

Plea for job training for autistic youth

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More needs to be done to prepare youngsters with special education needs for the workforce, according to the outgoing head of an NGO that has been serving the city's children in need for more than half a century.

While Heep Hong Society CEO Nancy Tsang Lan-see acknowledged the government's efforts to help those with special education needs at the kindergarten and primary levels, she lamented the insufficient support given to such youth in the period between graduation and employment.

"For example, while many of these teenagers are autistic, they are high-functioning with working abilities," Tsang, who retires at the end of the year after 37 years of service at the NGO, said.

While many of these youths could not enter universities or institutes offering mainstream vocational education, she said it would be a waste to enrol them in services such as sheltered workshops and day activity centres.

Sheltered workshops are targeted at disabled youths aged 15 and above and focus mainly on basic skills training such as packaging, while day activity centres provide care and training in daily living skills and simple work skills to mentally disabled youths.

There were around 53,160 children with special education needs enrolled in public schools in the 2017-18 school year.

Concerns have mounted over the possibility of the government neglecting education support for youths with special needs after it was revealed one of the campuses of Shine Skills Centre, in Kwun Tong, would be torn down to build a civil service college.



Nancy Tsang urges help for those with autism. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

Many parents with high-functioning teens prefer Shine, which offers job training for disabled people aged 15 and above, because it focuses more on education and is run by the Vocational Training Council, the largest provider of such education.

While Secretary for Labour and Welfare Law Chi-kwong last week said the council could run another job training centre, parents were still worried.

Tsang believed the government should put more resources into help these high-functioning special needs youths.

"There are a lot of resources in the preschool and school levels; if we do not help them with the last step before entering the workforce, it is a pity," she said, noting that Heep Hong's studies had shown that these youngsters had difficulty getting jobs if they did not get support.

A survey by Heep Hong from November last year to February this year found that fewer than half of 45 youths with autism managed to stay in a job for more than a year, despite having graduated from secondary school.