

**The Government should implement sex education in
primary and secondary schools as part of the
standard curriculum**

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Motion 3: The Government should implement sex education in primary and secondary schools as part of the standard curriculum

Introduction

The *Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools* were compiled by the former Education Department (now the Education and Manpower Bureau) in 1997 as a foundation for promoting sex education in schools, with the aim of serving the developmental needs of today's younger generation. Their effectiveness, however, has yet to be proved. The issue of sex is by tradition a sensitive topic for many in Hong Kong, with sex education generally neglected by the public. As technology continues to develop at a rapid pace and online pornography becomes increasingly accessible, there is an urgent need to educate children properly on matters and concepts of sex. Nevertheless, the government seems unconcerned about the current state of affairs.

According to Article 29 (1a) of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, "States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential". Sex education is a basic and essential aspect of education that lasts a lifetime. Sex education is not only about sex life; it extends beyond physical and mental aspects and covers morality, personality, and ethics, social culture and the law. We thus urge the Government to include sex education in the curriculum of secondary and primary education, to strive for children's right to know and right to be protected, to help children understand and protect themselves through sex education, so as to change public misunderstanding about sex. To find out how the public perceive and understand sex, we designed five sets of questionnaires that collect opinions respectively from the following: Primary One to Three students; Primary Four to Six students; Secondary students; parents; and teachers. We gathered 108 questionnaires from primary students, 414 from secondary students, 63 from parents and 75 from teachers correspondingly.

Current Situations

1. The *Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools* fail to keep up with the times

The curriculum and content of the sex education currently adopted at schools is not standardised. Some schools only allocate a brief period of time to teaching children the growth process; some even teach the biological changes only at adolescence. The method, content and hours of teaching vary among schools. According to an interview with the *End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation*, the curriculum of the ***Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools*** (hereafter "The Guidelines") compiled by the former Education Department in 1997 is too broad, so schools and teachers find it difficult to handle.

Since sex education is not compulsory for students, and schools are not obligated by the Education and Manpower Bureau to include it in the curriculum, the Guidelines are non-binding and hence barely functional.

Furthermore, *The Guidelines* do not keep pace with the times. They have been adopted since 1997 without any amendments or new guidelines being added. Their content fails to serve the needs of adolescents nowadays. For example, while the features of adolescence used to be taught in secondary school, students tend to mature much earlier nowadays and have access to more information. We can see that the Guidelines have quickly become outdated and cannot provide students with comprehensive sex education.

2. A lack of avenues for proper sex education

Students lack knowledge about sex mainly because the schools do not provide proper sex education. According to our questionnaire survey, 25% of the respondents claim that they did not receive any proper sex education in the past year. For those who did, 75% receive 0 to 4 hours of sex education at school in a year, which is a far cry from the 20-hour-per-year standard suggested by the **1997 Guidelines**. Unable to acquire knowledge about sex in school, most students turn to the public media, the Internet, and their peers. However, these channels may not be suitable and may mislead students about sex and inject improper values.

3. Poor knowledge base of sex among primary and secondary students

Hong Kong sex education is under-developed and inadequately supplied. Today, misunderstanding is common among teens regarding matters of sex. The government expects schools to offer proper sex education taking into consideration the students' age, and according to the 'Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools'. We set different questions about sex knowledge in the questionnaire based on the Guidelines. The result shows that only 3.1% of secondary school respondents and 8.5% of primary school respondents answered 4 questions correctly out of 5. This goes to show that very few of the students can answer the questions correctly, even though the questions are tailored to the knowledge base of primary and secondary students.

According to the 'Report on Youth Sexuality Study 2016' conducted by The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, local secondary 3 to secondary 6 students were generally only able to answer 8 out of 12 sex-related questions. Knowledge about sex is obviously insufficient for primary and secondary students. There are teenagers who violate the law, for example conducting illegal sex trade, or contracting sexually-transmitted diseases because of insufficient knowledge about sex. To summarize, primary and secondary students are not sufficiently educated in matters of sex. They

are ill-equipped to deal with issues and questions related to sex, and they often have wrong impressions about sex.

4. Teachers are not well trained in sex education

Nowadays, most teachers have not received any training in sex education as it is just an elective subject in the teacher training. Therefore, there is no guarantee that every teacher takes the sex education course. Teachers may not be adequately equipped to teach and may not be able to answer students' questions. In a study conducted between March and May 2015 by The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups School Social Work Unit that interviewed 582 teachers from 51 schools, 40.5% respondents were unfamiliar with sex-related knowledge and the skills for delivering it, which leads to various difficulties in promoting sex education in school.

