

BY HAND

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Mr. Michael Tien
Chairman, Working Group on Review of
Secondary School Places Allocation &
Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools

6 May 2005

Dear Mr. Tien,

Review of Medium of Instruction (MOD) for Secondary Schools

Thank you for attending our meeting on 23 April 2005 comprising PTA representatives from Marymount Primary School, Pun U Association Wah Yan Primary School, Salesian English School (Primary) and St. Francis' Canossian School. We trust you and your Working Group members found the discussion fruitful and, in particular, our concerns and perspectives have given you food for thought and demonstrated the need to review the entire MOI issue urgently and in a fresh light.

You have impressed the participants of the meeting that you are an open-minded person who is prepared to listen and amend the initial proposals of your "Review" in a rational way. You maintained that you wanted not only listen to parents, but are also asking for further input. We are pleased that you found our input constructive, and have appealed for more. You have also discussed with us your educational objectives, and have found that parents' ideals are aligned with yours. It is therefore upon this foundation that a **partner relationship** with us parents has been made possible. Above all, we are pleased that you did not reject our demands. Having heard our viable alternatives, we hope you will re-visit your MOI proposal seriously. This is the first step, the critical step, which you and the Working Group must take to incorporate the views of parents into your final recommendations.

To refresh your memory on what we have discussed in the meeting:

First, we parents cannot and will not accept the Working Group's proposals, and neither do we believe that their purported educational objectives will be achieved, because these rest on **3 untenable working assumptions**:

1. That despite the national language being Putonghua, mother tongue can arbitrarily and without public's consensus, be defined as Cantonese dialect.
2. That the "piecemeal" research cited is sound, sufficient, and conclusive enough for the public to accept it at face value.
3. That in the process of policy making, parents as major stakeholders can be excluded from involvement.

Second, these are at least **9 serious defects** found in your "review". These are yet to be answered by your Working Group.

1. Evidence cited to support the propositions is limited, anecdotal and open to different interpretation. We are yet to be convinced by research and studies which are impartial, scientific and comprehensive. Without giving full reference on the research cited, the materials and methods used, public is unable to judge for itself the claims that "mother-tongue is the best" for Hong Kong, and "mother-tongue is most effective".
2. Gradual eradication of one of Hong Kong's competitive advantages: English proficiency of its human capital. Limiting exposure to the international language sets a vicious cycle in motion.
3. Polarisation of English Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools and Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools, and the stigma of incompetence associated with CMI schools is further reinforced. The labeling of EMI and CMI is divisive, unnecessary and irrelevant in bringing about positive and practical educational outcomes.
4. Apart from having a Damocles' sword hanging over the EMI schools, schools and teachers alike are under continual pressure to cope with the constant, substantial and often contradictory and inconsistent educational policies and procedures at the expense of teaching and facilitating learning.
5. Performance in (English, Chinese and Mathematics) examinations is arbitrarily equated as "ability" of a student to "be able to learn effectively through English".
6. The absurdity and confusion of the proposed mechanism: that the opportunity of a certain group of P6 students to learn through EMI in their preferred school is determined by how another group from the upper form in the same school performs.
7. The Working Group's proposals do not address the critical and realistic issues of availability of resources needed (such as the number of current EMI schools falls short in meeting the 40% of students with the "ability" "to learn effectively through English"; the supply and training of qualified teachers, etc), should these proposals be implemented.
8. Due to early streaming based on examination performance, the potential imbalance between number of male and female students in EMI schools.
9. Unnecessary and unhealthy pressure and exercise burden onto primary school students.

Third, our demands and perspectives

They are based on **4 fundamental propositions:**

1. The availability of choice and the right to exercise it

- Parents and students deserve more choices and opportunities to embrace diversity in talents, ability and aspirations to adapt to the needs of society and the ever-changing challenges of the future. Diversity in our education system should be enhanced, and parents and students should benefit from it through their right to choose what best meets their needs.
- The Government must integrate into its overall education policy some autonomy to schools to operate on the free market principle rather than forcing them to conform to arbitrary directives. A school must deliver results in terms of educational outcomes. Schools that perform well will have a better prospect in terms of student intake and the support from parents and the public.
- The Education & Manpower Bureau (EMB)'s role is to support each and every school to further develop its strengths, its uniqueness, and to upgrade its understanding of global best practices in providing education. The EMB should however not be responsible, and should never attempt, to homogenize our schools into the same mode, chop and change education policies that lead to instability, and use totally unsubstantiated research as a means to restrict the development of schools, and hence the choice of parents.

2. The right to participate in policy making

- Parents are the major guardians and stakeholders of their children's well-being. They must be adequately consulted and their views given due recognition. Parents must have the right and the access to the making and formulation of education policy.
- We shared with you the idea of a PTA Jury System model currently in operation in Chicago, US, whereby the acceptance of education policy proposals must be upon the jurisdiction of the PTA jury, comprising elected parents representatives, child and education specialists, teaching and school management representatives, etc.

