

Motion 2

The government should formulate policies to ensure equal opportunities of development for children in poverty

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The Government Should Formulate Policies to Ensure Equal Opportunities of Development for Children in Poverty

Foreword

Hong Kong is a thriving metropolis. In this affluent and stable society, most families can maintain a high standard of living for their children, offering them a pleasant and carefree childhood. But there is also the underprivileged: many children in Hong Kong are living in destitute and are in need of help and support.

According to Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, “States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”. Children in poverty should enjoy equal opportunities of development as other children do. As the future pillars of our society, children should be given the chance to develop fully both physically and mentally, so that they can contribute to future prosperity and stability of our society.

To achieve this, family support alone is insufficient. Help from the society, the government and schools are needed. In this light, we table the motion “The government should formulate policies to ensure equal opportunities of development for children in poverty”. Our analysis and suggestions are as follows.

Status Quo:

According to government statistics, currently about 360,000 children in Hong Kong are living in poverty, making up one fourth of total child population. This is nearly 100,000 more than the figures obtained by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in a survey conducted in 2003. The issue of children in poverty deserves our serious attention.

There is a difference between the living standards of children in poverty and that of ordinary children. According to a questionnaire survey conducted by our group which involved 200 children from local low-income families, including South Asian families, half of the surveyed children have not joined extra-curricular activities requiring a joining fee of HK\$100 or above. Many of them expressed an eagerness to attend such extra-curricular activities as music classes and dance classes organized by schools, government or other organizations. However, the transport fares, tuition fees and other expenditures dashed their hope. They were deprived of a chance to learn and to widen their horizons.

Many interviewed children hoped that they would be able to find a job different from their parents’, which are usually low-paid and labour-intensive. These children expressed a desire to be professionals when grown up. But their dreams will never come true if the government offers

them no assistance. They will only feel inferior and lack self-esteem, fearing their unfavourable background would be made known. This will, undoubtedly, have adverse effects on their mental development and hinder their future development.

To ensure that timely assistance will be offered to them, we urge the Chief Executive promptly implement the measures to combat poverty as mentioned in his Policy Address, such as establishing a Child Development Fund and launching Comprehensive Child Development Service (CCDS) at a territory-wide level. We are in the opinion that these measures on alleviating poverty are far from adequate. Therefore, we call for more initiatives from the government to provide help to children in poverty and ensure their equal opportunities of development. The government should waste no time and take immediate actions as time is precious to children. Suggestions made from the points of view of children are listed out below for the serious consideration of the authority.

Suggestions:

At school level

Financial Aids

Establishing a fund to subsidize academic and extra-curricular activities

Each school should establish a fund aiming to provide subsidies for extra-curricular activities to students with financial difficulties, who will then have a chance to develop their talents to the full. Sources of funding can be solicited from the school's parent teacher association, alumni association and students' association; they can also be profits earned from the sale of school souvenirs, donations from the commercial sectors and surplus of government funding for the school. To enhance the transparency of the fund management, schools should publish their financial reports annually and inform students in need of the application procedures for their fund.

In musical instrument classes organized by school orchestras as extra-curricular activities, students are often required to pay the fee charged by music teachers employed from outside as well as the rental fee of the instruments. In other extra-curricular activities, such as science class (which often involves experiments), cookery class and art class, students also have to settle the material fee, which is not subsidized by the school. These expenses add to the financial burden of children in poverty. With subsidies available from this fund, these children can break through the barrier of poverty to have exposure for learning.

Facilities

Setting up a Toy and Play Room

Games for the brain (such as chess) and educational CD-Roms donated will be kept at a Toy and Play Room for loaning to students (especially those living in poverty) to offer them more diversified pathways to learning. They will be given priority in loaning the materials to ensure that they can be benefited from the measure.

Programmes

Peer homework tutoring

To save them the expenses of attending private tutoring classes, schools can set up Peer Homework Tutor posts to provide free homework consultation for the students living under severe or moderate economic restrictions. The posts should be filled by senior students. The rationale of this initiative is similar to that of the “Big Sister, Big Brother” Programme already implemented in many schools. The only difference between the two is that the posts proposed are recognized and appointed by the school.

