

COMMENT

Equal education for migrant children

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While migrant workers are praised for contributing to China's economic boom, their children have often been left behind by the cities their parents are helping build.

Today, most migrant children in cities go to schools that are specially set up for them. These privately run schools are usually poorly equipped and staffed, with low sanitation and safety standards.

Most local government education bureaus do not allocate funds to these schools as they do to public schools attended by other city children.

Their argument is that the education fund from the government is appropriated according to the country's unique "hukou" system, or household registration system. Migrant children usually do not have a city hukou and no allocations.

This argument is hardly convincing or justifiable.

This system, created in the years when the free flow of population was forbidden, can no longer meet the changing needs of today, when an estimated 200 million migrant workers from the countryside are working in cities. And the number is steadily rising.

Based on this false argument, many city authorities have made it difficult for migrant children to attend local public schools by charging additional fees. This is regardless of the fact that migrant workers are at the bottom of our society and generally make a meager income.

It is an uncomfortable fact to stomach, but public schools funded by taxpayers are simply shunning migrant children — children whose parents are also paying taxes by toiling on construction sites, waiting tables or stitching away in clothing factories.

It is outrageous for some to contend that migrant children will dilute the academic weight of the classroom if mixed with urban children.

While it is true that many migrant children from the countryside may have to play catch-up with their urban counterparts who went through preschool, the hardship and thrifty lives they have experienced could indeed be very educational to spoil urban children.

Schools, as educational institutions, bear the responsibility of teaching all children into qualified students despite their starting levels.

In fact, schools for migrant children have their town appeals.

You simply don't have to show as many documents that are required by public schools. These schools are also very flexible, catering to the needs of the migrant population. Students can also be enrolled at any time in the semester. School transfer and fee refunds are also easier — a sharp contrast with the rigid public school system.

In fact, many migrant children also feel happier in

these schools, despite relatively poor teaching conditions.

They feel more comfortable being with children of a similar family background, speaking probably the same Anhui or Jiangxi dialect.

A recent survey conducted by Fudan University found that most migrant children in Shanghai don't identify with local children.

About 60 percent of the 698 migrant children polled said they didn't consider themselves Shanghaiese. Among migrant children, who study at public schools together with local kids, the figure shot up to 75 percent.

It is shocking to see the discrimination and segregation of migrant children in our cities.

Migrant children and city children are both the future of the country and should enjoy the same right to the nine-year compulsory education stipulated by law.

Any effort to take away that right is simply a violation of the law.

In fact, local governments should be thankful to migrant children schools because they play such a vital role educating migrant children — a responsibility that should be shouldered by the governments.

Instead of harassing these schools, accusing them of poor safety, sanitation and teaching standards, and shutting them down randomly, local governments should take a positive step by offering a helping hand.

This could include fund support, training school teachers and principals and setting up computer rooms and libraries. They could also help them improve safety and sanitation standards by reinforcing school buildings and ensuring clean canteens.

In fact, many NGOs and volunteer groups have been doing these things.

The Pudong New Area in Shanghai has been experimenting with a new system to raise the standards of migrant children schools by offering all kinds of support. The progress has been amazing.

With more migrant workers coming to cities, the education of migrant children is a critical issue that we cannot afford to overlook.

Making decent education available to migrant children is not just about helping these migrant workers, it matters a lot to the future of our cities and nation to educate these children to be good citizens and productive workforce.

It also matters that compulsory education should be equally applied to all children, whether city kids or those migrating from city to city.

The National People's Congress, the country's legislature, should make detailed laws governing the education of migrant children, so their rights won't be violated.

Discrimination and segregation in the education of migrant children should not be tolerated.