Recommendations

1. Making sex education a compulsory part of the syllabus

We hope that every student can acquire comprehensive sex knowledge. To ensure every school will implement all-round sex education, we believe that it is essential to make it a compulsory part of the syllabus. As a result, we would like to urge the government to add sex education into the primary school and secondary school syllabus. This does not mean making it an independent subject, but rather to provide sex education lessons every month. Combining the views of Hon Tanya Chan, The End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation as well as the survey results, we suggest allocating a fixed number of class hours per academic year for sex education lessons – 10 hours for primary 1-3 students, 13 hours for primary 4-6 students and 15 hours for all secondary school students. According to the survey result, 80% of the interviewees agree to attending sex education lessons after class or during the class teacher period. We suggest teaching the sex education syllabus in the class teacher period.

2. The coverage of sex education

Upon collating the suggestions from The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, the views of the acting director of Against Child Abuse, Ms Wong Chui Ling, and the perspectives of teachers and parents, we have come to the following conclusion. For primary schools, Primary 1-3 students should learn the names of the sex organs of the two sexes and how new life is conceived, whereas primary 4-6 students should have a deeper understanding of male and female physiology, such as menstruation and the physical and mental changes during puberty. For secondary school, junior form students should learn about concepts such as sexual harassment, sexual impulses, unplanned pregnancy, sexual assault, sexual violence, marriage and life-long commitment. For senior form students, schools should reinforce and expand on the

topics taught before, enhance students' physical and mental understanding about sex and educate them to respect the opposite sex and protect themselves.

3. Implement sex education starting from puberty

Children should receive sex education as soon as they enter puberty. According to Ms Wong Chui Ling, children are subject to sexual assault and sex crimes at an increasingly tender age. Therefore, children should start receiving sex education at a younger age, including learning to protect themselves and reject inappropriate requests of a sexual nature. For example, children in the Netherlands receive sex education in kindergarten-- they learn about self-image, self-recognition, sex roles etc. As a result, the Netherlands has the lowest birth rate and STD infection rate among female juveniles in Europe. This demonstrates the effectiveness of introducing sex education in junior forms. Explaining the concepts of sex at a tender age allows students to hold a positive attitude towards sex education, especially when they have access to other sex knowledge in the later learning stages, such as the physical changes in puberty and homosexuality, thus helping them build correct values towards sex.

4. Establish a sex education committee

We suggest the Education Bureau should set up a Sex Education Committee, to examine the ways of adding it to the regular curriculum in both primary and secondary schools (Recommendation 2). The Committee will propose class hours, course schedule and syllabus of the sex education curriculum. There will also be coordinators responsible for implementing and regularly evaluating the effectiveness of sex education at school, offering professional training and suggestions, with the aim of unifying course curriculum and content and achieving comprehensive implementation. Students would acquire sufficient knowledge of sex and establish positive values. We recommend that the Sex Education Committee should invite professionals from different sectors including teachers, educators, medical practitioners, representatives of the Department of Health and sex educators to join the committee, where they can offer suggestions to help formulate the course guidelines.

5. Provide professional training to teachers

Our team believes that the government can support teachers in several ways. It can, for example, provide professional compulsory courses to teachers responsible for teaching sex education, such that they will be informed on the sex issues that most kids or teenagers are concerned about at different stages. Moreover, teachers need to learn to cultivate a positive mind-set in which to discuss sex, while being equipped with the knowledge and techniques of teaching each chapter. All of these can lead to a clearer learning direction in the course structure. Certificates would be given to teachers after

the course as a form of recognition. Schools could provide teaching resources, design school-based sex education courses for lessons, and thus improve the teaching quality.

Conclusion

Sex education is a lifelong endeavour. Right now, Hong Kong's sex education is incomplete and insufficient; teenagers nowadays are unable to learn to protect themselves under the unbinding ***Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools***, and this also adversely affects their growth. We hope that more people in society will face up to this issue and turn their attention to the necessity of sex education for children, taking the views of children into account, rather than simply dismissing such views as too juvenile or ignorant.. We hope that the recommendations we have proposed can promote and safeguard children's rights to become involved in sex education, and assure that they could learn what they are entitled to.

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