

Submission to the Education Panel of the Legislative Council

When did special needs students become prodigies?

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In recent months, special schools catering for students with special educational needs (SEN) have been informed by the Education Bureau that starting from the 2009/10 school year, no government funding will be provided for SEN students who continue to stay in school beyond the age of 18. In effect, this means that students will have to leave school by that age.

The decision has elicited stiff opposition from special schools, parents and all others concerned. The problem is not with the age limit per se but with the concomitant introduction of a new 3-3-4 curriculum for this group of students.

Before the most recent decision, SEN students had been able to stay in special schools up to the age of 18 to complete junior secondary school. In particular cases where for example illnesses warrant it, some SEN students had stayed in school even beyond 18 years of age. As a matter of fact, the Code of Aid for Special Schools stipulates an age limit of 20.

Under the new 3-3-4 curriculum that comes into operation in September this year, secondary education will comprise three years of junior secondary education and three years of senior secondary education, followed by four years of university education. Provision has been made under the new system for SEN students to, like mainstream students, pursue senior secondary education.

The tall order is that they will have to finish the three additional years of more advanced learning by the same age limit as before, that is, by 18. This means that students will have to leave school when they reach 18 even if they have not been able to keep up with their studies and have not reached Form Six standards by the time they are 18.

It begs many questions as to why education officials have arrived at such a decision. Firstly, that SEN students would need more time for learning than mainstream students is self-evident. SEN students suffer from different forms of disabilities.

If they had needed 12 years, assuming they entered primary school at the age of six, to complete junior secondary school under the old system, why do education officials now think that they can suddenly accomplish three more years of senior secondary education within the same time span?

Secondly, it must also be pointed out in this connection that the age limit intriguingly does not apply to mainstream students. The Code of Aid for Secondary Schools stipulates no corresponding age limit for mainstream schools.

Rather, paragraph 12 of the Code enjoins that no pupil should be expelled from school without proper warning and notice to parents. Why is the government treating two groups of students differentially? And why is the weaker and smaller group treated with more harshness?

Thirdly, the Code of Aid for Special Schools authorizes the removal of students from school beyond the age of 20. Why is the government contravening its own stated policy by arbitrarily lowering the age limit to 18?

Alas, our SEN students have not suddenly become prodigies. Nor does the sudden and quiet change of policy indicate any high esteem education officials have of the ability of SEN students to accomplish the impossible. Sadly, to treat the weak and the disadvantaged badly is a consistent trait of our SAR government.

This fails to consider social justice and compassion. Hundreds of SEN students who are or will shortly be 18 stand to discover that they are suddenly out of school. It is high time that the government justifies itself to this group of students and their parents as well as to society at large.

July 9, 2009

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