

**Motion 2**

**The Government should formulate measures to address child suicide**

**Child Councilors:**

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## **Introduction**

Do you know if children around you are having suicidal thoughts? How to help children who feel suicidal? According to various press reports, there were a total of 36 children who committed suicide in the past academic year.

According to Article 6(2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child. Children are our future pillars in the society. We should take prompt actions to solve the problem of child suicide.

The lives of children are inextricably linked with their schools and families. In their school lives, the sources of students' stress include both their peers and academics. Most of the pressure that parents put on children is related to academic issues. Excessive stress often leads to the loss of hope, and some may even choose to end their lives. Although there is no one cause for child suicide, the spokesman of Parents United of Hong Kong stated that "among all the reasons for attempted suicide, academic problems can be tackled most easily". This motion, therefore, will focus on the question of academic pressure on students.

Our team has interviewed people from the social welfare and education sectors. We have also collected 519 questionnaires from the general public. Our motion will be divided into two parts: the reasons for children committing suicide, and ways to ease the problem.

## **Current Situation**

### **1. Pressure**

According to the questionnaire results, two of the major sources of pressure are "studies" and "prospects". Students are being pushed by socially accepted norms. In order to attain a good result in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, which can "make or break" students' lives, they have to study around the clock. They even attend different tutorial classes to review what they have learnt over the past three years in a short period of time. When students struggle to keep up with so much work, and at the same time are scared of not getting good grades in school and public examinations, their stress is amplified. These pressures are the factors that lead to students committing suicide.

## **2. Social atmosphere and the education system**

The current society considers that attending university is the only prospect for students. Although the Government continuously advocates developing a diversified society, it fails to put enough resources into non-mainstream industries, such as creative industries. These industries are also not sufficiently well promoted. There are not many choices for further studies and career development. The career training and bridging programmes in secondary schools, which are provided by the Government to the students, are severely insufficient. In addition, the schools adopt a spoon-feeding approach to education. They neglect the diverse development of the students and thus cannot provide opportunities for students to develop their talents. For these reasons, non-mainstream industries continue to be unpopular and regarded as less important, and this strengthens the public's feeling that attending university is the only prospect for students. However, according to the questionnaires results, over half of the student respondents thought that confusion over their prospects may bring them heavy pressure. According to the statistics from 2015 to 2016, 23% of the suicide cases were related to pressure from studies. These findings suggest that the homogeneity of educational prospects makes students think that they have no other choice. They believe that they cannot go their way. Under such frustrating circumstances, they may conceive the idea of suicide.

## **3. Insufficient promotion of the current policies and measures**

There are many policies and measures that help to prevent children from committing suicide, such as "Joyful@school" ("Joyful@HK" aims to increase the public's participation in the promotion of mental health and raising people's awareness and understanding of mental health) and the lessons of "Life Education" (Through different activities, such as group discussions or lectures after the assemblies, these lessons aim to strengthen life education). However, they are not well-known. According to findings of the questionnaires, 48.8%, a high proportion of the respondents, had not heard about the aforementioned policies or measures, which all aim to prevent child suicide cases, from the Government.

## **4. Insufficient professionals at school**

The Hong Kong Government will implement a "one school social worker for each school" policy in secondary schools, however, the number of students in every secondary school in Hong Kong exceeds 700 people, and according to the questionnaires, about 40 % of students have had thoughts of suicide. Therefore, the ratio of social workers to students in need is 1:280. All counseling work has to be handled by social workers, leading to a drastic increase in their workload, therefore they cannot lend students a helping hand when students are in need, thus lowering the effectiveness of this policy.

## **Suggestions**

### **1. Improving the current parent education policy**

Currently, parent education is undertaken by the Committee on Home-School Co-operation, which provides resources such as leaflets and information on the website to parents for reference, and makes use of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) set up by schools to strengthen the cooperation between parents and schools. However, many parents who do not know their responsibilities hold the belief that good education is all about children getting good academic results. But overemphasis on academic results only increases children's stress level. Parents instill the value "Grades mean everything" to students, forming a utilitarian atmosphere in society.

Therefore, the current parent education should be modified to the form of seminars or small classes. Consistent education should be provided to parents from the birth of their children till they come of age. Some advanced concepts such as "parents assuming different roles when their children turn to different ages" and "the meaning of teaching children" should be added to the content of parent education over the current basics.

