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How much subsidy is granted for special school dormitories?

The purpose of the provision of dormitory services in special schools is to alleviate the pressure on parents who need to take care of their children with physical disability and multiple complex medical needs. In dormitories, students can learn to comply with the rules and improve their social skills through group life. This can also instil boarders' self-independence so as to have better integration into society. We (HKCS) agree on the direction and objectives of the Education Bureau's operation of special school dormitories. However, it is difficult to provide quality services due to the long-term manpower insufficiency in special school dormitories. It is even more difficult to achieve the Education Bureau's objectives of operating special school dormitories.

Currently, 21 out of 60 special schools in Hong Kong have been approved to provide dormitory services. Despite an emerging and ever-changing complicated situation of students' physical disability and a keen demand for temporary dormitory services offered by special schools, the Education Bureau has never conducted an in-depth examination of operational difficulties caused by severe manpower shortages faced by dormitories for years. Worse still, the current dormitory operation has been in jeopardy.

The staff establishment of a dormitory with 40 or more students includes: 1 warden, 1 assistant warden, 2 programme workers, 5 cooks, 2 night watchmen, and various staffing proportions of houseparents, houseparent coordinators, nurses and dormitory attendants according to different types of special schools. The biggest challenge is that the number of houseparents provided by the Education Bureau is far below standard, which seriously affects the care of the boarders. In addition, some positions such as cooks, night watchmen and attendants are paid less than their counterparts in other sectors, together with the lack of promotion and professional development ladders for houseparent coordinators and nurses make dormitories difficult to operate effectively.

To explain why the staffing allocated by the Education Bureau is far below standard, below let's take the houseparents' establishment of a dormitory accommodating physically challenged, severely mentally challenged and hearing impaired students as an example (see Table 1, Table 2):



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Table 1:

Boarder category / Item	5-day boarder	7-day boarder (year-round residence)
Boarding period (counted as 365 days per year)	Stay overnight after school for 190 school days	Besides 190 school days, also stay in a dorm for 175 non-school days
Number of shifts per day (after school) (8 hours per shift)	2 shifts: pm shift and night shift (more manpower for pm shift than night shift)	3 shifts for a non-school day: am shift, pm shift and night shift (more manpower for both am and pm shifts than night shift)
Number of shifts per year (8 hours per shift)	380 shifts (190 days x 2 shifts)	525 shifts on non-school days (175 days x3 shifts)
Number of duty shifts per year: around 109 days (counted as 5.5 working days per week, excluding 17 statutory public holidays and 14-22 days of annual leave)	256 shifts	256 shifts
Shortfall of duty shifts per year	124 shifts (380 shifts - 256 shifts =124 shifts)	269 shifts (525 shifts -256 shifts =269 shifts)

Table 2:

Boarder category / Item	5-day boarder	7-day boarder (year-round residence)
Shortfall of houseparents per year	1.48 persons (380 shifts ÷256 shifts =1.48 persons)	2.05 persons (525 shifts ÷256 shifts =2.05 persons)
Establishment by Education Bureau (increment of number of houseparents based on the increased number of boarders)	2 houseparents : 8 boarders (lacking 1.48 houseparents)	Additional non-school day arrangement 1.4 houseparents : 8 boarders (lacking 2.05 houseparents)
Reasonable establishment by Education Bureau	3.48 houseparents : 8 boarders	3.45 houseparents : 8 boarders

A special school dormitory is managed by houseparents who are social workers holding a social work diploma. They are responsible for not only taking care of the daily living of the boarders but also fulfilling the duties of being the parents to guide the students' growth until they leave either the special school or dormitory. If a dormitory has long been taking care of the boarders with insufficient houseparents, it is difficult to achieve the purposes of setting up a dormitory by the Education Bureau. What's worse is that if an accident occurs in a dormitory, the special school has to face the criminal liability for negligence in care.



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Another difficulty in operating special school dormitories is insufficient funding by the Education Bureau. At present, the funding approved for each boarder is \$1,580 for the five-day board and \$2,213 for the seven-day board. A special school dormitory provides catering services mainly based on the financial subsidy. If the subsidy \$2,213 per month is given for the seven-day boarding, the boarders will receive \$73.7 per day for expenses on 4 meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner and afternoon and evening snacks. That means only about \$18.4 per meal can be spent on average. For developing children, especially those with physical disability and medical complexity, it is significant for them to receive balanced dietary nutrition every day. The figures mentioned here just reflect that they are living below the poverty line. As a result, schools often have to get additional funding to subsidise the food expenses. In addition, special tableware and daily necessities required for the disabled have not been included in the above expenditure. Therefore, it is far from easy to maintain the basic service quality of dormitories.

We urge the Education Bureau to promptly review and address the long-standing problem of acute inadequacy of manpower in special school dormitories to enable the provision of quality service in the dormitories and to enable the boarders to regard the dormitories as their second home.