

Fears over effect on low-income families

Action Group slams Govt over school rent increases

THE Education Action Group (EAG) yesterday charged that the Housing Department raised the rent of 142 primary and 61 kindergarten schools in housing estates because it is "unwilling to operate with a deficit."

The group "feels it is extremely unfair to low income people living in housing estates to further add to their hardships because of Government's problems," EAG stated. "Government should serve the people, not benefit from them."

When the Housing Department announced on Tuesday it would discontinue the rent subsidies, a department spokesman said the Education Department is responsible

for aiding schools under the Provisions of the Code of Aid for Primary Schools.

The code, however, only provides for rent and rate subsidies for aided primary schools. It does not bind the Education Department to subsidise kindergartens or the 77 non-aided primary schools.

The Housing Department will continue to reimburse rates paid by non-profit kindergartens, although no provision will be made for profit-making kindergartens.

EAG said Government should provide kindergarten education and "give every assistance possible to those who have taken up Government's responsibility."

The group said despite the rates reimbursement to non-profit kindergartens, "the large rent increase alone will cause great burdens to the kindergartens, forcing them to either close, increase their fees, or drastically reduce the quality."

The double burden of rates and rent on profit-making kindergartens "will certainly force closure," the group said.

According to the EAG, mothers in housing estates must send their children to kindergarten because they have to work to provide adequate family income.

FEES

"Paying higher fees in the kindergartens in question or finding a kindergarten in another area in case of closure all add to the families inconvenience," the group said.

EAG also urged that Government provide in-service training to the teachers who will be left jobless when the private primary schools are forced to close and underqualified for positions in aided schools.

The group charged Government with showing little concern for private primary school and the teachers who staff them.

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"Now that there are adequate government-subsidised primary schools, Government is willing to get rid of private primary schools in housing estates that it relied on for many years."

In light of the Education Department's closure of several primary schools last year and the imminent closure of many more, EAG urged that Government instead either establish full-day school from primary three or introduce smaller classes.

"Both could enable more individual attention to the many children falling behind in school as indicated by the high failure rate," the group said.