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Hong Kong's failure to keep track of truants stoking up problems for vulnerable youngsters, charity warns

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Education Bureau's admission that it only has figures for secondary school dropouts alarms concern groups, which say pupils who skip classes are more likely to turn to drugs

Hong Kong's young people are increasingly at risk of developing drug problems and other anti-social behaviours after it was revealed the government is failing to monitor the number of children playing truant, a charity has warned.

The city's schools are required to report secondary school pupils who have been absent for seven consecutive days to the Education Bureau, but an investigation by the *South China Morning Post* has found the data is not being recorded.

The *Post* made an Access to Information request to the bureau for the number of days lost to truancy in the last academic year, but it could only provide the number of secondary school dropouts, which increased from 3,700 in the 2013/14 school year to 3,900 in 2014/15. The figure for 2015/16 was not yet available, a bureau spokeswoman said.



Sky Siu, executive director of KELY Support Group, which has provided holistic programmes for young people aged 14 to 24 since 1991, said the government's failure to monitor truancy rates was a "big concern" because skipping school often led to other social problems.

"[Truancy] is a direct result of social disengagement," she said. "The more children are disengaged with school, the more that leads to problems later in life, particularly in relation to substance abuse. Truancy puts you at a disadvantage. You have to find your place in society and in the family."

"Anything could really happen. We, like other NGOs, would be interested to know the rates of truancy here as part of our preventative work; it would give us more help with our programmes."

Hong Kong's public schools in particular have long faced criticism for their heavily academic curriculum, which offers children little time for physical education and the arts.

[After 71 student suicides since 2013, education chief told Hong Kong schools are like a 'prison' \[1\]](#)

The number of student suicides last academic year rose significantly, sparking fears that young people were being pushed to breaking point.

Siu added that her group's work with Hong Kong's schoolchildren suggested they were bored in class, while also feeling very pressured to obtain top grades.

But she did not think punitive measures such as fines for parents of truant children, as has been introduced in parts of the United States and the United Kingdom, were needed to encourage greater engagement in the classroom.

"We have found overall that there is a general boredom here," she said. "[Children] are not really interested. That is linked to the high academic pressure. It forces young people to be in a state where they do not know how to cope. But for all young people, their needs are going to be different. It is important to be aware of what is going on if someone is playing truant. Policies are there to find information, but I think the biggest and most important process is talking to young people."

[Nine Hong Kong schools chosen for pilot scheme to prevent student suicides \[2\]](#)

Dr Kean Poon Kei-yan, an assistant professor at the Education University of Hong Kong, said disengaged teenagers, generally boys, were more prone to engage in gangster activities, including drug abuse. She said they were often from low-income families in which parents were working full-time and could not always supervise them.

"I do believe most of the Hong Kong parents really encourage the children to go to school," she said. "I do not see a big problem with truancy, but I do see cases where very low-income families are struggling with this. The schools are doing a pretty good job, but when children are not going to school, then there are family problems."

"And I have seen that the academic orientated atmosphere in Hong Kong is making teenagers more withdrawn. When they get to an age where they have more independence over their life, they are keeping themselves at home and playing video games."

Poon said her research suggested those students who dropped out of mainstream schools to attend schools for social development were generally suffering from a reading disability and attention deficit disorder.

"I would say some of the schools, especially ones that are more academically orientated, they have students with severe reading disabilities who need a lot of help. And maybe they cannot cope in these regular schools. They cannot write even very simple Chinese characters."

Despite the criticism, an Education Bureau spokeswoman said in a statement that it worked with schools to ensure children who consistently skipped classes without justification were made to re-attend "at the earliest opportunity".

“Schools are required to report to the Education Bureau on the seventh day of students’ continuous absence, irrespective of their class levels,” she said. “Non-attendance cases will be identified for followed up with a view to bringing students back to school at the earliest opportunity.

Tackling truancy overseas

Britain

Local authorities and schools can use various legal powers if a child is not attending school without a legitimate reason between the ages of five and 16. Parents can be issued with a parenting order, which requires them to attend parenting classes, theoretically providing them with the skills to improve their child’s attendance. They might also be given an education supervision order, which results in a supervisor being assigned to them to boost their child’s school attendance. A school attendance order will be issued in cases where a child is never attending school, meaning parents will have 15 days to prove they are home-schooling their child or have registered them with a school. Finally, parents can face fines of up to £120 (HK\$1,175) for persistent unexplained absence, and the education authority may choose to prosecute them if this is not paid.

United States

Truancy policy varies from state to state, but in about 40 states, students face fines of up to US\$1,500 for persistent truancy. In reality, these fines are passed to the student’s parents, who face jail time if they do not pay by a certain date. During the 1960s, students who consistently skipped school faced harsher punishment under the juvenile justice system, but by the mid-1970s, laws were introduced to refer the students and parents in most of these cases for court-ordered mentoring programmes and parenting courses respectively. Less serious instances of truancy are handled with warning letters and parent-teacher meetings.

Singapore

Parents of children attending primary school face prosecution if their child fails to attend classes regularly. They can be fined up to S\$5,000 (HK\$27,500) or jailed for up to 12 months for persistent truancy. This law does not apply to secondary school students, although education remains compulsory until the age of 15. Increasing numbers of parents have been seeking what are known as Beyond Parental Control Orders from local courts, according to the Singapore Children’s Society. These orders give parents greater help in managing children under the age of 16.

Topics: City Weekend

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