

**Mechanism for handling complaints about the
implementation of integrated education and
Support for students with mental illness under the existing
integrated education system**

**Meeting of Legislative Council
Panel on Education
Subcommittee on Integrated Education
8 July 2014**

Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission

Purpose

This paper aims to provide views of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) on (1) mechanism for handling complaints about the implementation of Integrated Education (IE) and (2) support for students with mental illness under the existing IE system.

Background

2. EOC has always been upholding the rights of equal learning opportunities for all students irrespective of their disabilities, and we have long voiced our concern that students with disabilities should have access to equal learning opportunities through inclusive education.

3. The concept of IE was first introduced to Hong Kong in the 70s. Initially, it took the form of special class and special programmes in ordinary schools to cater for students with special educational needs (SEN). In 1997, the IE Pilot Project emphasizing “whole-school approach” was launched in response to the 1994 *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* that called upon governments to accord inclusive education the highest policy and budgetary priority so as to include all children in mainstream schools regardless of individual

differences or difficulties. From 1999 onwards, the IE programme was officially implemented in a number of primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. In 2001, EOC issued the *Code of Practice on Education under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance* (the Code) to provide guidance on the legal requirements under the *Disability Discrimination Ordinance* (DDO) to ensure that students with disabilities can have equal learning opportunities.

Mechanism for handling complaints about the implementation of integrated education

4. To ensure that students with SEN can enjoy equal learning opportunities, apart from other suggestions, EOC has made the following recommendations in the Code:

- (i) *“education establishments should develop grievance procedures to handle grievances or complaints from their students/prospective students with disabilities, and/or their parents, concerning matters relating to the DDO. Such procedures should be communicated to all students of the educational establishment and their parents in order that they understand the function and operation of the procedures.”*

- (ii) *“the Government should help resolve disputes between schools and students with disabilities and their parents concerning matters relating to the DDO. The Government is advised to set up a dispute resolution mechanism to handle such disputes.”*

5. To handle and resolve grievances or complaints from students with disabilities and/or their parents, Education Bureau (EDB) has set up the following mediation mechanism:

(a) For the schools, School-based procedures are established to handle complaints from parents and students, including those disability discrimination complaints.

(b) For the Government/EDB, if the school and the parent involved in a dispute fail to reach a settlement, the Regional Education Offices of the EDB will provide assistance by collecting information from the school and the parent, studying the case in details, and arrange mediation meetings to resolve the dispute. If a settlement cannot be reached, EDB will set up a case study group to consult the views of the professional and persons concerned to find a solution. Taking into account the recommendations of the study group, its practicability, resources available etc., EDB will decide on the terms of mediation between the parent and the school, and implement the agreed measures.

6. If the complaints cannot be resolved through the aforementioned mechanism, under the DDO, the aggrieved students and/or their parents can lodge a complaint with the EOC. EOC will conduct an investigation into the complaints and endeavour to settle the complaints by means of conciliation.

7. Generally speaking, the aforesaid mechanism can provide an effective platform for the aggrieved students and/or their parents to ventilate their grievances as well as resolve the disputes.

Support for students with mental illness under the existing integrated education system

8. Support for students with mental illness under the current education system has always been a major concern of the key stakeholders including the parents, teachers and Government officials etc.. However, parents of students with mental illness and teachers generally consider that support for students with mental illness under existing education system is far from satisfactory. In the inquest into the death of Mr. WONG Ling-fung, the Jury has recommended that the Government and educational institutions to assess whether existing IE system is suitable for persons with mental illness.

9. To address the issue of the support for students with mental illness under the current IE system, the EOC proposes the following recommendations:

(a) Early identification of students with mental illness

10. Comprehensive and detailed assessment should be taken at the pre-school level, to enable early identification of students with disabilities, particularly students with mental illness. A detailed assessment report should be made available to the parents, schools and relevant experts. Parents and carers can use the information to better understand the child's development needs and equip themselves to address such needs at home, as well as share their experiences and work closely with professionals on holistic support measures and strategies. The report can also help to ensure a seamless transition between pre-school, kindergarten and primary school, whereby children with SEN can continue to receive appropriate services and assistance.

11. In view of the manpower shortage in counselling professional/educational psychologists, the Government should consider working closely with local tertiary institutions to formulate plans and programmes to train more professional counsellors and educational psychologists in Hong Kong.

(b) Increasing resources and manpower

12. EDB should address the problems of manpower shortage, limited resources and inadequate special education training for school principals and teaching staff in mainstream schools. Pre-service teacher training programmes in local tertiary institutions should include special education and inclusive education as core components.

(c) Teachers and principals should learn more about the needs of students with disabilities, particularly students with mental illness

13. School staff's knowledge in IE and existing support services needs to be strengthened. From the 2007/08 school year onwards, EDB has commissioned structured training courses for serving teachers on the support for students with SEN pitched at three levels of competencies, namely Basic, Advanced and Thematic (BAT) Courses. Currently only about 25% of the teachers in ordinary schools had completed BAT Courses of 30 contact hours or more. To equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to deal with students with SEN, EDB should secure additional resources of training which targets at 100% of the schools having all of the teachers trained in special education. The EDB should closely monitor the progress of teacher training and regularly review the training targets.

(d) Adopting the anti-bullying policy

14. The cultivation of a caring campus is essential for the implementation of IE. Teaching staff should share the value of education for all and accept students with SEN. Schools should promote mutual respect and zero tolerance towards any form of bullying in the campus.

Way Forward

15. Education is a major social investment and is crucial to the future of our children. For many students with SEN, their access to quality and higher education remains their only effective hope to integrate into the mainstream society and move up the social ladder.

16. The EOC is prepared to strengthen its collaboration with the Government and key stakeholders in promoting equal opportunities for students with SEN, and facilitating public understanding on the principles of equal opportunities in education and requirements of the DDO.

*Equal Opportunities Commission
June 2014*