

Bennett points to danger signal

J. Bennett
29 March 1975

The Rev Joyce Bennett called for a re-examination of the parity principle in financing English-speaking schools.

"I see some very disquieting danger signals being raised over the issue of the education of English-speaking children." She said the issue was an opportunity to re-examine the position of Chinese children who are unable to cope with the intensive study of Chinese "on which their promotion to senior secondary and tertiary education depends."

It was important, she added, "that the Government does not foster separatism in the educational system."

There was now no adequate provision made in Anglo-Chinese schools for languages other than Chinese and English to be taught, said Miss Bennett.

French for 11 candidates at the advanced level course.

"We are penalising these children whose second language for examination purposes cannot be Chinese."

A Chinese child who, at the age of 10 or 11, returns to Hongkong after starting primary education overseas, or a child who goes overseas to school for a year or more and then returns, is unable to return to the Anglo-Chinese schools because they cannot recognise and write enough Chinese characters.

Only English language schools, she said, can meet the needs of these children. Miss Bennett proposed several alternatives to the current situation:

- The provision of free education to children in English language schools as well as to children in the Chinese sector.

- Or the continuance of fees in the English language schools, but with a far greater amount allowed for fee remission, which should be paid by the Government.

- Or the subsidising of

The Legislative Council meets

teachers of French in designated secondary schools to provide a second language for children whose Chinese is inadequate.

"Each of these three alternatives will cost money and I believe provision must be made in our Budget."

She said that more thought needs to be given to the best way of providing reasonably priced education for non-Chinese children.

And, she said, there should be a re-examination of the parity principle in financing the English speaking schools.

"Among the Anglo-Chinese schools there is not complete parity." "For example, a technical school gets more subsidy than a grammar school. Children in special schools and classes have smaller classes than those in ordinary schools and classes."

"Subsidies should, within reasonable limits, relate to the needs of the institution and child."

She said that many English-speaking children are just as "local" as children going to the Anglo-Chinese schools.

"Do not forget that many parents of many children in the Anglo-Chinese sector do not pay taxes and I have known Chinese children with one or more parents not even living here."

She said the 1965 White Paper which put forward the principle of parity between the English-speaking and other schools had implied uncertainty as to whether it would even be practical.

"If school fees are too high, the Government must

provide an alternative which is free and so within the reach of the poorer members of the English-speaking community."

Miss Bennett criticised the Government for failing to make any increase in the number of school inspectors needed to bring the "per caput" schools (non-profit making private schools which receive a per capita grant from the Government) over the next four years into the Government system.

"Once these schools are in the public sector, it will be important to increase the Education Department's back-up services such as the advisory inspectorate, in-service courses, visual-aids and library services."

Student-teacher ratios needed revising, as all Government and aided secondary schools are required to expand their number of classes to meet Government targets for a free place for three years in secondary schools.

The schools urgently needed more laboratory technicians, librarians and a higher class-teacher ratio.

"I do not find these increases in the estimates, although verbal promises have been made from time to time that these extras are being actively considered."

"The implication given has been that this relief will come soon, hopefully next September."

She asked what relief could be given to staff in the Government and aided schools and when it would start.

"Many of us would prefer the Government spent money in that way rather than on

abolishing tong fai or subscriptions."

She was disturbed to discover that there are some 1,828 untrained teachers teaching in day-time private primary schools — an area where the foundations for future academic ability is laid.

The Director of Education, said Miss Bennett, is unable to promise to continue in-service training courses for untrained teachers after next year.

"Are parents aware that some of our private primary schools are receiving high fees, yet engaging untrained teachers?"

"Can we, dare we allow such a system to continue?"

She said that if there is not sufficient money to train the teachers, private schools should publish the numbers of their untrained staff in relation to their trained staff.

On social welfare, Miss Bennett said there was an urgent need to establish a code of aid for institutions providing care for children and old people to ensure clear-cut arrangements for their organisers.

Under the present system, said Miss Bennett, arrangements for subvention are "clumsy, time-consuming and uncertain."

Philanthropic organisations, she said "hesitate to involve themselves in these services when the amount of subventions are so difficult to gauge and so dependent on the personal whims of committee members and others."

Under a code of aid, the Government would be able to maintain a much stricter control of budgeting and expenditure.

Miss Bennett said a study should be made on the effectiveness of funding by the Community Chest, the Lotteries Fund and the Social Welfare Department to voluntary agencies which provide welfare services not provided by the Government.