

**Staff Council Submission to Bills Committee on the English School Foundation (Amendment) Bill
2007SEN Provision in ESF Schools**

Context

At the request of the Bills Committee the Chair of Staff Council, Mr. Gordon Pheysey, (a Humanities teacher at West Island School) consulted with a range of teachers about the matters raised below. The detail in the document is a composite of the views they provided.

1. Removal of LEGCO Members from the Board of Governors of the ESF.

The Chair of Staff Council and interested members were part of the extensive process of consultation on the revised ordinance. Opinions expressed during this process made it clear that that stakeholders (i) valued the presence of LEGCO members on the governing body; (ii) saw this an important part of the checks and balances within the system: and (iii) identified it as a significant contribution to transparent governance within The Foundation. Teachers share these opinions. In addition they have stated that as the numbers of students enrolled at ESF schools who come from local families and/or those who have permanent residence status is rising, it is appropriate that representation of LEGCO on the governing body of ESF continues.

2. Representation of parents of children with Special Educational Needs within the composition of the Board of Governors and the School Councils.

Teachers are against positive discrimination that favours SEN membership of School Councils and/or the Board of Governors over other interest groups for the following reasons.

- (i) All parents have the opportunity to stand for election to their School Council. If SEN becomes an issue of significant importance at a particular school parents of these children or those with particular expertise in this area can be elected.
- (ii) It is possible to utilize this expertise by inviting the above to particular meetings and/or by co-opting them onto working groups convened by the School Council.
- (iii) This option is preferred to one in which different (and often competing) interest groups are guaranteed a place on the Councils. It is important that Councils are able to consider the needs of the school as whole and direct it in ways that reflect the needs of all of its stakeholders and its position in the community. SEN should be considered from within this context. Direct pressure on Chairs of Council, Principals, and individual teachers, from interested parents does not facilitate good governance and could work against the principle of inclusivity and non-discriminatory practice.
- (iv) Two major concerns exist about the inclusion, by right, of SEN parents on School Councils. Firstly, it would be difficult for schools to identify with any degree of accuracy, consistency and fairness, a level of SEN that would qualify a parent for membership of a Council. Secondly, if we were to single out SEN parents for special treatment would in all likelihood cause other special interest groups, including those who use English as a second language, those whose children are gifted and talented, and those from ethnic minority groups, to demand similar treatment as well.
- (v) The balance of the Board of governors was very carefully considered. The issues raised in the items (i – iv) above apply to it as well as to school councils.

3. Proposed Amendment to section 4 (1) (a) of the ESF Ordinance: Objects and Powers of the foundation. Inclusion of the words...irrespective of disability and Special Education Need.

(i) SEN in ESF Schools

The ESF, its teachers and its parents, understand all too well the benefits of education. Each rationalizes its provision and its purchase in the context of the impact it has on the prosperity, achievement, security, integration, life choices, and happiness of the children they have responsibility for.

Over the years the ESF has provided a curriculum that has been geared to helping students in many ways and there is great competition for places in our schools and the resources within them.

The achievement of the qualifications necessary for entry into university and eventually into professional careers is the thing that attracts the vast majority of our parents and we need to pay heed to this.

Quite rightly the Foundation and its teachers have celebrated the success of its students and have made great efforts to ensure that examination results continue to place us in the highest percentile for non-selective schools. As teachers we intend to make sure that this remains the case.

While Vocational Education and Training has been provided and is currently being reviewed, there is no extensive history, culture, or funding for students with severe SEN within ESF Schools.

As a Standing Committee of the Foundation Staff Council is very aware of the difficulties facing parents of children with acute SEN in Hong Kong. While some ESF schools have responded to pressure and begun to play an increasing role in this area that they are doing so is a credit to them and particularly to the imagination and ingenuity of their Senior Management Teams and the skill and work ethic of their teachers.

Teachers are concerned that becoming a major provider of SEN in Hong Kong must ultimately be an internal decision for ESF based on its knowledge of the funding, space, equipment, and skills base (both actual and potential) available to it. This is not available in sufficient quality or quantity for us to move forward in anything other than a cautious manner. Amending the ordinance to make us do otherwise will simply create problems for all involved, and not least the children concerned. The primary consideration underpinning each of the comments below, whether in relation to SEN students in specialist centres or their placement in mainstream classrooms is the needs of these children and the capacity of ESF to deliver on any promises it might make to them.

