

# Angered by ESF chiefs' silly charade

BENJAMIN Rees (*South China Morning Post*, December 28) is right to doubt Mr Ken Woodhouse on the subject of the English Schools Foundation's fees remission scheme.

Mr Woodhouse has recently taken pains to insist that the scheme, which administers government funds, was never intended for people who couldn't afford ESF fees.

He says it is and always was only for the affluent who "suddenly and unexpectedly" fall on hard times.

One can only assume that before making this new announcement he carefully weighed the implication of taxpayers bailing out this group against the embarrassment of ever-increasing numbers of people unable to afford ESF fees.

My recent experience shows that the scheme is not really what Mr Woodhouse says it is. Our family fit squarely into the newly defined target group. We were, albeit uncomfortably, managing to send three children to an ESF school, when suddenly and unexpectedly this summer, our income was cut by two-thirds.

Not knowing the new definition of the fee remission scheme, we saw no other way to make ends meet than to split the family up and put two children in free public

schools in North America. One parent and child stayed here.

When our family situation became intolerable I wrote to the ESF from overseas and asked if there was any point in applying for fee remission.

I sent full details about income and expenses: school fees alone would be half our revised monthly income; add modest rent and together they exceeded income. I also asked for suggestions about other English schooling in Hongkong, specifically whether my children could go to a local school.

I never received a reply, but the ESF was quick to contact my husband through the school principal. In that call, the principal did caution my husband that his public statements in the *Post* about the ESF had not made him "any friends" within the organisation - although "if you were to die", the

family would probably be an easy candidate for full remission.

The principal's call underscored the just-behave-and-play-the-game arbitrary nature of the ESF.

Nonetheless, with that advisory about keeping quiet, we were encouraged to return and apply for fee remission: the suggestion was that something could surely be done for a family who had "belonged" to the ESF for seven years.

We returned to Hongkong and school the first week of November. A month later our application was refused. Our average monthly income based on last year's tax records disqualified us, we were told. Why I could not have been told this without coming back to Hongkong and what I might do about alternative schooling are

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WRITE: South China Morning Post, PO Box 47, Hongkong.  
TELEPHONE: 5652292 - FAX: 8111048 or 8111278

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questions that remain unanswered.

This experience shows that, whatever its purported rationale, the fee remission scheme has been effectively abolished. Instead of saying so, a silly charade is concocted whereby the fund is for the poor until there are too many; then it's for emergencies befalling the affluent - but as soon as an emergency comes along, it's for the poor again. It is also clear that the ESF feels it has something to hide. A recent *Post* report noted that the ESF had issued strict orders to Clear Water Bay teachers not to speak to the media. Mr Woodhouse likes to take digs at the media in his newsletters, as though the media had something to do with ESF problems.

Meanwhile, we still do not know where funds for the multi-million-dollar payoff to ousted Chief Executive Officer Mr Millard are coming from.

Mr Rees is right: the time has come for a judgement on whether the ESF is a private club or a quasi-public school system, answerable to taxpayers who support it more generously on a per capita basis than they do local schools.

If it is to continue to behave like a club, public funding should be withdrawn immediately.

GINNY McCORMICK  
Mid-Levels

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST  
1 JAN 1993