

Local educational scene evolving to meet demands

Can local schools deliver a holistic education to alleviate the increasing demand for international school places?

Increasing fees, long waiting list, and a lack of places at international schools in Hong Kong have left expatriate families wondering whether mainstream schools can be an option for their children.

Under the old HKCEE system, non-Chinese speaking students were allowed to study French instead of Chinese to gain qualifications that would enable them to enroll in overseas universities. In the past, a number of prestigious English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools have been offering this option.

Although the new diploma for secondary education, the HKDSE, has taken this advantage away, expatriate families are regarding local schools as a good alternative for their children to learn how to speak and be literate in the Chinese language, as well as to integrate into the local community.

With China rapidly rising in world stature and becoming a major trading nation, business leaders are looking for people who can speak Chinese and operate successfully in a Chinese cultural context.

But veteran Wendy Lau, who has worked with both international and mainstream schools, as well as the Education Bureau, does not think elite schools in Hong Kong can act as an alternative to international school because of their teaching methods.

"I have encountered students who have attempted this and felt very alienated. The end result is weak results both in English and Chinese. Although there are a few exceptions, most elite schools are still very much conformed to a textbook-oriented, exam-oriented style of learning which non-Chinese speaking children find very difficult to adjust to," she explains.

"A good example of this is writing. International school students are encouraged to write using phonics and praised for attempts – red crosses are not used. In local



schools, if a child spells a word wrong, they receive a big red cross. This saps their confidence and children fast develop a fear of writing. This fear is very difficult to undo and lasts for a lifetime for many," she adds.

Lau thinks there is no reason why local schools cannot provide top-notch education for all children. "What is needed in the local system is more freedom in the curriculum for teachers to motivate students, especially at primary level and less time spent on exams."

In fact, a number of Direct Subsidy Schools (DSS) in Hong Kong have been exploring the option to provide international education.

Good Hope School has a culturally diverse student body, with students with European, Canadian or American backgrounds. All Secondary 2 students are allowed to take either French or German as an additional foreign language, which may lead them on to taking international examination such as GCSE in their senior forms.

Apart from the HKDSE curriculum, DSS schools are also becoming authorized IB World Schools offering the IBDP program for students intending to further their studies overseas.

Diocesan Boys' School offers a rigorous pre-IB year which begins in Grade 10 to prepare senior students for the final two years in the IB Diploma curriculum, while St Paul's Co-educational College also has a F.4 Preparatory Year Course to develop students the qualities outlined in the IB learner profile.

Recently, St. Stephen's College and Po Leung Kuk Ngan Po Ling College have also become IB World Schools in February and May this year respectively.

