

A question of language

Teaching in Chinese or English is the question currently dogging schools in the territory, Caroline Hughes and Angela Szeto report.

THE resignation of David Cheung Chi-kong, head of Pui Ching Middle School, has turned the spotlight once again on the controversial issue of language policy in schools.

News of his imminent departure comes as the Education Commission prepares to hand over the final recommendations of its Fourth Report to the Executive Council - three months later than anticipated.

Much of the delay can be attributed to the heated arguments over language that have rocked the education world since the report was unveiled last November.

Now, pessimists say the loss of Mr Cheung - Hongkong's most passionate and eloquent advocate of mother tongue education - is a blow that the Commission's language proposals will find hard to withstand.

The Education Commission wants most of Hongkong's schools to adopt Chinese as the medium of instruction.

Only 30 per cent of students can cope with learning through another language, it says.

Most principals agree that, educationally, there is no argument about the Commission's language proposals - mother tongue education is undoubtedly what is best for students.

However, with parental pressure firmly on the side of English-medium teaching, principals are nervous about adopting Chinese-medium, fearing a mass exodus of students to other schools.

Their concerns are to some extent justified by the experience of Mr Cheung himself, who was the first principal to switch from English- to Chinese-medium education in 1987.

Three years later, he resigned as Carmel Secondary School principal when teachers, worried by falling student enrolment, voted to return to English-medium.

"Parents are motivated by economic rather than educational fac-

tors," says Dr Keith Johnson, senior education lecturer at Hongkong University.

Both parents and students see English as leading to better jobs and more opportunities for tertiary education.

Faced with this apparently overwhelming opposition to Chinese-medium teaching, "principals are going to need something more positive than general encouragement," Dr Johnson says.

"They are going to need protection from parents."

A recent appeal to 400 secondary schools to adopt Chinese-medium instruction, made by a group led by Mr Cheung, illustrates the size of the task ahead of the Commission.

Of the fewer than 100 schools which replied, about 60 said they would adopt mother tongue education within the next five years - but only if at least 200 other schools switched simultaneously.

Chan Joe-chak, principal of the Chinese YMCA School and chairman of the Hongkong Association of Careers Masters and Guidance Teachers, says as well as parental pressure, practical difficulties also cause genuine problems.

Teachers "can't teach confidently in Chinese, as they can't use it fluently", he says.

According to Pong Tak-yue, head of the Chinese Middle Schools Association, not enough is being done to help schools adopt the Chinese-medium.

"The Examination Authority has refused to translate past A' Level examination papers into Chinese for us to practice the new Chinese-medium A' Level exams," he says.

Such problems mean the Government must make mother-tongue teaching compulsory for most schools, says Luke Yip Jing-ping, principal of St Stephens' College and chairman of the Hongkong Aided School Teachers Association. It is "unfortunate" that the Commissioners "did not have the courage to recommend central policy", he says.

Mr Yip argues that if Hongkong is to have compulsory education at all, it should make it compulsory in a language that children can learn in.

Education Commission members have defended their stance: "I have never believed in compulsion," says Dr Kathleen Barker, head of St Stephen's Girls School.

Fellow Commission member Angela Cheung believes the fourth