

**The government should improve the learning environment of  
grassroots children**

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## Motion 3

### **The government should improve the learning environment of grassroots children**

#### **Preamble**

Learning is an essential part of child growth. Since the Hong Kong society attaches great importance to total development, it is usual for children nowadays to join extra-curricular activities or interest classes as part of their learning. According to Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), “States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity”. Article 29 of the UNCRC states that “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”. However, one in every five children in Hong Kong lives in poverty. Children of wealthier families receive better learning support than their grassroots counterpart, whose academic performance suffers as a result of the poor learning environment. For example, the poor living environment makes it impossible for grassroots children to concentrate on their homework or study. Their parents, poorly educated and working long hours, can offer little help. In addition, grassroots families often live from hand to mouth and their children could not afford to have the same learning opportunities as their wealthier peers. Though the government has implemented poverty alleviation policies in recent years, these have failed to address the needs of all grassroots children. We therefore move the motion that the government should improve the learning environment of grassroots children, so as to facilitate their learning and increase their competitiveness in the future.

#### **Current Situation**

To better understand the current learning situation and problems faced by grassroots children, we have interviewed different individuals including Legislative Councillor the Honourable Mr Cheung Kwok-che, Dr Law Chi-kwong of the Community Care Fund (CCF), Mr Tien Puk Sun, JP of Commission on Poverty (the CoP), Ms Sze Lai-shan of the Society for Community Organization (SoCO), child ambassadors of the Hong Kong Committee on Children’s Rights, Mr Ngai Tse-Yeung of Hong Kong, social worker of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), in addition to a number of grassroots children and their parents. We have also surveyed 616 children through questionnaires. Among them, 45% belong to the grassroots (equal or below 50% of median household income) and the other 55% are non-grassroots children (above 50% of median household income).

##### **A. Difficulties in learning**

About half of the grassroots children found their studies challenging. At primary level, these children mainly had difficulties in handling the English subject. As they proceeded to secondary level, both English and Mathematics presented problems. Hence the problem with English began at primary level. 51% of the children thought that the curricula were too difficult and 19% of them found learning resources lacking. It is thus essential to provide greater support at the primary level.

##### **B. Limited opportunities to attend tutorial classes**

A total of 90% of the children who have attended tutorial classes found these classes helpful to their studies. However, about 60% of the grassroots children were unable to join tutorial classes at school mostly because of the insufficient quota (23%). Moreover, the main reason for not joining tutorial classes outside the school was financial difficulties (40%). These statistics indicate that grassroots children do not have enough opportunities to attend tutorial classes.

#### C. Interest classes too expensive to join

More than 40% of children from grassroots families could not participate in interest classes, mainly because of financial difficulties (37%) and insufficient quota (19%). In addition, grassroots children expressed an interest in sports (34%) and music (28%), indicating the necessity to set up more interest classes in these two areas and to provide opportunities for those who cannot afford joining interest classes.

#### D. Lack of learning facilities

Over 20% of grassroots children reported insufficient learning facilities at home, such as the lack of computers with internet access; more than 30% of them complained about the inadequacy of reference books and supplementary exercise materials. These statistics indicate that some grassroots children are in need of better learning facilities and support.

#### E. Inadequate parental learning guidance

Over half of the grassroots parents did not help children with their studies, probably because they were busy with their work or were unfamiliar with the course contents. This indicates that grassroots parents have difficulties in helping with their children's studies.

#### F. Poor living environment

A quiet and cosy environment can help children to concentrate on their studies. Survey results show that noise (43%) and lack of space (37%) were the main culprits affecting studies. Some grassroots children pointed out that they had to study on beds or in toilets and were subject to interruptions because they did not have their own rooms. Obviously, the living environment of grassroots children needs further improvement.

### **Interview Analysis**

#### A. Great difficulties in learning English

Mr. Michael Tien Puk Sun shared his two-day experience living in a cubicle apartment in an interview with us. He discovered that the English language competence of grassroots children lagged far behind their peers because they had little assistance from their poorly educated parents. The absence of experienced English teachers also played a part. Moreover, the "tutorial classes by senior students" scheme in school only offered limited quota. Furthermore, grassroots children were in greater need of help from professional tutors with their studies compared to those who took tutorial classes, but they were unable to pay for the tuition fees.

