

Parents hit out at poor pre-school funding

Education minister criticised for putting teacher quality ahead of affordability

Agnes Lam

A parents group has hit out at the education minister after he said that extending the free education to pre-primary schooling was not a priority in an ongoing review of early childhood education.

Speaking at RTHK's City Forum yesterday, Chan Siu-chu, chairwoman of the Hong Kong Alliance of Parents' Associations, said parents were disappointed with Secretary for Education Arthur Li Kwok-cheung's remarks.

On Saturday, Professor Li said the government attached greatest importance in the review to improving teacher quality. He also questioned whether the quality of education would improve if pre-school education became free.

"Professor Li cannot just put an equal sign between quality and school fees. Why can't the government just spend more to improve quality and lower tuition fees at the same time?" Ms Chan said.

"It is just not fair. Compared with other government expenditure, spending on early childhood education is tiny. The government is responsible for and capable of providing free pre-school education, why can't it just do it?"

Sanly Kam Shau-wan, chairman of the Council of Non-profit Making Organisations for Pre-primary Education, said the government spent only \$166 a month in direct subsidy for every child attending non-profit making kindergartens.

"The government spends 10 times more on a primary or a secondary pupil," she said.

A representative of the Hong

Kong Christian Service's early childhood education service criticised the government for offering too little subsidy.

"The government poured a couple billion dollars into secondary school education after some secondary school teachers complained. Why can't the government spend more on pre-school education which is vital for a child's development?" she said.

Professional Teachers' Union spokeswoman on early childhood education, Yung Hau-heung, said that more and more teachers were quitting because of the lack of government subsidy.

"Teachers are paid far less than they deserve, and many have already left the field as the economy is getting better now," she said.

The starting salary for a qualified pre-school teacher, as set by the government, is \$12,000, and the maximum pay is \$23,000.

"Teachers on average are paid about \$8,000 to \$9,000. How can you expect a university graduate to stay in this field? They are unfairly treated and poorly paid," she said.

Lorna Chan Kim-sang, the head of the Early Childhood Education Department at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, said all pre-school teachers would have to be degree holders in order to enter the field in the long term.

The Education and Manpower Bureau said government spending on childhood education had doubled in the past decade and that the bureau had allocated about \$1.3 billion for 150,000 children attending kindergartens and nurseries in the 2005-06 school year.

SCORES OF KINDERGARTENS MAY CLOSE

Education groups have warned that more than 100 kindergartens could close if the government simply pours more resources into improving the quality of teachers, identified as the most important issue by education minister Arthur Li Kwok-cheung.

Mervyn Cheung Man-ping, chairman of the Hong Kong Education Policy Concern Organisation, said more than 100 kindergartens in public housing estates may have to be phased out because they cannot compete for the best teachers.

"All trained and qualified teachers will be lured to work at private kindergartens run by rich sponsoring bodies instead of non-profit making ones, which serve mainly children from new arrivals and South Asian families," he said.

He urged the government to offer subsidies to kindergartens so they can hire better quality teachers, buy new equipment and upgrade buildings. *Agnes Lam*