

Age limit used to ignore dropouts — Legco

By MICHELLE CHIN

LEGISLATORS are concerned the Education Department may be using the compulsory school age limit of 15 to excuse itself from finding a school place for dropouts.

They claim the department may be delaying the procedure of finding a school place for these students, allowing it to shirk its responsibility once the students turn 15.

According to government statistics presented at the Legislative Council educa-

tion panel meeting yesterday, the total number of dropout cases involving students below 15 during 1993/94 was 2,832, although 21.7 per cent returned to school or joined apprenticeship programmes.

Of these, 947 turned 15 during the period of consultation with their parents, while 559 could not be traced. Education Department officials are following up 711 cases.

Citing the 947 cases, legislator Cheung Man-kwong of the Democratic Party said he was worried the depart-

ment was trying to wash its hands of such dropouts.

The Government cannot force parents to send their children to school once the latter turn 15.

Director of Education Dominic Wong Shing-wah denied the legislators' charge, saying: "We keep trying to persuade the children to return to school even after they reach 15 years old. But sometimes it's the parents who don't want to see their children being sent back to school."

He said the Government could do nothing.

Separately, panel members questioned the low admission rate at the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Practical School in Au Tau in Yuen Long. The school has five form one classes with a total of 64 students, although it can provide up to 450 places.

Mr Cheung said: "Why can't this new school enrol second- and third-form students at the same time? Why must it wait until there are a number of such students before opening these classes?"

He also criticised the Education Department for

setting a stringent criteria for admission.

"The students are required to have no emotional problems, no learning difficulties, no triad background, no record of frequently running away from home," he said.

"If they meet this criteria, they can go to a normal school instead."

Assistant Director of Education Clement Wong Chi-keung said students with difficulties should go to special schools geared to deal with their problems.