

Applicants from mainland flood secondary schools

Principals struggle to cope as newcomers from talent scheme lack English and Cantonese skills

Public secondary schools in the city have reported a surge in the number of pupils from the mainland seeking in-year admissions in recent months, and one district has declared a "full house" with some having to turn away most applicants referred by education authorities.

A few secondary schools also had to organise intensive English classes over the summer holidays as prospective pupils' proficiency was poor, with some scoring less than 10 out of 100 in entry- language tests.

John Chan*, a veteran secondary school teacher, said staff members were told by their management that the institution was expected to admit dozens of newcomers across different levels in the new academic year, which starts next month, despite the pupils' poor qualifying results.

"The situation is crazy this year," he said. "In the past, only a few students were admitted. But now we have more than 20 new students coming into [each of] Form Two and Form Three.

"Almost all students were sent by regional education offices, which we could not turn down."

But one school principal who asked not to be named told the Post some schools would try to fill as many places as possible "on their own", to avoid referrals by regional authorities of students with relatively poor academic standards.

Chan King-tat, principal of Pok Oi Hospital Tang Pui King Memorial College and chairman of the Yuen Long District Secondary School Heads Association, said his school was also told by education authorities to admit three pupils from across the border. "Students from the mainland applied to our school directly in the past – they weren't sent by the government," he said.

Chan added it was an "unprecedented" move by education authorities, who had also indicated which subjects the new pupils should take.

But he explained his institution could only admit one of the three referrals, as the academic performance of two was "not good enough".

He said an Education Bureau official had told him some of the applicants for in-year admission were dependants of mainland talent living in Hong Kong, whose children were born in the city but grew up across the border.

Others were children who had returned to the city with their families after living overseas.

Chan added the official had said it was "full house" in North district, the area closest to the border.

A spokesman for the Immigration Department said the number of dependants aged under 18 who had their application approved under the Top Talent Pass Scheme launched in December 2022 stood at 47,732.

The scheme was designed to recruit talent from outside the city, with about 95 per cent of applicants from

the mainland. The children of successful applicants are eligible to enrol in the city's public schools free of charge.

Non-local parents in Hong Kong can seek a place for their children in a city school, either by direct contact with institutions or through the regional offices of the Education Bureau.

A bureau spokeswoman said it was unable to provide the number of applications for school placement help being sought in regional education offices.

Wong Kin-ho, chairman of the [Hong Kong Education Workers Union](#) and a secondary school vice-principal, agreed the number of children seeking in-year admission this year, especially over recent months, had hit an "unprecedented high".

"Our in-year application this year has doubled, jumping from around 70 last year to 140 this year," he said. "But we could admit eight of them at most."

Wong added 70 per cent of applicants were dependants of parents recruited through the top talent scheme and the rest were holders of one-way permits or Hongkongers. He said the school had earlier suggested mainland pupils whose English skills were poor could start in a lower year, so they could manage their lessons better and not fall behind.

Kan Wai-hung, principal of HKTA The Yuen Yuen Institute No 1 Secondary School in Kwai Tsing district, said the more than 40 schools in the area had also experienced increased in-year admissions this year. "Applicants are spread across different grades, and their relatives, such as cousins who studied in Hong Kong, will recommend the schools they attended to others," he said.

Kan said the gap in English-language proficiency between city and mainland children was huge as some of the newcomers were from rural areas and had not learned English in kindergarten or toddler playgroups.

Lee Yi-ying, head of the Subsidised Secondary School Council and also principal of Kowloon True Light School in Kowloon Tong, said she expected the rise in mainland applicants would persist unless the top talent scheme was modified.

She said some mainland pupils who attended international schools across the border had good English skills, but that they were in the minority.

"Generally, their spoken and written English is also poorer when compared to their reading and listening," she said.

Lee said some schools had also launched Cantonese classes to help mainland students integrate and assigned Hong Kong pupils to help them adjust.

*Name changed at interviewee's request

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EDUCATION

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Principals struggle to cope as newcomers from talent scheme lack English and Cantonese skills

William Yiu

william.yiu@scmp.com

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