

Curriculum talks with MOE break down

Written by Taipei Times

Tuesday, 04 August 2015 08:03 -



National Taichung First Senior High School Apple Tree Commune Club spokesperson Chen Chien-hsun falls to his knees and asks forgiveness of student protester Dai Lin, who apparently committed suicide on Thursday last week in protest against curriculum adjustments, at a news conference following unproductive talks with Minister of Education Wu Se-hwa on the curriculum controversy at the National Central Library in Taipei yesterday.

Photo: CNA

Talks between Minister of Education Wu Se-hwa (吳思華) and students over the curriculum controversy fell apart yesterday, with students storming out of a Ministry of Education (MOE)-sponsored forum in tears.

“What in the world are these talks supposed to be?” Northern Taiwan Anti-Curriculum Changes Alliance convener Chu Chen (朱陳) said. “What I see is a failure of education and a policy that has gradually moved away from the masses.”

“We are willing to accept a suspension of the implementation [of changes to curriculum guidelines] — all that is needed is those few words,” he said, repeatedly breaking into tears. “Only that would count as respect, without which, all we are left with, other than pain, is a hatred of the government and education.”

Wu repeated his position that it is administratively impossible for the guidelines to be withdrawn, because they have already gone into effect.

“I am truly willing to allow schools to make the decision about textbook choices. I think this is the solution to the problem,” Wu said when asked if the ministry could postpone implementation until next year.

The ministry’s policy of allowing schools to choose whether to use pre-adjustment textbooks represented the “maximum” it could do, he said, urging students to “return to school” and ask

their teachers to keep using old textbooks if they disagree with guideline adjustments.

After Wu's rejection, Chu rushed from the meeting room in tears, shouting: "I am so sorry Dai Lin (戴林)," referring to a student whose suicide on Thursday last week, allegedly in protest against changes to high-school curriculum guidelines, sparked the latest wave of student protests against the controversial adjustments, in which student protesters have occupied the ministry's forecourt since Friday last week.

Chu was followed out the room by the few remaining student protesters, including Yi Juo-yu (易若愚), who threw a badge at Wu, calling him "shameless" and promising to "look him up" later.

Prior to Chu's outburst, most of the other students had already left the meeting in protest after Wu refused to make concessions, only to rush back and bang on the meeting door, saying that they needed to "save" Chu after he started to cry.

In a tear-filled news conference afterward, students expressed their frustration with the ministry.

"Today is the day that Taiwan's history and education died," National Taichung First Senior High School Apple Tree Commune Club spokesperson Chen Chien-hsun (陳建勳) said. "All that the death of a student has gained is the education minister telling us that we should 'look to the future.' What is that supposed to mean?"

"Today we compromised and told the ministry that we could accept a 'suspension' or 'freezing' [of the implementation of curriculum guideline adjustments] because we are tired and we do not want anyone else to be hurt," he said, falling to his knees as he apologized to protesters.

Yesterday's talks between Wu and student representatives at the National Central Library in Taipei focused on accusations of irregularities in the process under which the guidelines were adopted, with students citing the absence of academics of Taiwanese history from the review committee and the ministry's loss in a lawsuit on procedural openness in calling for a suspension.

In response, Wu repeated previous ministry talking points, including that a Control Yuan investigation had found no problems with the procedures and that the ministry had a responsibility to protect the privacy of academics who participated in the guideline's review committee.

Wu arrived 10 minutes late for the forum, and at one point rolled his eyes in response to comments made by National Taiwan University history professor Hua Yih-fen (華以芬), who accompanied the students.

She told him that there would be no way to "help" him if he kept using "bureaucratic verbal tricks" and "administrative procedures" to respond to the students.

Deputy Minister of Education Lin Teng-chiao (林騰蛟) after the forum finished announced four concessionary displays of "good will" to the students, including a promise to reveal the names of members of the guideline review committee members within 10 days of asking their permission, adding an appendix on controversial terminology to the outlines, guaranteeing schools the right to select their own textbooks and initiating a "rolling review" of the review process.

He said the event was a "good start" for communication between the ministry and students, adding that the ministry was open to arranging further meetings.

Although the ministry had previously suspended implementation of the original 2009 curriculum guidelines, the current round of adjustments could not be suspended, because it had already been implemented, he said, adding that suspension would put the ministry on the line to cover the losses of publishers that have already revised textbooks.

The ministry would investigate the possibility of covering the losses of schools that wish to switch back to old textbooks, he said. Most schools had already completed the textbook selection process when the ministry announced in June that schools were free to continue using the old versions of textbooks.

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At press time last night, a large crowd remained in the ministry's courtyard, with student representatives saying that they would announce their next steps today.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2015/08/04](#)