

Inadequate schooling for indigenous students: An investigation into the right to education¹

Economic and social factors often prevent indigenous students from pursuing advanced studies, resulting in low competitiveness and high unemployment. How can the society provide a level playing field to safeguard the rights of the indigenous people? Control Yuan Members launched an investigation into the case.

Improving the education of indigenous people has been the focus of social issues for many years. Although the situation has come a long way after various remedial measures taken by the Ministry of Education, the number of aboriginal students enrolled in advanced education has remained relatively low (a mere 1.33%). A look at the statistics reveals the overall picture of enrollment. For the nine-year compulsory education (from elementary through junior high school), enrollment for aborigines is on par with that of regular students, whereas that of high school is 8.02% lower than regular students and that of degree studies is 39.88% less. A review of the level of education levels for literate people 15 years old or above shows that only 16.21% of aborigines hold a college degree or above and 44.05% with less than a high school diploma, compared with 35.87% of the total literate population holding a college degree or above and 32.84% a high school diploma or an associate degree. Apparently, the greatest disparity between aboriginal and regular students lies in degree studies.

The investigation points out some inadequacies that require greater affirmative action, scholarship programs, and the restoration of family function given that most aboriginal students are raised by grandparents. As for academic performance, actions should be taken to identify the factors behind the poor performance of aboriginal students in junior and high schools. Drop-out rates are four to five times higher among aboriginal students than their non-aboriginal counterparts. The problem is aggravated by high faculty turnover, uneven teaching competence and excessive use of substitute teachers. For teachers servicing aboriginal students, knowledge in aboriginal culture or multi-cultural education are a prerequisite. Compulsory schooling aside, preschool education and nursing require greater inter-ministerial coordination. By and large, aboriginal students will be better served if a special and dedicated unit is in place at the central or local level to be in charge of the matter.

In response to Control Yuan's redress, the Council of Indigenous Peoples has approved of new subsidized summer and after school classes targeting aboriginal students. These efforts have reduced the gap between learners in the cities and countryside, decreased financial burden on aboriginal households, and prevented aboriginal students from lingering in

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unhealthy places during the summer. Fifty-seven service centers have been established around Taiwan to offer regular visits to homes of drop-out students. The Ministry of Education has set up special units to be in charge of aboriginal education. The Ministry has also urged city and county governments around Taiwan to take the matter most seriously and authorized the National Pingtung University of Education to run a pilot scholarship program for training and hiring teachers of aboriginal descent.