

## Motion 4

**The government should establish a platform where children can participate and express their views**

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## **I. Introduction**

We believe that all of us have experienced the sense of helplessness that came from voicing our opinions but ending up ignored. Children are not without their voices, yet the society tends to turn a deaf ear to their opinions. This is why we are now taking our first step and let the society hear us.

In Hong Kong, child affairs have been taking a one-way path all long. The lack of communication with children, and hence the lack of true understanding of their situation, has resulted in children being denied their rights of society participation. Even though the government has always been dedicated to improving the education system and developing child welfare, it has often ignored children's opinions. Her policies, therefore, cannot tend to children's needs. Instances like "3+3+4 new senior secondary education", "CSSA cutbacks" and "school closure order" are all results of policies forced through without a basis of consultation; it is only natural that they are met with resentment.

According to Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, "...the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." Children are definitely entitled to social participation. While children naturally cannot match adults on knowledge and maturity, they must have their own views and opinions on such issues of personal concern as child affairs; not to mention that only children understand most clearly their own needs. For the sake of children's benefits, the society needs to listened to and consider seriously their opinions.

To create more channels for children to participate and speak in the society, we table the motion "The government should establish a platform where children can participate and express their views."

## **II. Current status**

Hong Kong is an international metropolis where equality among all people is advocated. As social participants, children also wish to express their views, but such pleas are very often ignored.

The United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child came into effect in Hong Kong in 1994. On promoting child rights, however, the government has only gone so far as to paying lip service; nothing concrete has been put into action. The rights to participation belong to one of the four major categories of children's rights, yet in many areas Hong Kong has failed to ensure that children enjoy adequate rights to participation.

First of all, the media could have played a vital and effective role on promoting children's rights. It can, for example, provide opportunities for children to express their opinions and articulate their view. It is a pity that currently the media only focuses on disseminating negative information about children, such as cases of child abuse and family violence.

Furthermore, in the past month or so, our group has interviewed five Legislative Councillors from different political parties and also the Chairman of Commission of Youth. In the interviews, all political parties agree that present government-provided channels are

extremely inadequate for children to express their views; the parties themselves also do not have effective policies or measures in place to address the issue. Dr. Philemon Choi, Chairman of the Commission of Youth, also agrees that children should enjoy the same platforms and rights as youth do.

To obtain a clearer picture on the actual exercising of children's rights to participation, our group has conducted a questionnaire survey involving more than 1,600 children aged 9 to 18. The result showed that over 60% of the interviewed children believed they had the right to express themselves. An equal 60% commented that existing platforms were inadequate for children to participate and express their views. About half of the interviewees said the government would not take their opinions seriously. Nearly 70% supported the setting up of a platform to allow children to participate and voice their views. The results of the survey prove that children in Hong Kong long to express their views and hope that their opinions would be respected. As the stakeholders in the child policy, children definitely have their own unique views – and most of them have tried articulating them. However, these opinions have ended up being part of casual conversations rather than conveyed to the government to perfect its policies.

There have been successful examples overseas where platforms have been set up to allow children to participate and voice their opinions. In Switzerland and England, for instance, Children Parliaments have been established to provide a platform where children can participate in the issues related to them and tell the government what they need. As an international metropolis, why couldn't Hong Kong set up a similar platform for children?

To sum up, most children in Hong Kong yearn to express their views on policies related to them. They also hope the government can respond to and make improvements on the basis of their requests. We do believe that the government hopes to provide more outstanding policies and services that cater to the needs of the public – including the children. Therefore, we urge the government to establish a platform where children can participate and express their views, to ensure our opinions and requests could directly reach the administration.

### **III. The Structure and functions of the platform**

The objective of the platform is to act as a bridge across which children and the government can exchange views and build up a close relationship of mutual trust. Through organized participation, the platform will not only help children develop their minds, but also increase their interest in bearing social responsibility. To uphold the “rights to participation” as mentioned in the Convention, the platform will adopt a “children-led” mode of operation, to provide a friendly environment for child representatives between 10 to 18 to voice their views. The platform is structured in three major segments:

#### Parliament

Child representatives explore current social issues that are related to children, and, if possible, formulate solutions accordingly.

#### Executive committee

Formed by adults, responsible for executing administration duties in such areas as finance, documentation and communication, and provide assistance on the work progress.

#### Promotion team

Formed by child representatives and assisted by executive committee members, responsible for promoting the platform and children's rights to the public.

In addition, the platform will listen to children's voices and collect their opinions on a district level. Meetings will be held regularly to which government officials, representatives of various related organizations and other individuals will be invited. Guests will listen to children's views, explore child issues together and directly reflect opinions to different government departments. In this way an effective and long-lasting channel of communication can be established.

#### **IV. The Selection of child representatives**

In its early stage of implementation, the platform will adopt "Pilot Project" as its format of election. The system will be based on schools or child related organizations, and all child representatives must join the election by his/her own volition. The candidate can be recommended either by schools or NGOs, and can be a primary school student (primary 4 to primary 6), a junior secondary student (secondary 1 to Secondary 3) or a senior secondary student (secondary 4 to secondary 7). Child representatives would then be generated by mutual election. The number of representatives for each district depends on distribution of the child population. The total number of representatives is temporarily set at 80, with election to be held on a biannual basis. After sufficient recognition and support from the public is garnered, the horizontal and vertical coverage of the elections will be expanded in a gradual and orderly manner, and ultimately representatives will be generated by universal suffrage for all children under 18 years old.

#### **V. Positioning of the platform**

We hope this platform will be authorized by the government and directly subordinated to the Chief Secretary. The authorization of the government implies that the platform is supported and recognized by the administration, and will be able to capture public attention. As a consequence the government can implement the Convention in a more concrete manner, and children's rights to participation can be more effectively exercised.

The reason why the platform is subordinated neither to a bureau nor a department but to the Chief Secretary, is that we consider child issues a wide-ranging topic; a bureau alone cannot effectively forward the opinions to other government departments. Therefore, we believe that the problem can be solved if the platform subordinates directly to the Chief Secretary. Moreover, the work of the Chief Secretary is intimately involved with different aspects of a child lives, and as such can allow the platform to gain public trust.

#### **VI. Conclusion**

It is the responsibility of every civilian to contribute to the society. Children are always ready to voice their opinions; yet the society takes their views with indifference. This feeling of rejection is by no means enjoyable.

As an international metropolis renowned for its freedom of speech, opinions from all walks are an important social asset. If children's opinions are neglected, the impact will be profound. A platform that allows for child participation will not only teach children to speak up against

unfairness, but also train their critical and analytical thinking, meanwhile cultivating their knowledge of and sense of belonging in the society. The government can take reference from the children's views to make the most appropriate and democratic decisions.

We all wish Hong Kong could realize the spirit of democracy and perfect the room for child development. To this end, I, on behalf of 14 Child Councilors of my group, move the motion "The government should establish a platform where children can participate and express their views" be passed.

## **References**

UK Youth Parliament

<http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk>

## **Acknowledgements**

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Hon Sophie Leung Lau Yau Fun, Legislative Councilor (Liberal Party)

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All children who have completed the questionnaires