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Court threat over ethnic schooling

Campaigners seek the backing of 100 families to launch discrimination case against government

The government is facing the threat of a landmark court action accusing it of racial discrimination.

Hong Kong Unison, which campaigns for the rights of minorities, claims they administration has failed to provide adequate educational opportunities for ethnic groups.

It is seeking the backing of 100 families for a lawsuit that would be the first against the government under the 2008 anti-racism law.

The group's executive director, Fermi Wong Wai-fun, said: "We need to have 100 individual cases willing to challenge the Education Bureau's policy for ethnic minority students in the court.

"It is serious racial discrimination that these children cannot have the same quality of education as others."

The move comes after the Education Bureau was criticised by the Equal Opportunities Commission for failing to help ethnic minorities integrate into society and achieve the Chinese-language standards necessary to succeed in education.

The bureau said in response that it would work with the commission to offer more support to non-Chinese students. But Wong said: "It is very rare for a government bureau or department to reply to an EOC report in such a wishy-washy way."

Having lobbied the bureau for years to help ethnic minorities integrate into society and to offer them better Chinese-language teaching, Wong said they were running out of patience and it was time to step up their fight.

"The collective case will help us demonstrate that their learning difficulty is not an individual problem, in that [minority students] are not clever or not hardworking enough." Wong said. "We also want to demonstrate that it is not an individual problem of schools that they are not teaching the students well," she added. "It is, in fact, the problem of a poor education system."

When it produced the report, the commission said that if the bureau did not follow up its recommendations it might "exercise the authority of the commission", which could include an inquiry or court action.

About a dozen families have said so far that they will join Hong Kong Unison's case, including a family of Pakistani origin with three children; all, apart from the father, were born in Hong Kong.

Eldest daughter Nayab Nadeem Khan, 13, said: "I want to live in Hong Kong for the rest of my life and I believe speaking and reading Chinese is vital for success here.

"The present Chinese curriculum in school is too difficult. We need a separate Chinese-language curriculum and assessment for non-Chinese speakers for educational advancement and employment."

Commenting on the group's likely legal action, the Education Bureau said it was committed to helping non-Chinese-speaking students adapt to the local education system and integrate into the community.

The bureau added that it was examining the commission's report with a view to making these students' learning more effective.

EDUCATION

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Fermi Wong plans legal challenge

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