We do of course have a responsibility to consider the needs of our other students. Unfortunately, as with anything, there is an *opportunity cost* attached to any course of action. We must recognise that while teachers would very much like to cater for the SEN needs of all students regardless of the nature of the disability and the type of need, they simply cannot do so without detracting from what is provided to other students. It should be noted that this is not simply a question of cost.

(ii) Motivation and Learning

ESF schools seek to tap in to, and to harness, the natural motivation to learn that can be found in most of its students. It does this by providing them with learning experiences that match their learning styles while at the same time challenging them to develop new ones. Ultimately we are seeking to generate a sense of wonderment and inquisitiveness in our students that will drive them beyond routine learning to a position in which they are able to take control of their own learning and become the person they are capable of being. This is never an easy process and convincing students that they should make the most of the vast range of learning opportunities provided for them can be very difficult indeed.

(iii) Creating A Positive Self Concept

At ESF we have been placing collaborative, inquiry based learning, at the centre of our curriculum for some time. To help students get the most from their learning experiences teachers have to ensure that the tasks set are stimulating, encourage children to engage with the materials and require them to interact with their peers in order to solve problems that are necessary for their completion.

Although the range of ability is quite wide in our classrooms we have to design tasks that allow everyone to play an active part. Opportunities for learning are most stimulating when they reward participation and effort, will allow everyone to achieve something worthwhile, and ensure that individual targets are attained.

There is concern that the level of differentiation required to enable students with severe SEN requirements to participate in these types of activity in mainstream classes will alter the nature of the lesson and change the learning experiences offered to the other students in the class.

There is also concern that placing students with these needs in this type of situation will serve to highlight their problems and create a negative self-concept.

The key to cognitive and emotional development is successful participation in the learning experience. The students' attitude towards learning can be badly affected if their experiences are negative and they may become demotivated or end up withdrawing from the process altogether if their experiences are upsetting.

(iv) Teacher Skills

The skills and training required to work with students who have significant levels of SEN are very different to those developed in normal teacher training. Specialist teachers who have these skills are in short supply and high quality ones are very difficult to find.

(v) Specialist Equipment

There will be considerable demand for extra equipment if schools are required by ordinance to take and integrate students with significant SEN. This will range from equipment to facilitate learning and that which will improve and effect mobility.

(vi) The Learning Environment

ESF schools are full to capacity and Senior Management Teams are currently looking at creative ways of timetabling lessons and structuring the school day to relieve pressure on resources that are currently stretched to the limit.

At the moment simple things like the movement of students around school at break and lunch-times is very difficult with duty staff having to control hundreds of students in corridors, on stairways, and in canteen queues to maintain order and safety. Lift access is very limited in most schools and it would be impossible to vouch for the safety of students with physical disabilities without making significant additional provision for them.

Classrooms in ESF schools are not particularly large and class sizes of 30 up to year 10 means that they are very crowded with little room to move around. Simply placing students with a physical disability in some of these rooms will put them at risk. Asking them to participate in a meaningful way in tasks that require them to move around on frequent basis would be almost impossible.

When students are engaged in research tasks they often have to travel from a classroom to the library or a computer room. Again, because of the pressure of numbers, students often do not have a full lesson in these facilities and have just a short time to get inside, find what they need, and return to their classroom.

In short, the learning environment is on occasion, crowded, hectic, pressurized and demanding and our students do extremely well to negotiate their way through the demands of their day. Placing a student with severe SEN in this environment requires a lot of thought and many guarantees that would have to be underpinned by ESF and the government before we could go ahead.

(vii) Local Government Support

In schools in the UK and Australia, where most of ESF's teachers come from, SEN is dealt with in partnership with the local authority. At the moment, this proposed change to the ordinance would be made without a clear understanding of what the relationship between ESF and EMB would be.

(viii) Recommendation

A student in the wrong curriculum and the wrong learning environment may ultimately develop a negative sense of self that is shaped by an exaggerated sense of difference that these would create between them and their peers.

Teachers would prefer to see the matter of Special Educational Needs dealt with through a process of negotiation involving them, parents, Principals, School Councils, ESF Centre and EMB.

This should be done outside of the ordinance process, so that more thought can be given to what can be done well; who is best placed to do it; what support is required; and what any proposals might cost can be considered properly. In this way we should be able to ensure that good intentions do not make an already difficult situation worse.

The above comments notwithstanding as educators are aware of and sympathetic to the feelings and frustrations of parents who are trying to deal with these issues on a daily basis. We would urge therefore that this matter be given priority status and that every effort be made to ensure that solutions be found and implemented as soon as is possible.