Parents of special needs children want them to be included under Compulsory Education Act

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THEY may be wheelchair-bound and afflicted with muscular dystrophy, but the Liew brothers feel they are fortunate.

“We have been given a mainstream education and are now in university. At school, we get to interact with ordinary people, make friends and understand their way of thinking. This makes us feel normal,” said Liew Chong Choon, 21, who hopes to work in the finance industry after he graduates.

Together with his younger brother, Chong Heng, 20, they attend classes at the Singapore Management University and volunteer for a mentoring programme for less privileged children.

But the Liew brothers do not want education for special needs individuals, like themselves, to be considered a privilege. It should be a right, they say.

Pushing for the same cause is an alliance of Volunteer Welfare Organisations (VWO), who formed a Joint Committee for Compulsory Education for All (JCCEA) over two years ago.

“This is in line with the notion of an inclusive society,” said Ms Maureen Fung, director of the Asian Women’s Welfare Association (AWWA), which spearheads the movement.

While the Compulsory Education (CE) Act for children has been in place since January 2003, children with special needs — physical or mental — are automatically exempted.

It was thought that CE for special needs children would be “unduly harsh” on their parents as most VWOs — who run special education schools privately — are not yet equipped with the space or resources they need to provide for the children.

School fees at special needs schools can also be costly — ranging from around $60 to $1,500 per month — due to special transport arrangements and the expertise involved.

However, a survey conducted by the JCCEA in late 2003 showed otherwise: Almost all of the 2,500 parents of special needs children polled rooted for compulsory education for all.

Said Ms Fung: “This is evidence that CE for special needs children is viable in Singapore, as parents do not think it would be unduly harsh on them.”

The survey report was submitted to the Ministry of Education (MOE) in April last year.

There had been no prior data collated on the views of parents regarding compulsory education for their children with special needs.

Through the survey, parents also appealed for special needs schools to be included under the ambit of the MOE, allowing them to better tap more resources and institutional support.

While co-funded by the MOE and National Council of Social Services (NCSS), special needs schools are categorised as “private needs children schools”, not Government-assisted schools.

On its response to such appeals, an MOE spokesperson told TODAY the present “many helping hands” approach — comprising the Government, NCSS and VWOs — works best for Singapore.

“We will continue to finance and support special education with the secondment of teachers, and provision of training and facilities,” he said. “We will also continue to review the special education sector regularly to improve the education of children with special needs.”

The Ministry of Community Development,
Youth and Sports (MCYS) said it works together with the MOE, the NCSS and the relevant VWOs to help children with disabilities maximise their potential.

Said a MCYS spokesperson: "These children have access to special education schools, early intervention centres, integrated childcare centres and integration services for children with disabilities in mainstream schools."

It was also noted during the Budget Debate in Parliament this year that "only a few" special needs children were not attending schools – 10 in the Primary 1 cohort in 2003 and 12 children each year for the past two years – and hence legislation was not a pressing need.

However, VWOs felt the "many helping hands" approach and the de facto high enrolment rate of special needs children was good enough reason for inclusion in the CE Act.

"We are certain that the Government and VWOs can work together to provide the facilities and resources necessary to educate all children with special needs of school-going age," said Ms Fung.

Indeed, the efforts put in to help special needs children look promising.

The MOE now supports 20 special education schools that cater to 4,500 children with various disabilities. By 2008, 18 more special education schools will be completed with a capacity for 7,200 children.

Currently, there are 2,500 children with mild disabilities studying in mainstream schools. A total of 31 primary schools and 25 secondary schools are now fully accessible to the physically-disabled, and MOE aims to equip such schools for every cluster of eight to nine schools.

VWOs such as AWWA and the Singapore Association for the Deaf-run Community Integration Programmes – such as "Teach Me" – help special needs students integrate into mainstream education.

Said AWWA Teach Me Services director Raymond Chow: "Every able student, regardless of his or her handicap, deserves to be given a chance to integrate into mainstream education. With the appropriate assistance, they are no different from any able-bodied student and have an equally good chance of making it in mainstream schools and in life."

Since 1991, Awwa's community integration programme for special needs children, Teach Me, has helped over 500 of its clients progress from special schools to mainstream education, from kindergarten through to university. The Liew brothers are one such example.

"Some (special needs) children do not get to go to school due to various circumstances. But if the law comes into force, then no one will miss out on their education – special or mainstream," said Chong Choon, one of the brothers.

While many students may complain that their educations are 'stressful', for the Liew brothers – and a significant minority of physically-disabled students – it represents a chance to prove their worth.

"To put it plainly, we do not want to viewed as parasites, always a burden to society," said Choon Chong.

Forging on one year after the submission of their survey report, AWWA invited MPs from the Government Parliamentary Committee – including chairman Gan Kim Yong – to visit their premises last month and reiterated their case for an all-inclusive CE.

Ms Fung says the JCCEA is hopeful that their goal for the inclusion of special children in CE will be eventually achieved.

"The Education Minister said the 'door is not closed'," she stressed. "It took several years for Edusave to be extended to special needs children, so we will continue to persevere for our cause."