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Migrant kids caught in dilemma on eve of new semester

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Zhang Yue was surprised to learn her school in Beijing had been closed down in July, and that she was assigned to attend a public school, with the start of the autumn semester fewer than 10 days away.

"I won't go to a public school even though my school was closed," said Zhang Yue, 12, who had gone to Hongxing School for migrant children for the past six years and was about to start middle school there.

"I like the teachers and my fellow students here," she said. "I'm afraid that I might be looked down upon by others in a public school even if my parents can afford the higher fee there."

Hongxing School has more than 1,400 students each year, most from migrant worker families. Most of its students, like Zhang Yue, did not know their school's fate was uncertain.

Last month, the Haidian District Education Commission issued a circular clamping down on 37 private schools for migrant children in the district and assigned the 15,000 affected students to nearby public schools.

"There are more than 50,000 migrant children in our district, and one-third of them are studying in private schools," said Zhu Jianxin, section chief with Haidian Education Commission. "A lot of those schools are not well-equipped, and accidents such as food and gas poisoning, roof collapse, fire and traffic accidents might occur at any time.

"Moreover, these schools do not even have enough qualified teachers to guarantee the quality of education. We are very concerned about these children."

China now has roughly 120 million migrant workers, more than 2.8 million in Beijing. By working the worst-paid and riskiest jobs, they prop up a cheap labour industrial transition and rapid urbanization. Migrant schools have mushroomed in recent years in the capital as more children and their parents arrive in the city.

The commission said earlier this month that most of the migrant schools, which collect cheap fees and suit the needs of low-income migrant families in the city, were found to have safety problems in an inspection carried out in March, thereby prompting the shutdown.

Wu Jijun, who has been teaching maths at Hongxing School since 2002 called the sudden closedown a "big surprise."

"The Haidian Education Commission has checked the migrant schools every year since the first such school was founded in 1999," Wu said. "They found only some minor problems with the schools in previous years and asked the schools to improve their facilities the best they could.

"We are fully aware of the safety issue and invented our own emergency mechanism," he said, pointing to the clay roof and the high-voltage wires overhanging the 30-square-metre classroom. "We even trained school kids to stay calm if there is any unexpected event."

No serious accident had been reported in the past seven years, he said.

Zhu said the education commission had allocated 13 million yuan (US\$1.625 million) to re-use six idle school sites that have not been in operation for years and add 33 public schools for migrant children.

This year was the right time to close down these unqualified schools, he said, as the district had finally saved enough resources to make the change. The migrant children would be able to study at public schools, instead of the ill-equipped, shabby private schools for migrant children.

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Hongxing School has 56 teachers and 33 classrooms, and a cafeteria in the corner serves 200 students for lunch.

A flagpole erected in the centre of the school is its tallest signpost. Such a school is far behind the requirements set by the education commission to run a private school: 1.5 million yuan (US\$187,500) of registered capital and a running track of 200 metres.

"It's definitely impossible for a private migrant children school to meet such standards," said Xie Zhenqing, Hongxing's principal.

Xie started the school in 1999 with 200 students of different education levels, and now the school has turned into the biggest of its type in the Haidian District.

The school charges 400 yuan (US\$50) a semester for pre-school kids and lower level primary students, 450 yuan (US\$56.25) for primary school students above grade 3 and 870 yuan (US\$108.75) for middle school students. But the school does exempt charges for needy families.

"We don't overcharge the students, and we don't have extra earnings during the semester," Xie said.

For example, Zhang Yue said she did not pay one cent this year when her father was seriously ill and the school principal asked her to go back to school even though she knew the girl's parents were short of money.

Wang Chunzeng, whose son had also studied at Hongxing School for six years, said the public schools were more expensive and migrant children would have to pay extra fees at the public schools in addition to the charge for the students who have no resident registration (or hukou) in Beijing.

Public schools do not charge tuition fees within the nine-year compulsory education by law.

However, Wang said he only heard about the charge from his friends and had never gone to the public schools to confirm the information.

But Zhu confirmed that "public schools charge 300 yuan (US\$37.50) to 500 yuan (US\$62.50) for one semester. But if schools arrange students' spring outings or order school uniforms, the fee might be higher."

But he was quick to add: "If the students go where we assign them, they won't have to pay extra money upon registration."

Another issue is the cost or necessity of school uniforms. They are not compulsory at Hongxing or at other migrant children schools, Xie said. "We offer cheaper uniforms at 80 yuan (US\$10), whereas students have to pay up to 300 yuan (US\$37.50) in public schools.

"Public schools also have different textbooks, which are more expensive than the books we offer. Moreover, students in public schools spend an extra 600 to 1,000 yuan (US\$75-125) in the name of construction fees.

"Money isn't everything. We often see school kids retreat from public schools and return," Xie said, adding that students easily made friendships in migrant schools because they were already comfortable in the surroundings.

"I have a friend whose son is now studying at a public school. The boy said the teachers never paid enough attention to him, and the local students don't play with him because they know he is not one of them."

Zhang Yue seems to understand that situation well.

"If my school closes down," she said, "I would rather just go back to my home village."

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