

Bureau 'is failing *ethnic minorities*'

Equal Opportunitites Commision criticises school chiefs over integration and language teaching

The Education Bureau is not doing enough to help *ethnic minorities* integrate into society and must provide better Chinese language teaching, the Equal Opportunities Commission says in its latest report.

Chairman of the watchdog, Lam Woon-kwong, demanded the bureau ensure equal access to quality education for ethnic minority students.

"Education is the key for many of these families to escape from poverty. But since these students cannot read and write Chinese, they are deprived of the opportunity to have better education and many even leave school at an earlier age.

"In Hong Kong, how can one leave school at 15 or 16 with difficulties in reading and writing Chinese and find a decent job?" Lam said.

Noting that there are about 10,000 ethnic minority students in Hong Kong, Lam said most of them failed to get a place in the highly sought-after English-medium primary and secondary schools due to their poor scores in Chinese.

Many of these students are forced to study in 28 designated primary and secondary schools where a majority of the pupils are from *ethnic minorities*.

Lam said this went against the aim of the government's integrated education policy.

Introduced in 2004, the policy aims to bring more ethnic minority students into mainstream schools.

"Over the past four years, the number of designated schools increased from 15 to 28. It means many parents and students are forced to pick these designated schools where they have less opportunity to learn Chinese and so integrate into the society. It is not good for them," he said.

Sahal Abdullah, a 10 year-old Pakistani, is one of the examples.

Studying in a mainstream school, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong Wo Che Lutheran School, he was forced to repeat primary five in a designated school in September.

"I simply do not understand all the subjects. I only got a pass in English," he said.

The report also found many ethnic minority students did not go to kindergarten, which made it harder for them to adapt to and learn Chinese at primary schools.

It also pointed out the current examination system put ethnic minority students at a disadvantage because their low attainment in Chinese adversely impacted on their total scores and minimised their opportunities of advancement.

"Ironically, we all know that university students do not have to speak and write well to have good results in most of the subjects," Lam said.

The commission recommended that the Education Bureau adapts a number of measures to improve the situation.

These included offering language and cultural programmes for ethnic minority students at pre-primary level and establishing a separate Chinese-language curriculum and assessment for non-Chinese speakers for educational advancement and employment. "We have just sent the report to the Education Bureau, and we hope that it would respond to our recommendations and follow them up. Or else, we do not rule out the possibility of exercising the authority of the commission," he said.

The commission could launch a direct investigation or go to court over the education policy.

Fermi Wong Wai-fun, director of Hong Kong Unison, demanded the bureau remedies the situation as soon as possible.

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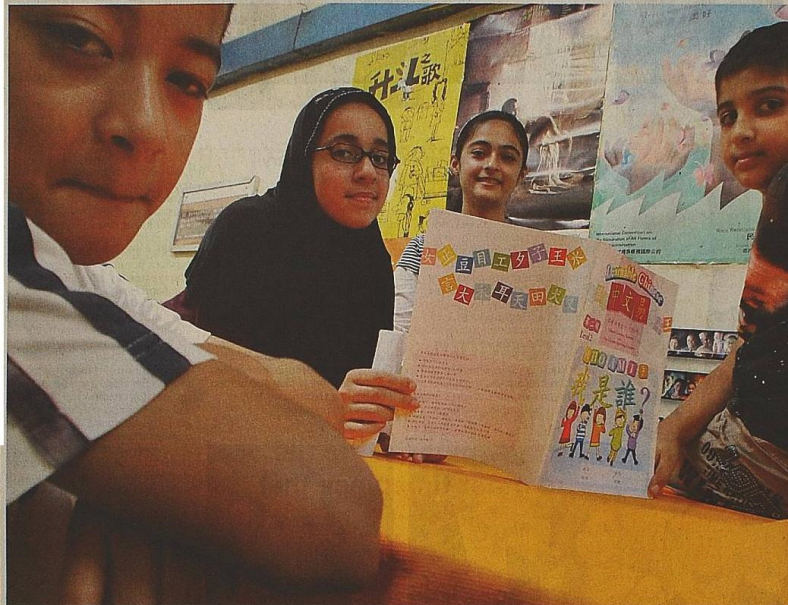
"We will bring the case to the court if the situation continues," she said.

Nayab Nadeem Khan, a 13-year-old Pakistani who will become a form two student at Marymount Secondary School in September, feared that her dream of becoming an ambassador would not be realised due to her poor Chinese.

"I was forced to drop the Chinese and Chinese history subjects next year. I spent many hours studying but they were still too difficult for me," she said.

In response to the report, the Education Bureau said it would work hand-in-hand with the commission to offer better support to non-Chinese students.

EDUCATION



Nepali Paradhan Reshe (left) and Pakistani Iqaa Sultan, Nayab Nadeem Khan and Sahal Abdullah at the Unison office in Tai Kok Tsui. Photo: Sam Tsang

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Martin Wong and Jennifer Lo

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FERMI WONG WAI-FUN, HONG KONG UNISON

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