

S. L. P.

17 5 1977

# 11,650 children not in schools

An estimated 11,650 primary aged children are not in schools although legislation to enforce attendance was introduced six years ago, the Director of Education, Mr Kenneth Topley, disclosed yesterday.

The problem is particularly serious among the fishing and water-borne communities, with an estimated 3,900 children in the six to 11 age group who are not attending school, he said.

Mr Topley told a press conference that so far no parent had been prosecuted although the Education Ordinance 1971 gives him powers to enforce school attendance where parents appear to be unnecessarily withholding their children of primary school age from school.

"Technically a parent has not broken the law if he keeps his child away from school. He is only liable to prosecution if he disobeys the department's attendance order.

"So far it has been necessary to serve only two attendance orders and we haven't had anybody yet who had refused after the order was issued," Mr Topley said.

Any parent who without reasonable excuse fails to comply with an attendance order is guilty of an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of \$500 and to imprisonment for three months.

Mr Topley felt the main reason parents deprive their children of free primary education is "they are ignorant that children of school-age ought to go to school."

As for the floating population, the children are often needed to help the families and furthermore, they are often at sea.

Mr Topley was launching a campaign to draw the



Mr Topley

attention of all parents - specifically those among the floating population - to the full availability of free primary places.

The campaign is also aimed at reminding parents that they could be prosecuted if they did not send their primary age children to school or if they prevented them from attending classes at any stage of the six-year course.

Since the Director was given powers in 1971 to enforce primary school attendance, the parents of 770 children were persuaded to send their children back to school or had returned their children to school of their own accord, 58 were found places in school by either the Special Education Section or area staff of the department and 681 were over-aged, untraceable or had left Hongkong.

The cases known to the department are those who dropped out and had been reported by school principals.

Asked what plans the department had to contact those children who had never been to school at all, Mr

(Cont'd on Page 26 Col 7)

# 11,650 children not in school

(Cont'd from Page 1)

Topley replied: "That is why we are holding this campaign in order to winkle out such children."

As to how effective this would be, the Director said: "We wouldn't know until we've tried, would we?"

In the six-month period between September last year and March this year 695 cases were reported to the department which then referred them to the Social Welfare Department for investigation of each family's circumstances and the needs of the children.

Of these 258 returned to school, two were found places in special classes for mentally sub-normal children, and 227 were either overaged, had left Hongkong or could not be found.

The remaining 208 cases

are still under investigation. "Often the Social Welfare officers have a hard time locating the parents," said the Assistant Director of Education (Primary), Mr David Leung, "and frequently those they manage to find decline counselling and assistance offered by the workers."

Should a parent refuse to send his child back to school an attendance order is then considered.

"Some cases can be settled in a fortnight while others may drag on for months, by which time the child could be overaged and beyond the scope of the legislation," he said.

The exact number of children in the six to 11 age group not attending school is not known.

But last year's by-census estimated that about 11,650 children in this age group were not attending school - 1,160 were believed to be on Hongkong Island, 3,100 in the New Territories, 3,490 in Kowloon and 3,900 in the fishing and water-borne communities.

Mr Topley stressed that since the by-census was conducted during the summer holidays, the statistics may exaggerate the situation, "but these are the best figures we have.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I would like to see all these children in school."