

35,000 sign petition on 'baby-classes'

ABOUT 35,000 signatures were collected as of yesterday from parents, kindergarten principals and teachers supporting the retention of "baby-classes" for three-year-olds.

The figure was disclosed at the in-house meeting of kindergarten principals organised by the Alliance of Pre-school Groups at Grantham College of Education.

The signature campaign, initiated by six educational groups, aims to reverse the Education Department's ruling on admission age to kindergartens.

More signatures are expected as the campaign runs until early July.

Under the new regulation, only children aged three years and eight months or above can be admitted to kindergartens, and those under this age will be channelled to child care centres.

Kindergartens can register with the Social Welfare Department under the Child Care Ordinance should they seek to admit three-year-olds, provided they meet the requirements laid down by the department.

Such an arbitrary age demarcation at three-year-eight-month will deprive many children of pre-school education, said Rose Wu, a representative of Committee for the Improvement of Primary Entrance Procedures, at the meeting.

While the White Paper on primary education and pre-primary services estimated that more than 180,000 children will be aged two to three years in 1985, it only recommended

—by—
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the provision of 33,050 places at child-care centres to meet the needs.

Miss Wu queried whether the places available can meet the increasing needs of the children, stressing that the running of "baby-classes" would be helpful to many parents.

The rationale behind these new arrangements shows that the government does not have a clear concept of pre-school education, trying to separate "care" from "education", Miss Wu said.

The quality of pre-school education has improved a lot, providing social and intellectual stimulation for young children vital to their development, she said.

She pointed out that in view of the increasing number of career women in Hongkong, it was unlikely that parents could afford

the time to provide enough care, attention and stimulation for their children at home.

President of the Professional Teachers' Union, Szeto Wah, said that under the new policy kindergartens would be "amputated."

If kindergartens cut their "baby-classes", they would face a serious loss in school fees, resulting in some cases in the closure of the kindergarten, Mr Szeto said.

Although kindergarten operating "baby-classes" can register with the Social Welfare Department as child-care centres, the regulations governing teacher-pupil ratio, space and equipment are so different from those of the Education Department's that many schools will not qualify, he said.

The alliance called for the repeal of the age-demarcation policy and the establishment of effective channels for consultations.