

INSIGHT

Is the vacant school in Mui Wo an ideal base to help youngsters kick drugs in a socially inclusive setting? Or should the needs of travel-weary local children come first?

A Learning Process

by Stephanie Han

It's 4 AM and you are probably asleep, but a 14-year-old boy in Pui O, Lantau, has already begun his long day – which includes a grueling four-hour commute. He will travel by bus to Mui Wo, ferry to Central, and MTR to Mei Foo, Kowloon, for an 8 AM start. He may return home as late as 9 PM, collapsing in bed after homework and a snack. The next day the alarm goes off, and it begins again. His father, Edwin Poon, 56, says: “I would prefer to send him to school in Lantau, but I have no choice. By the time he gets home, he is worn out. No time for friends, no social life, no family life, it's not much of a life.”

Far from unusual, this is a typical journey for many students in the South Lantau District (which includes Peng Chau). About 700 students commute between two and four hours a day, and families may spend more than 1500HKD a month on transport.

Children as young as 11 commute long distances, putting an immeasurable stress on families who have no choice but to send them far from home. Health, academics, social and family life inevitably suffer. There are untold stories of fatigue and transport disasters that have endangered children's lives. One youngster fell off a ferry, and many make their way home alone after dark. The logical solution is to open a secondary school in South Lantau, which has a population of 18,700 and more than 3000 full-time students. Yet that remains clouded by government bureaucracy and politicians who refuse to acknowledge that places in distant schools do not serve the needs of a diverse, thriving community. By 2014, the area's population will be 21,000, but it has no local secondary school. Further compounding the community's challenges, one-third of the students attending local schools are non-Chinese speaking. The privileged may be able to afford an English schools foundation place, but South Lantau's median monthly income is about 10,000HKD a month.

So why are the needs of this community being ignored? First, the government has used incorrect statistics to bolster its argument against community interests. Contrary to the claim that South Lantau has only 50 primary six students, each year over 100 students in the educational district graduate to secondary school, the vast majority of whom would choose to attend a local secondary school if it served their needs. Government statistics also failed to take into account geographic location when measuring population growth. Families are moving to Lantau for clean air in droves; the area's birth rate is over 30% higher than a decade ago.

Second, the government states that the previous secondary school was shut down in 2007 due to a lack of enrollment, but it refuses to acknowledge facts. It was a gravely mismanaged school,

with nine headmasters in 10 years during the 1990s. Authorities ignored residents request to design the school to meet local needs.

Finally, the government has seen that in difficult times, it is best to give in to popular sentiments without deep probing – instead of leading by pragmatic analysis, numbers, and long-term vision. The press-savvy and extraordinarily wealthy Christian Zheng Sheng Association plans a school that would serve 200 students at its maximum. Yet that wields more clout than a Mui Wo School that could serve 1300 students. Locals have no objection to Christian Zheng Sheng College's mission. They only ask this: why must the community's one secondary school be seized by a large, outside organization that has 17 location choices across Lantau and millions of dollars behind it?

Plans for a Mui Wo school have been drawn up by noted academics, and both local and international school teachers. To meet student needs, it would be able to run both Chinese and English classes, and have an environmental focus to maximize its rule location. Educators, parents and community leaders are dedicated to building a 21st-century school and to fully participate in Hong Kong's plan to be a regional educational hub.

South Lantau locals lack wealth and political clout, but they remain steadfast in their belief in the sanctity of family and education. People here prefer bikes to cars, watch cattle amble along, and listen to drums from the village squares. Merchants know residence, neighbors watch each other's children, and the playground is filled with the sounds of Cantonese, English, Tagalog, and Putonghua.

South Lantau residents understand that a solid, community-based education changes the lives of all residents, unites everyone in its mission, promotes family unity, and is by far the best method of preventing illicit drug use.

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