

A helping hand for Hong Kong's disadvantaged children

Matthew Cheung promotes the benefits of after-school learning support schemes



Matthew Cheung [+ FOLLOW](#)

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After-school support schemes can improve students' study skills and help their personal development.

In a recent exclusive interview with this newspaper, I shared the government's strategy to unleash the potential of the local workforce in face of a fast-ageing population and a shrinking labour force.

Among the measures to boost labour supply is the substantial enhancement of childcare services. My interview has drawn some interesting feedback, with some doubting the

effectiveness of the proposed after-school learning and support programmes for underprivileged children in attracting mothers back to work.

Allow me to elaborate on our thinking behind the HK\$200 million scheme under the Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged, which is designed to attract contributions from business corporations on a dollar-for-dollar matching basis.

The proposal would be a win-win formula. While it is one of the supporting measures to help women balancing their family and work commitments, its primary aim is to facilitate the development of children from grass-roots families.

We fully respect the choice of women and appreciate that some would prefer to take care of their families rather than pursue careers. However, many female homemakers would like to work, given the necessary support and employment opportunities. Indeed, according to a government census in 2011, there were about 500,000 female homemakers of working age, and 8 per cent of them (about 41,000) said they were prepared to enter or rejoin the labour market given suitable childcare and family support.

During the public engagement on population policy, as well as my contact with grass-roots families, the feeling was strong that the lack of sufficient childcare services was one of the major obstacles for housewives who would like to join or rejoin the workforce.

The government, therefore, launched a host of enhanced childcare and after-school care services to help women balance their family and work commitments. However, there is much more to it than that.

Many less-educated parents have expressed the wish to have more support for their children in academic matters.

The promotion of after-school learning and support programmes through the Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged will provide a platform for the business sector to work with welfare NGOs and schools to help children from grass-roots families. After-school learning and support schemes should aim to improve students' study skills, learning motivation and academic performance; to strengthen their development in aspects such as self-esteem, self-management, emotional management, interpersonal skills and resilience to adversity; and to support parents to relieve their stress in parenting and improve their parenting skills.

We are building on the success of some existing schemes of cooperation under which schools and NGOs tap not only the resources but the creativity and expertise of the business sector to come up with tailor-made schemes that suit the needs of individual communities.

Akin to the government-run Child Development Fund scheme, we are addressing cross-generation poverty through educating, enlightening, enabling and empowering disadvantaged children. The involvement of volunteers from different professions will not only help the children catch up on their studies, but also broaden their horizons. All they need are some dedicated mentors.

Some have queried how such initiatives could help reduce the "anti-rich sentiment". First, let's not forget that many successful local business leaders grew up in grass-roots families, and each one has a good story to share with their young charges. We believe this cooperation model will encourage the business sector to create a cohesive, inclusive and caring society.

In a recent fundraising event for the "333 Learning Companion Leadership Programme" - a shining example of private-sector initiatives to nurture disadvantaged children into young leaders - I was deeply touched when the children sang We Can Fly in impeccable English and with visible self-confidence. Even if getting the mums back to work won't fly, I am sure that our children will fly high. The scheme would definitely pay good dividends.

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