Letter to Mayor Gu

JIUFANG QIN

Dear Mayor Gu,

In your 2006 inaugural address as Mayor of Anshan City, you promised that you would bring a revolution to education. Since 2006, I and the rest of the city have watched you try to do so. Old schools have been reconstructed and refurbished; new schools have undergone further expansion; schools that are not doing well have been combined as a means of reformation. Advanced equipment has been introduced to each school, professional teachers have been hired with higher salaries, and extracurricular classes such as choir and tennis have been added to the standard curriculum. Finally, to meet the demand of developmentally challenged children, you’ve introduced private schools of special education. The local newspaper, the Anshan Daily, comments that this is a wise decision, one that ideally will kill two birds with one stone: these new schools will expand education opportunities for developmentally challenged children in Anshan City, and the government will benefit as the schools invest in the city.

But introducing private special education schools as a way to improve the overall quality of special education in Anshan excludes the existing system of public special education. Anshan’s one public school remains almost unchanged, even though it has only an old, two-story teaching building and a small playground full of sand. The classrooms are small, somber, and without adequate lighting, and there are no computers or projectors, only old-fashioned blackboards. There are only three courses (Chinese, music, and math) and the number of teachers is so limited that they each have to teach more than one subject. Moreover, the salaries offered in this school are so low that many teachers leave and few new ones come to fill the vacant positions. Since the school cannot afford to hire a cleaner, all the cleaning has to be done by students. It is in such austere circumstances that developmentally challenged children in the public special education school are expected to learn.
This class disparity in the education system is by no means unique to Anshan, and the situations of other cities can be useful as cautionary tales. In New York City, where I’m now studying, recent debates on education policy have concerned the “redlining” of education. “Redlining” used to refer to the practice of denying or increasing the cost of services such as banking, insurance, health care, or even supermarkets to residents in certain, often racially determined, areas. In New York, the term is used to describe the disparities in access to education among communities with different economic statuses.

Michael Holzman, author of the Schott Foundation report on inequalities in the New York City school system, notes that “low performing schools are mostly located in economically disadvantaged areas while high performing schools tend to be located in economically advantaged areas.” Holzman alleges that “schools in economically advantaged districts get more resources from the New York City Department of Education, such as a higher percentage of experienced, well-educated teachers, more equipment, more advanced placement tests, and more talented programs, and kids from these economically advantaged areas are more prepared in a certain sense to learn.” It seems that due to this unequal allocation of resources, where a student lives determines his or her education more than ability does. Education in New York City is divided by districts, and districts correlate to economic status. Rich families can move to school districts that receive more resources, while poor families often have to live in districts that receive less. Holzman argues that “to those who have much when they come, much is given; to those who have little when they come, little is given.”

When I hear about this redlining in New York City education, I can see similar problems ahead for special education in Anshan. The changes put in place thus far favor wealthier families and threaten to further hinder public special education. Both the locations of the new private special education schools and the tuitions of such schools will “redline” a large number of developmentally challenged children and exclude them from the improvements to special education—or even exclude them from the existing special education resources.

According to the second National Sampling Survey of the Handicapped carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2007, 75% of the disabled population comes from rural areas; it follows that, of all the disabled children, those from rural areas comprise a major portion. And since most new private schools are established in cities for economic reasons, this rural majority of disabled children will be out of reach of better educational opportunities.
Even if location were not an issue, the tuition of such private special education schools is not affordable for rural families. In the 2005 population census taken by the National Bureau of Statistics, the average annual income per person in families with handicapped members was 2,260 yuan (about 357 dollars) in rural areas. Considering that the average annual tuition for private school education is 12,000 yuan (about 1,895 dollars), the average income of families from rural areas is not nearly adequate to send their children to these schools. A necessary education thus becomes a luxury beyond many families’ means. Consequently, only those families with enough money are able to send their children to receive high-quality education, and the accessibility of the improved education is narrowed by cost as well as location.

This situation is one faced by Tiantian, a developmentally challenged eight-year-old who lives in Anshan. Journalist Zhai Xiaoxue interviewed the family and reports that Tiantian’s mother is severely handicapped and that his father is a clock-maker with an unstable income of 1,500 yuan per month. They wanted to send Tiantian to the public special education school, but it was already full due to limited funding. They then turned to local private special education schools, but found them an expensive dream—1,100 yuan a month. Refused by both sides, Tiantian could only stay at home.

If special education reform fails to reach the public schools, though, even the students lucky enough to be admitted will be at a disadvantage. The arrival of private special education schools will also lead to competition with the current public schools over qualified teachers. The high salaries and better working conditions in the planned private special education schools will attract the qualified teachers who currently work in the existing public schools. The current plan will aggravate the already significant shortage of teachers, leading to an even more insufficient and unprofessional public education for children with special needs. As in the New York City schools, what is good stays good, and what is bad gets worse.

Introducing private special-education schools will benefit some developmentally challenged children, but only a small proportion. The rest, those who cannot access private special education, are facing even more difficulties in getting any education at all. Shouldn’t the education and the future of all developmentally challenged children be weighed equally? Your care for the economically disadvantaged, developmentally challenged children—your commitment to include them in the better special education you’re bringing to Anshan—will win your citizens’ respect. We will regard you not only as a good mayor who understands the importance of education, but also as a sym-
pathetic and kind-hearted person. We will be proud to have a mayor who does not exclude even a single member of our society.

Sincerely,

Jiufang Qin

**WORKS CITED**

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—. “2005 Population Census.” Web. 14 June 2012. (See Zhuo Ying Qui and Dejian Lai for equivalent information in English.)

