

25 Sept. 2012

To Whom It May Concern

I am writing in support of the Center for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies (CSLDS), Chinese University of Hong Kong's (CUHK) efforts to obtain funding for a bilingual and co-enrollment pilot program for hearing impaired students in a regular Hong Kong secondary school. This program is to be a continuation of a successful pilot program that has been carried out in the preschool, a regular HK kindergarten and primary school for the past 6 years, which was started with the support by the then Secretary of Education and Manpower Mrs. Fanny Law. The funding CSLDS needs now is for the secondary school program. The goal of this effort is to provide a comprehensive alternative model for educating the hearing impaired children from preschool through secondary school in HK.

I am writing in the capacity of the former Senior Specialist, Head of the Audiological Services & Deaf Education Section of the Education Bureau (EdB). I have been retired from the service since the end of 2006, after working in this field for over 27 years. We had many successful initiatives for the deaf and hearing-impaired children during my predecessors and my period in the Bureau. But there was so much more I would like to have accomplished especially in the area of deaf education. I remember that the Bureau and the Section's motto then was "No one is left behind" and "Every hearing impaired child is a Star". Despite our best efforts, we were unable to live up to our motto. There is still much that can and should be done to ensure that "No hearing impaired child is left behind". The funding CSLDS is seeking will help reach this goal to improve the hearing impaired children's ability to communicate. Being able to communicate effectively is the key that unlocks their isolation, opening up a whole new world for them, a world that will enable them to achieve an education.

When I was still working in the Bureau, one of my main concerns was that some of the deaf and hearing impaired students, especially those that were in the Special School for the Deaf in HK were doing poorly, both academically and in social integration. Due to poor communication skills, many of the students were unable to understand much of what went on in the classroom and left school having learned very little of what was presented to them. My heart cried out for them. They received 9 years of free and compulsory education, just like any other student in HK. But after 9 years of education, some of the students could not even achieve a Chinese literal standard of primary 3 or 4 level, not to mention other academic subjects! They had difficulty in something as basic as reading a newspaper. Because reading was so difficult for them, they had little if any interest in reading. The hearing impaired also found it difficult to

express themselves clearly in any form, neither the spoken nor the written form. Even when they tried communicating in a sign language, it would usually come out in a mumble, jumble of confusing signs. Without acquiring proper language skills, how could they convey even their most basic thoughts to others or understand what others were trying to convey to them.

Since there was no proper teaching of HK Sign Language (HKSL) in any Schools for the Deaf in HK, all they could learn was some simple signs that were passed on from schoolmates, either being made up among themselves or from their deaf family members, who acquired their signs from somewhere or the deaf community. No one had ever studied HKSL properly and systematically before, not to mention teaching it and using it as a medium of instruction in school. Sign language was like a taboo in the special schools. Even after the CSLDS has been studying HKSL for over 15 years, some teachers in the Special Schools for the Deaf now still have a hard time opening themselves up to and accepting the language.

We often say that our deaf and hearing-impaired children are deaf but not dumb. They are surely not dumb; some of them are actually very smart. But under this kind of education system, one can imagine what they would be like when they graduate. Without acquiring a language, they are not able to even think properly, not to mention that they cannot express themselves fully and precisely either verbally, in a written form or in a sign language. But they are not dumb. Just like any one of us, they have feelings and needs; they have potentials and dreams; they want to become independent, self-fulfilling individuals, having contributions to the society. But instead they have to depend on their family members for only simple communications and on the society for social security. But they and surely we as a society don't want them to spend their lives depending on their family and society for their livelihood.

A few years before I retired, I was so happy to see that at last there was someone in the academic field who has an interest in studying HKSL. I started working with Professor Gladys Tang of the CUHK who is also the Director of CLSDS, hoping to bring some changes in the then deaf education system in HK. But several years passed and we still had great difficulty in changing the attitude of the School for the Deaf. The task was like trying to move a mountain! They were so entrenched and comfortable in the way they had always done things that they would not seriously explore the ideas we were presenting to them. We were very frustrated and disappointed with their attitude and resistance to change.

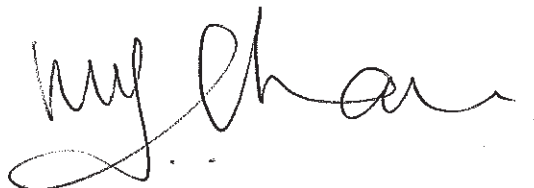
Then came the Hong Kong Jockey Club's (HKJC) agreement to support the CSLDS's pilot program, a 7-year project on "Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrollment: A Research Program on an Alternative Model of Deaf Education in Hong Kong" from preschool to primary level, starting in the academic year 2006/07. The program is now in its 7th year and the HKJC has agreed to fund the program for one extra year. Throughout the 6 plus years this program has been in existence, I have personally known and worked with most of the people involved in this program. I know them to be passionate about their work and dedicated to the task of improving the education of the hearing impaired. The CSLDS has had very positive feedback from both the hearing and the hearing impaired students, and their parents. The responses have been equally good from the schools, academics and professionals in the field locally and all over the world. It is a successful model in terms of academic achievement and social integration for both the hearing and hearing impaired students. Everyone, especially the deaf community is very excited about the impact this program has on improving the quality of education available to the hearing impaired. In carrying out this project, the resources developed, the teaching methodology and strategies adopted also proved to be useful for educating other students with special education needs and those from ethnic minorities.

Now the students are in Primary 6 and they would be going on to a regular secondary school the next academic year. You would think the EdB would gladly take up its role and develop the model to benefit more students and at higher levels. But coming from EdB myself, and knowing them to be very conservative and having to go through all the red tape, it is very unlikely that they would fund a pilot project as an alternative model for deaf education in secondary school. EdB would try considering incorporating the present model into its education system only when it has been proven successful. The CSLDS and the program need support from the public and private institutions.

As far as I know, CSLDS would like to involve more people and organizations in the society for the project, so that more people will have a better in depth understanding of what they are doing and sharing the joy of achieving something quite spectacular and life changing. They the CSLDS, the students, the parents and the school need your support.

The CSLDS with all their previous experience have most of the setup ready for the secondary school project to be introduced to the school and become part of the school curriculum, what they are lacking is your funding. Hope you can seriously consider granting them the funding. I am most certain that the students, the parents, the schools, the government, the society and even EdB eventually will appreciate your contribution to this great endeavor with a committed mission to improve the quality of

education for the hearing impaired and other students in HK, Taiwan, Singapore, China, and those countries and communities using Chinese as a means of communication, and around the world as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tina Chan', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Tina Man Yuk CHAN
Retired Senior Specialist/Section Head (1996-2006)
Audiological Services & Deaf Education Section
Education Bureau