

Henry Henry Standard

20 June 1979

40,000 students face no school threat

by
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THREE well-established private schools may soon close, jeopardising the education of more than 40,000 students.

Another 40 private independent schools, in which the Government has not bought places for successful students, may be in the same predicament.

The Education Department's invitation to 73 schools to become fully-aided has bleakened the prospects of these schools, which are mostly profit-making establishments.

One of the three schools which may close has 20,000 students in its branches on both sides of the harbour and has been operating for more than 20 years.

The management is reported to have offered its land and school buildings to developers for \$100 million, but potential buyers were only willing to pay half that price.

Sources said the "golden age" of private schools is over because the Government has expanded its education programme in the public sector. With nine years' free education, the Government's could easily satisfy public demand by buying places in schools, sources said.

One source said private schools are facing the predicament in different ways. Some had applied to join the "bought place scheme" but were rejected, he said.

Others have decided to remain as profit-making schools by expanding Form 4 and 5 classes, he said.

He added that the Education Department's deferment of a decision on the schools' applications for fees increases might also force some of the financially-hit schools to close down.

The vice-president of the Hongkong Private Anglo-Chinese Schools Association, Ching Kai-ming, agreed with this view and said more schools would show signs of strain early next month.

The first of these schools would be small private schools which neither make profits nor are in the Government's bought place scheme, he said.

An Education Department spokesman, commenting on newspaper reports on the future of private independent schools, yesterday said it was inevitable that the number of such schools would decline, especially with the

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introduction of nine years' free education.

"The development may be compared with that of primary education during the 1950s and 60s which was also characterised by the growth of the public sector, the gradual reduction in the private sector and an overall improvement in quality," the spokesman said.

The department issued a general circular to these schools last April advising them that they should change to non-profit-making status before they could qualify for assistance.

It said operators can incorporate themselves as a non-profit-making body, or hand the school over to an established non-profit-making sponsor.

It also said that the acquisition of non-profit-making status alone would

not guarantee Government assistance and that each application would be studied and considered on its own merits.

"This clearly shows that the department has the overriding interest of the children and parents at heart while upholding also the legitimate concerns of the operators of these private schools," the spokesman said.

Meanwhile, the number of new schools to be opened in the coming academic year with the scheme to convert caput grant schools into aided ones will set a landmark.

In September nine new schools will commence operation - two each at Kwaichung and Tsunwan, and one each at Saikung, Shatin, Taipo, Yuenlong and Chaiwan.

At the same time the Education Department is in

the process of inviting 73 caput grant schools to become aided ones under a conversion scheme which will be spread over four stages.