



## Press Release

### **Launch Ceremony and Press Conference for “JC A-Connect: Jockey Club Autism Support Network”**

June 2, 2015

In recent years the number of people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has risen globally. This trend has been especially marked in developed countries. According to the latest statistics of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 1 in 68 children were identified with ASD in the USA. This is a stunning increase since 2000-02 when the CDC first began tracking the disorder and estimated the rate to be 1 in 150 children (National Health Statistics Report, 65, March 2013).

In Hong Kong, a similar trend of rapid increase in the number of students with ASD has been observed. According to statistics from the Education Bureau (EDB), in the four years from 2009/10 to 2013/14 the number of students diagnosed with ASD in public schools has increased from 2,050 to 4,970, more than doubling in 4 years. Many of these children with average or above intelligence are attending mainstream schools in Hong Kong. With greater public awareness of the disorder and improved detection and diagnosis, the number diagnosed is projected to raise by 20% each year.

Two pilot projects, by introducing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide school-based professional support for ASD students, had been conducted from 2011/12 to 2014/15 academic years, by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and EDB respectively. The results, which involved the participation of NGOs in school-based project, showed that the intervention not only successfully improved the social skills of ASD students, but also provided strong evidence on the effectiveness of the coaching programme and other support strategies.

In view of the increasing number of ASD students in Hong Kong’s mainstream primary and secondary schools, The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust has earmarked HK\$167 million to pioneer a three-year programme entitled “JC A-Connect: Jockey Club Autism Support Network” commencing in the 2015/16 academic year. The Charities Trust is collaborating in the programme with the Faculty of Social Sciences of The University of Hong Kong (HKU), the EDB and six NGOs with solid experience in serving ASD students. The participating NGOs are Caritas - Hong Kong, Heep Hong Society, New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association, SAHK, The Salvation Army and Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and the programme seeks to provide better support for these students, their families and schools. Coaching programmes, teacher training and research will be conducted to improve the social communication, emotional regulation and learning strategies of ASD students to help with behavioral problems, enhance their overall learning ability and social skills.

Mrs Margaret Leung Ko May Yee, Steward of The Hong Kong Jockey Club; Professor John P. Burns, Dean of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong and Mr Kevin Yeung Yun-hung, Under Secretary for Education, Education Bureau, HKSAR officiated at the Launch Ceremony. Tutors and members from Caritas Parents Resource Centre showed the talent of autistic persons by giving sand drawing and music performance. Representatives of six participating NGOs and over 200 schools also attended to show their support to the programme.

Professor Burns hoped the experiences of the programme could be further promoted and shared beyond Hong Kong, especially on the Mainland, in order to create greater impact and mark a new milestone for a better support for ASD students.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club Steward Mrs Margaret Leung Ko May Yee said that providing equal opportunities for students with special educational needs to develop their full potential had long been part of the Club's commitment to building an inclusive society. "Generally, students with ASD are facing difficulties in communicating with people, which, coupled with misunderstandings about their behaviour, bring great challenges to their study, social and everyday life. We hope that through this cross-sectoral platform, schools, teachers, parents and general public will have a better understanding of autistic students, and will provide comprehensive support for them," she said.

Dr Irene Ho, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong and Project Director (School Support) and Dr Sandra Tsang, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong and Project Director (Family Support) shared that the evidence-based programme emphasized the partnership of families and schools, with their active participation, to enhance teachers and parents' skills and competency in handling these cases, and to provide students with prompt and appropriate intervention. In conclusion, the programme aimed to enhance the quality of services and encourage cross-sector collaboration in order to establish a sustainable foundation for promoting community inclusion.

The three-year programme will be conducted from 2015/16 to 2017/18 academic years. Totally around 2,600 coaching programmes will be delivered by the participating NGOs. Each coaching programme will cater for 4 to 6 students with ASD and aim to improve their social communication, emotional regulation and learning strategies. Other support activities will be arranged for their parents, schools and peers. The programme will involve 250 mainstream schools, covering about half of the ASD students. Design of coaching programme, operation and evaluation will be tailor-made to meet the special needs of students. To ensure the quality outcomes of the coaching programme, HKU and EDB will conduct assessment on the design and contents, conduct on-site observations and participate in regular quality assurance meetings. Advice will be also provided to the participating NGOs in accordance with the most updated researches and international development.

In addition, professional leadership trainings and seminars will be provided as a platform for the staff of participating NGOs to exchange working experiences and knowledge on the support services offered to the individuals with ASD.

To raise public understanding on ASD and the supporting services, the programme will also offer staged training programmes to teachers or school personnel from primary and secondary schools across the territory, organise international conferences for wisdom exchanges, as well as provide an online platform to enhance general knowledge on ASD and share the learning resources.

Participating NGOs will provide education and assistance for the parents of ASD students through 18 satellite centers and conduct other educational programmes, in order to promote the awareness, understanding and acceptance of individuals with ASD. Evaluation on the effectiveness of programme will also be conducted for the enhancement of existing support services.

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