

New government, new approach. One of the first things Minister of Education Pan Wen-chung (潘文忠) did after taking office was to announce the withdrawal of controversial high-school curriculum guidelines that have been criticized for being laid down in a non-transparent process. The announcement also included the establishment of a new curriculum guideline committee to allow students to participate in the discussion and formulation of curricula. This is an important step forward for democratic school procedures.

The Ministry of Education also announced the "Observations on the Notice Governing Educators' Teaching and Punishing of Students as Defined and Implemented by Schools," saying that schools may not dole out punishments based on uniforms or personal appearance. Uniforms and appearance are to be separated from punishment, and while schools can use democratic procedures, such as public hearings or school-wide referendums to regulate student uniforms and appearance, they cannot issue demerits for violating the regulations, but are instead expected to rely on methods such as oral persuasion and counseling.

Some people have criticized Pan for acting too hastily, as he called a news conference to announce the new policies before discussing them within the ministry, but in doing so, he promptly removed an issue that has caused tension between students and teachers in recent years. This is a good sign of self-confidence and resolve.

The uniformity and neatness of the nation's school uniforms might be supported by teachers, but rebellious members of the younger generations often dislike rigid and authoritarian rules on uniforms and appearance. Even if they must wear uniforms, they often try to differentiate themselves by wearing caps or shorter skirts, or sporting more flamboyant hairstyles, with many students having been given warnings and punishments for such behavior. Most adults can recall such a battle of wits between students and teachers from their school days, but are likely to realize now that such confrontation was meaningless.

The basic spirit of the ministry involves the need to adhere to democratic procedures and build an academic culture founded on openness and trust. Education is diverse and free, while compulsory course contents and regulations on student uniforms and appearance are not in line with educational trends. As schools move toward democratic procedures, they must not treat students as ignoramuses. Instead, they must build students' confidence, treat them with respect and stop issuing warnings and punishments in an authoritarian manner. They must also start adhering instructions and advice and teach students through discussion and dialogue. If schools took such an approach, they would probably achieve better results.

Students key to nation's democracy

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The 2014 Sunflower movement has had massive political, economic, social and educational effects. It made it clear that modern students are capable of independent thinking. They were well-intentioned and willing to speak up for a majority of Taiwanese — which was verified at the ballot box in January's presidential and legislative elections. The Executive Yuan's announcement that it is dropping all charges against students who stormed its compound in March 2014 and the ministry's measures to open up schools is a declaration that the new government plans to treat students with more respect and trust to build a strong relationship with young Taiwanese.

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