to the government to take this great need in their stride and give a leg-up to those who clearly need help by legislating, even nominally at first, for a caring community in which we can proudly point to a civilized integration of people, not only of all colours and creeds, but also abilities, or in this case, significant disabilities.