### **2. Improving the current life planning and curriculum**

First of all, the Government always mentions that life planning is a kind of career path planning, thus neglecting other aspects of children's development.

Also, the current secondary and primary schools do not provide enough support on further studies and career choices. Even though students have conducted life planning, not every pathway is feasible in this homogenous society. Therefore, we suggest that the Government should invest in developing creative industries and step up promotion efforts so that secondary school students can understand different pathways for their future in order to equip themselves as soon as possible.

Moreover, we suggest that the curriculum of life education should be adjusted by adding "Life and Death Education" into the curriculum, so that students can understand that death is not the only way out. Many children these days misunderstood that suicide could solve all problems when they were facing difficulties and they seldom sought help. Therefore, life and death education should be added in the curriculum and taught in groups. Teachers can discuss the issues of life and death with students and students can express their own ideas on suicide.

### **3. Strengthening the communication between students and social workers**

Nowadays, not many students are willing to confide in the school social workers. According to the questionnaires, students have the misconception that social workers will inform teachers or related people after knowing their problems. However, if they refuse to confide in social workers, it will lead to overwhelming stress and increase the chance of committing suicide.

Schools should let students know that the purpose of the social workers is not to monitor students' behavior, but to provide a channel for them to pour out their worries. Social workers, in the same way as doctors, are subject to a confidentiality agreement unless the case is related to life and death or crime. Once violation of the regulatory legislation is identified, the penalty can be as serious as the cancellation of registration.

### **4. Setting up a retreat day**

Retreat day means taking a rest first before reorganization. Allowing students to take a break, a retreat day can help to create a room for them to think, release and relieve stress, and then adjust themselves accordingly.

On a retreat day, students can take care of their emotions, take a break from the busy school work, and examine their mental status.

The arrangement of a retreat day is highly feasible and flexible. It can be a one-day life education activity, a half-day sharing session, or even a one-hour resting period. In fact, many schools have already assigned a half-day every week for students to join activities instead of study, such as life education classes. Schools can also consider using life education as the theme for the retreat day. It should be noted that the purpose of setting a rest day is to give teachers and students a chance to take a break and improve their mental health.

### **5. Raising the public's awareness on child suicide issues**

Children can show their tendency to commit suicide in five ways: physical symptoms, emotional fluctuation, behavioural changes, pessimistic thinking, use of words related to suicide and death, etc. However, sometimes the signs are not very obvious. For example, children can appear to lose interest in study or have a chaotic daily life, which makes it harder to recognise their suicidal tendencies. Therefore, we think that by promoting and educating the public in ways such as organising parent

education lectures, we can make the public better informed about the signs of suicidal children and the means to deal with related situations.

#### **6. Establish the supporting group “Stay With You”**

In the light of children’s study pressure, we suggest that a supporting group “Stay With You” can be formed. Alumni can voluntarily join the group to offer counseling to their juniors. Although each person has different experiences, alumni are able to relate to current students’ sources of pressure since they had a similar school life back in their day.

Alumni can accompany the students and console them through sharing their personal experiences. When some students are found to have suicidal thoughts, their cases may be referred to social workers for follow-up. As a result, the workload of social workers could be reduced, and students at risk of committing suicide could be discovered and receive help before any tragedy happens.

#### **Conclusion**

We hope that everyone can have a deeper and broader understanding about child suicide after hearing our motion. Each and every child is the pillar of the future society. While we are concerned about their academic performance, we should also pay attention to their holistic development. Support and encourage them when they are frustrated; let them understand that ending their life is never a solution to their problems. To prevent further deterioration of the situation, parents should face up to the problem.

Obviously, sprouts cannot grow surrounded by thorns, nor can they flourish when they are over-fertilized or given too much water to even absorb. This also applies to raising children. Children can hardly grow happily and healthily when they are stressed with the over-expectation from their parents, schools and the society. Under such circumstances, they may be overwhelmed and even think about ending their own lives. Children are in a mentally fragile state, and society should never exaggerate the importance of their academic performance and neglect their own interests. We hope that different walks of life will cooperate and create a favourable environment for the growth of our children and prevent child suicide.

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