

Dear Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to the Subcommittee on Special Education. We wholeheartedly support the efforts to address the educational needs of all special needs children in Hong Kong, both Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese speaking.

In our case, we have a personal interest in the education available for non-Chinese speaking autistic children. We have two young sons, aged 2 and 5, both on the “autism spectrum”. Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the world. The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that 1 in 150 children are currently on the spectrum. We had the option of moving to several different Asian cities, but decided upon Hong Kong specifically because of the availability of research-based therapy and education for our young children at AP Primary School. However, as our children are growing older and showing more progress, we are now forced to reconsider our situation as the support for and availability of mainstream education is insufficient.

- Only available education for children on the autism spectrum, in English, is at the international schools or international sections of local schools. There they face:
 - Long waiting lists.
 - Standard entrance test is required at most schools.
 - Anecdotally, schools resist accepting children who may pose problems, especially those with behaviour issues. Although they are not allowed to discriminate, through a series of institutional requirements, many schools are basically able to pick and choose which students to accept.
- The true number of special needs children requiring education exceeds the figure of 100 that ESF noted at the Legco subcommittee meeting. That number does not include the following:
 - Parents, such as ourselves, who are discouraged by the long waitlist and have not bothered to apply to ESF.
 - Applications lodged at other international schools.
 - Children of parents who have decided against coming to Hong Kong due to the lack of educational facilities for their children. In an informal conversation with the ESF’s SEN Advisor, Mrs. Jan Martin, she estimated that she receives 2-3 phone calls a week from parents who are overseas and considering moving to Hong Kong and she has had to tell them that there is no placement for their child. The number of such calls to other international schools may be similar.
 - Families who have left Hong Kong upon receiving a diagnosis.
- There is just one special needs schools for non-Chinese speakers (ESF’s Sarah Roe), for children who cannot integrate into mainstream schools.
 - They have students with a number of different special needs, each requiring different approaches and teaching methods. However, just because these children are categorized as having “special needs” does not mean that they will benefit from being taught using the same approach.
- There are autistic children who can be integrated into the mainstream school system, but may need the assistance of a “shadow.”

- Many international schools will say they do not have the resources to deal with special needs children, yet they do not accept shadows (even if paid for by parents).
- The schools that do accept shadows may only accept from a select few NGOs. Some of these shadows are not properly trained to assist the child. However, if the costs of a shadow are being borne by the parents, the parents' wishes on which organization the shadow comes from, and his/her training should be taken into account.
- ESF has recently received government funding to increase the number of special needs placements at their schools. However there are other international schools and private schools that provide education for special needs children that are just as worthy and deserving of government support as well. We do not have experience with the other schools which also provide for special needs children, so we can only draw from our experience.
- Our older child is at AP Primary School, a school specifically for children on the autism spectrum. He is progressing very well, and there will hopefully come a time when he will be ready to integrate into a mainstream school. It seems unlikely, however, that he will be able to do so in Hong Kong due to the long waiting lists, the entrance examinations and the lack of available in-classroom support.
 - Inclusion benefits everyone. However, students have to be ready to learn. To push children into mainstream schools when they are ill-equipped to handle such pressures defeats the purpose of giving them an education.
 - Schools such as AP Primary are extremely important for these children. AP Primary addresses a demand that the Hong Kong government has thus far overlooked; it teaches skills and academics in a way in a way that these students can understand and learn.
 - The school has classes for both preschoolers and primary school-age students.
 - Without this school, many autistic children would either be forced to go to a school like Sarah Roe, where they would not be able to develop to their full potential because many of their teachers are not specifically trained to teach autistic children, or they would be mainstreamed into regular schools where there is a high chance of failure.
 - Many high-functioning autistic children are able to integrate into mainstream schools, however to give them the best chance of succeeding in a mainstream classroom, they first have to be taught how to learn. Based on a scientifically proven methodology (Applied Behavioural Analysis), AP Primary has successfully mainstreamed a number of children into the regular school system.
 - AP Primary also provides bilingual assistance to mainstream schools when a child is ready to be mainstreamed.
 - The school also accepts autistic children who have greater needs. Thus, it is an excellent alternative for parents who are either on the waiting list for Sarah Roe or who would like an education that addresses the particular needs of autistic children in a classroom with a very high teacher-student ratio.

- AP Primary has classes for both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking students and currently does not receive any government funding.
- In an effort to reduce the cost of school fees, AP Primary has set up a charitable foundation, Autism Partnership Foundation.
- In Canada, there are special needs schools for those who are unable to participate in a normal school environment. For those who are able to participate but need the assistance of a shadow, schools are assigned shadows who in fact are there to help all children in the classroom who may require assistance. If the nearest school does not have a shadow assigned, students will be bused to the nearest school that does.
- This system allows the maximum number of children to enter mainstream education which is better for everyone in the long run. Because the shadows can assist all children, parents are less resistant to having children with special needs in the classroom.
- We would like to see something like that in place in Hong Kong for both Chinese speaking and non-Chinese speaking students.
- A number of colleagues and friends with special needs children who have considered Hong Kong for a job posting/relocation have asked us about the suitability of Hong Kong for their children. We have told them of the current situation and none of them have come. We are also aware of a number of people who have left HK upon receiving a diagnosis of a learning disorder for their child.
- We were living in Shanghai when our older son was diagnosed. Mainland China has little by way of therapy or education for autistic children, especially non-Chinese speakers. Most people immediately returned to their home country or for those who worked at companies with offices in Hong Kong, relocated here.
- Unless the current education situation is addressed, Hong Kong will be unable to keep or attract talented individuals.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.

John Zimmerman and Alice Miao