#### B. Inactive response to the After-school Care Scheme of CCF

The After-school Care Scheme of CCF is not implemented across the board, so grassroots children cannot benefit fully from it. First of all, only less than 100 among the over 500 primary schools in Hong Kong have joined the scheme. The fact that schools may choose not to

participate deprives grassroots children of the chance to benefit from the scheme. Also, teachers are often burdened by heavy workload, and can contribute little time or manpower to organizing activities. Besides, the popular demand and the short duration of the scheme result in little actual help to participating children.

#### C. Poor living environment and long waiting period for public housing

Some interviewees pointed out that their living environment in subdivided living units was awful. For example, the unpleasant smells from the streets forced them to close the windows, making the room stuffy. They had no desk to work on and had to do their homework on beds, and their studying time was over once their parents needed to rest. They could only get up early next morning to finish the rest of their homework.

It is the hope of grassroots children that the government can expedite the construction of public rental housing (PRH) estates. Many of them have been on the waiting list for over seven years rather than the three years promised by the government. According to the survey, the living environment of most grassroots children was disagreeable, plagued by noise and lacked space and privacy. These children found it hard to concentrate in such an environment and their studies tended to be adversely affected.

#### D. The lack of a department responsible for long-term children policies

Currently, there is no government department handling the issues of child poverty and development. All short-term and long-term plans are executed by different departments, resulting in overlapping services or lack of follow-up services. Moreover, there is a lack of systematic information sharing to help parents and children in need. The current education system of Hong Kong neglects the needs of the students with inferior learning abilities, and this imposes a disadvantage on these already less fortunate. A thorough reform of the education system is thus called for. Despite the existence of the Commission on Poverty, the society remains divided on relevant policies. Each policy has to go through a prolonged period of discussion and examination, which may last years. Priority is not given to children's needs.

### **Recommendations**

#### A. To increase housing supply and optimise home environment

In the short term, the government should refer to the Home Modification Project carried out by the SoCO and help grassroots families to improve the learning environment for their children. In the long term, the government should speed up building PRH estates.

#### B. To increase the funding quota of After-School Care Scheme and lower its application threshold

We recommend that the government should offer more financial assistance to non-governmental organizations that provide community services and increase the funding quota for the After-School Care Scheme of CCF as well as tutorial classes. This would benefit more grassroots children and improve their academic performance. Those living above the poverty line should also receive assistance through referral of social workers.

#### C. To regularly review the poverty line and allocate resources probably

The poverty line is now defined at 50% of median household income. The government should regularly review the definition of the poverty line and examine the possibilities of setting three poverty lines (40%, 50% and 60%), so that resources can be proportionally allocated. It should also consider the inclusion of asset test in some of the subsidy schemes so as to discourage abuse of resources.

D. To extend the opening hours of students' study rooms and provide more self-study space in schools

i. Interviewees reported that there were not enough study rooms and opening hours for students. The survey results also indicate that most grassroots children do their revision in self-study rooms in addition to studying at home. Therefore, we suggest an extension of the opening hours of study rooms during examination periods or weekends. The use of self-study rooms should be observed so as to ensure its function in providing a good learning environment for grassroots children.

ii. The study rooms should be open till 9 pm according to the practice of some schools. The government should allocate more resources to schools so that extra hands such as junior college students can be hired to answer questions from grassroots children.

E. To improve measures taken by schools

i. Schools can utilize the funds granted by the Education Bureau to provide after-school care and tutorial classes to help students who cannot catch up with the learning progress and whose living environment is not suitable for study. Nonetheless, the Education Bureau should provide manpower resources, such as referring to the "333 Learning Companion Leadership Program" jointly launched by the business and social welfare institutions, by hiring retired teachers as instructors so that schools can keep ends meet with the scheme and do not have to add on to teachers' workload.

ii. Schools can hire experienced teaching assistants who not only can teach students to finish their homework, but also report students' progress to teachers, so that teachers can follow up during the lessons without being overburdened with workload.

F. To offer parents-support classes

We suggest that non-governmental organizations should offer parents some support classes to share experience among parents in encouraging children to do homework and revisions, and to introduce some free study resources in different districts.

## **Conclusion**

Learning is an essential part of child development. An ideal learning environment can motivate children to develop their interest in learning and enhance their learning performance. People often say children are born with unlimited potential and their right to develop should be given full expression. However, grassroots children face such problems as undesirable learning environment and lack of learning resources, which pose negative impact on their learning. Children's right of development must be protected and the government support to grassroots children is urgently needed. Thus, we move the motion that the government should improve the learning environment of grassroots children be passed.

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