3. The right to school information

- Every child should be given an opportunity to attend a school most suitable to his or her development from the parent's view. The EMB must set up a structure to make information about secondary schools more transparent and readily available to parents through, for example, support for the organization of open days or seminars for prospective parents, production of school prospectus to include information on school curriculum, respective MOI for each subject and the public examination performance, school mission & principles, teacher-student ratio, teachers' profile, etc..

4. The right to learn

- We believe in providing high quality education to all who are willing or motivated to learn.
- We reject the notion that there is such thing as “an ability to be able to learn effectively through English” (Para. 3.2(a) Review of MOI Consultation Document), not to mention using this as an exclusion mechanism to deprive the right and opportunity of any willing student to learn through his choice of English as MOI.
- With children as young as 11 or 12 years old, examination result is one of the weakest indicators of their potential to learn by being proficient in one language or another.
- As a principle, majority of students have the ability to learn through EMI (CMI or other languages by the same token), given the opportunity to learn, and through a facilitative learning environment. The onus is on the school, and indeed is what education is about, is to believe in and to draw out the potential, and thence to inspire and to develop them responsibly and effectively.

On these fundamental propositions, we urge you therefore to:

1. Defer any further expansion of MOI policy under 1998 “Guidance” until a professional, non-partisan and comprehensive assessment has been commissioned and presented to the public. The assessment should cover the following:
 - a) The pedagogical benefits of mother tongue instruction since the implementation of “Guidance”;
 - b) The learning outcomes associated with English and Chinese as MOI, as reflected in higher level public examinations (the HKCEE or equivalent for example), over an extended period of at least 5 years;
 - c) Comparative studies on the benefits for students, parents, teachers, schools and the community of a truly bilingual or multi-lingual education in contrast to a Chinese/Cantonese dialect-based education.
2. Extend the consultation period on MOI policy to at least 2 September 2005.
3. Abolish the labeling of EMI and CMI titles.
4. Help parents & students make informed decision on their choice of schools, the Government should encourage schools to be more ‘transparent’ and proactive in sharing their information.

5. Take immediate and concrete steps to upgrade our English standard across the board, including primary and pre-schools. The continual declining trend in our English standard is indeed both alarming and worrying.
6. Allow schools more discretion in the choice and use of MOI.
7. Redefine the role of Education & Manpower Bureau.

In the meeting, your Working Group member highlighted the role of EMB in "quality control". We ask if "control" the objective of this exercise? Exerting more and more control by the EMB will not effectively solve any of our problems in the education system. If anything, we see that it only starts to undermine one of the fundamental strengths of Hong Kong, the ability and stability of schools; it brings only division amongst schools, discrimination and frustration in students and parents. Empowerment and support, trust and confidence in schools and parents, and the potential of our children, is the better route, the way forward.

As parents, we place our trust in you. Consultation does not merely mean listening. Genuine consultation requires the willingness to listen, the openness to admit that the current proposals on MOI have big gaps against the expectations of Hong Kong parents, and the readiness to re-visit the proposal. All of which should not present undue hurdles to someone like yourself, or any policy-makers in this light, who has an ideal in enhancing our education system.

We understand your constraints. We understand that the current MOI issue, the controversy and complexity inherent in and associated with it, is emerged from the 1998 "Guidance". Under the conviction of a partnership, we shall commit to use our time and energy to continue the dialogue with you and the Working Group. We shall empower you to broaden your deliberations to include the entire basis of the Guidance, and not just "the final stage of the "Guidance" implementation" as you had explained to us. This will ensure that the final solution be acceptable to parents and beneficial to our children, supportive to school development, and hence strengthen our education system overall.

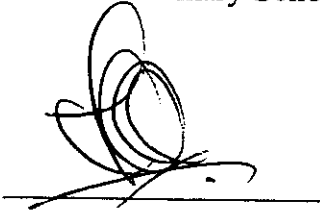
In closing, please accept our sincere gratitude and appreciation for giving us your time. We earnestly look forward to your response in writing on the above by **13 May 2005**. Kindly note that we shall also be posting this as an 'open' letter on the schools' PTA websites, as well as sending this letter to the media. In so doing, we want our parents and the public to better appreciate the complexity of the issues you are dealing with and provide their support to enable us to further the prospects of HK becoming a truly bilingual/ multi-lingual society.

You are involved in shaping Hong Kong's future. Do not short change the parents of Hong Kong. Like yourself, we are part of this reform, and we always will be. We are serious and ready to extend a helping hand to you --- please do not disappoint us.

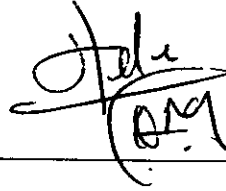
Yours sincerely,



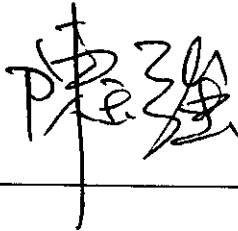
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Chairperson of Education Commission
Secretary for Education & Manpower