

## SCS speaks at opening ceremony of Ebenezer 125th Anniversary Education Online Forum (English only)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, at the opening ceremony of Ebenezer 125th Anniversary Education Online Forum this morning (April 21):

Timothy (Chairman of Board of Directors of Ebenezer School and Home for the Visually Impaired, Mr Timothy Lam Jr), Brian (Supervisor of Board of Directors of Ebenezer School and Home for the Visually Impaired, Professor Brian Duggan), Matthias (Chairman of Hildesheim Mission to the Blind, the Reverend Matthias Wohrmann), Alice (Chief Executive Officer of Board of Directors of Ebenezer School and Home for the Visually Impaired, Dr Alice Yuk), distinguished guests, principals and teachers, Ebenezer colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. Thank you very much for Alice's kind invitation. I am very delighted to have the opportunity to join you all this morning for Ebenezer 125th Anniversary Education Online Forum.

The forum is part of the year-long celebration for the 125th anniversary of the founding of Ebenezer School and Home for the Visually Impaired. My warmest congratulations to you all in Ebenezer.

Founded in 1897, Ebenezer has developed from a school accommodating four blind girls into a well-established charitable organisation serving many individuals of varying ages with visual impairment. For decades, Ebenezer has been providing education, employment, rehabilitation services for children with visual impairment and operating residential care and nursing facilities for visually impaired elderly. The professional teams of Ebenezer are devoted to pursuing excellence and innovation in its services for the visually impaired.

You might wonder why I, the Secretary for the Civil Service, am joining this joyous occasion to celebrate the 125th Anniversary of Ebenezer. There is good reason for this. My story with Ebenezer dates back to my time as the Director of Social Welfare more than a decade ago. Since then I have had the privilege to continue to support Ebenezer's work, such as joining Ebenezer's Walk with Pride in 2018 while I was the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs. Recently I have offered my support to Ebenezer in getting some of its service recipients, namely the children and the elderly vaccinated to protect them against the COVID-19 virus.

A lot has changed since my first acquaintance with Ebenezer, especially in recent years as we experienced the social unrest in 2019, and then have been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020.

The epidemic has brought much disruption to our daily lives. Various sectors of the community have been affected in the past two years, and Ebenezer has been no exception. With all the uncertainty and despair going on during the five waves of the epidemic, we did our best to overcome the challenges, and managed to work our way towards the "new normal".

Take Ebenezer's work in the pandemic as an example. Its pre-school services established remote support by phone or through the Internet. When face-to-face lessons were suspended in Ebenezer School, special arrangements were made with the support of speech and occupational therapists to tailor-make learning materials for its students according to the Individualised Education Programme. In the Ebenezer Care and Attention Home, video calls were made to connect its residents with their families through smartphone.

All these illustrate that despite all the difficulties, we can ride out the storm with determination, creativity, commitment, and most importantly, care and love. We will always find a way out, just like what this year's Ebenezer anniversary theme suggests, "The Future is Ours".

In fact, this two-day education online forum is a testament to what I have just said. When I first received the invitation, I expected that the event would be held at the school hall with all participants in physical attendance. The forum was subsequently switched to full online mode in view of the fifth wave of the local epidemic. It ended up being held in a hybrid mode, with some of the speakers and guests being physically present in the hall with most of the audience watching it online. Ebenezer has been agile and flexible in adapting to changing circumstances in order to make the event as successful as possible.

"The Future is Ours" reaffirms Ebenezer's confidence and vision in the potential of the visually impaired and its determination to help them realise their potential in the hope of building an inclusive society.

The Government shares the views of Ebenezer about the importance of building a compassionate and inclusive society.

Since the start of the current term Government, the subsidised places for day rehabilitation, respite and residential care services for persons with disabilities have increased by 20 per cent.

The Government set up the Arts Development Fund for Persons with Disabilities in 2019 to provide funding support for NGOs (non-governmental organisations) with relevant experience to organise elementary or continuing arts programmes for persons with disabilities, as well as training programmes to help those with good artistic potential strive for excellence or develop their career. As of now, the Fund has approved around \$41 million to implement 68 arts projects. I am also glad to note that, with the Fund's support, Ebenezer launched the Ebenezer Music Academy in 2020 to nurture visually impaired students with music talents, opening up diverse pathways for them. I am lucky to meet some of them.

Since 2018, the Civil Service Bureau has expanded the internship scheme for students with disabilities by doubling the number of places from an annual average of 50 to 100. Since its inception, more than 500 students, some of whom being alumni of the Ebenezer family, have participated in the scheme. In August last year, I personally met with an alumni of Ebenezer, Mr Yang Chan-kuang, who joined our internship programme. Chan-kuang studied at St Paul's College after his years with Ebenezer, and is now a student of the University of Hong Kong. Given his interests and competence in language, Chan-kuang was arranged to work in the Official Languages Division of my bureau. I also introduced Chan-kuang to a well-respected friend of mine in Beijing, Madam Yang Jia, who is a visually impaired professor at the Graduate University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It was very kind of Madam Yang to offer him encouragement and inspiration. We are all very glad to see that Chan-kuang had a very fruitful and enjoyable internship experience.

Employment is the key to the future for many visually impaired persons.

Since July 2017, more than 3 700 persons with disabilities have been employed under the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme. The Government raised in 2018 and 2020 respectively the on-the-job training allowance payable to employers participating in the scheme and the maximum amount of the training allowance to \$60,000 over a nine-month period, in a bid to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities.

To create more employment and on-the-job training opportunities for persons with disabilities, the Enhancing Employment of People with Disabilities through Small Enterprise Project provides seed money for NGOs to establish social enterprises for employing persons with disabilities. Since its launch in 2001, the project has provided over \$150 million to subsidise the setting up of more than 130 social enterprises, providing around 950 jobs for persons with disabilities. Under this project, Ebenezer founded the Cedar Workshop, which is operated by persons with visual impairment. The Workshop designs corporate training programmes, enabling corporate employees to strengthen team spirit through experimental activities. As far as the Government is concerned, my bureau would also explore more opportunities to employ persons with disabilities in the Government.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the saying goes, "Rome was not built in a day". To make "The Future is Ours" vision come true, work has to be done by all of us – the Government, the NGOs, the corporates, and the community on an ongoing basis. In these challenging times, we must not lose faith and hope. And with love and concern, we shall triumph in our endeavours to build a more inclusive and thriving society for all, including the visually impaired. As Ebenezer's mission is rooted in Christian faith, let me conclude with 1 Corinthians 13:13 – "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love".

Finally, I wish the Education Online Forum a great success and all of you good health and happiness!

Thank you very much.