Organizing activities in long vacations

With regard to the participatory rights of children in poverty, schools can encourage the presidents of school societies to organize activities inside and outside school during long holidays. Activities that can be organized inside school include workshops, in-school camps and topical talks, while outside ones can take the form of study trips, exchange tours in the mainland and visits. Moreover, students living in poverty who achieve good academic results, maintain good conduct records, or contribute significantly to their schools can be allowed to enjoy privilege in the activities as a reward to their zeal in exploring opportunities in their school for self development.

Early release of textbook assistance

In Hong Kong, textbook assistance is only released after students have bought their textbooks. For poor families, the sum is usually taken from what is reserved to cover the child’s expenses during the summer vacation. As a result, the child’s opportunity in joining summer activities is greatly reduced. It is therefore highly beneficial to children in poverty if textbook assistance can be released earlier, i.e. before the beginning of the summer vacation rather than at the end of October as at present.

At society level

Reducing or exempting fees for joining activities/interest classes

Setting up a beneficiary programme for children in poverty

We urge that the government set up a database on children in poverty. All of their personal data will be kept in this database and each of them will be assigned a number. All registration

forms for interest classes should be supplemented with a relevant section for children in poverty to fill in their assigned number. The government will then verify the information against their records in the database. After the verification process, the children concerned will be offered financial aids for the class fee. This initiative can eliminate negative stereotyping children in poverty often experience when they have to disclose their identity before obtaining the benefits to which they are entitled. With this database, social workers can also identify the children in poverty more easily, before offering assistance to them and evaluating their situations.

We suggest that only Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients and students with full grant of textbook allowance be eligible to apply for the Children in Poverty Card. Details of this programme should make reference to the current Senior Citizen Card Programme.

Reducing or exempting transport fares

More discounts for transportation

At present, the only 50% fare discount students aged over 12 can enjoy is at MTR. To cut their expenses on transport, we propose that such fare discount for children in poverty (aged 12-18) using student octopus cards be extended to cover the East Rail, buses and other public transports. This will greatly encourage and motivate these children to actively participate in extra-curricular activities, widening their horizons. Eligibility for this benefit is the same as that of the Children in Poverty Card.

At government level

Formulation of policies

To implement our suggestions at the school level, the support and co-ordination of the Education Bureau are surely needed. For example, the Education Bureau should disseminate to schools guidelines on the measures to combat poverty, and demand all schools to formulate their own measures so as to look after the development of children in poverty in schools. Moreover, all schools must have their measures on alleviating poverty currently in force listed out in *School Profiles*. All these actions will definitely prompt the schools to pay serious attention to the issue of poverty.

Providing aids to organizations concerned

The funding for the Child Development Fund should be increased and made good use of. The funds can be allocated to schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government departments to support initiatives aiming at helping the poor.

Promoting multiple intelligence

The importance of all-round development should be promoted through publicity

campaigns so that the general public will be aware of the importance of extra-curricular activities to child development.

Conclusion:

Having made reference to the motions tabled in the previous Children’s Council meetings, we discovered that the issue of children in poverty had, in fact, been raised for a number of times. Unfortunately, according to our group members’ observations and the data we collected during visits, our conclusion is that there has not been any single sign of improvement in the plight of poor children. To the contrary, the situation has been worsening. As a result, we deliberately table this issue again in this year’s meeting in the hope of bringing this issue to the attention of the public.

We are not satisfied with the mere fact that children in poverty are offered the opportunity to receive school education. We reckon that they should also have the chance to join extra-curricular activities, as other children do. Through extra- curricular activities, children in poverty can have extensive exposure, thus broadening their horizons and enhancing their interpersonal communication skills. Only in this way will children in poverty be guaranteed a comprehensive and healthy physical and mental development.

To this end, I, on behalf of 19 Child Councilors of my group, move the motion “The government should formulate policies to ensure equal opportunities of development for children in poverty” be passed.

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