A Letter Written by Poet Hu Lanlan to Ministry of Education: Save those Children Kidnapped by Homework and Test Scores

In 2002, on the first school morning after the May Day Holiday, the only son of my friend, a 14 years old junior high school student named Bi, hanged himself in the bathroom, because he wasn't able to finish his holiday homework. He was so afraid of being criticized by the teacher, or having his parents called by the school. When the body of the boy was carried out of his house, all neighbors wailed, and his parents were crushed down with lamentations. This is the first time I witnessed the life of a teenager ruined by fearful homework.

But I didn't expect such tragedies to keep on happening in the following years. More and more students committed suicide because they couldn't finish their homework or couldn't take the huge academic pressure. Some of them were only primary school students. The youngest child reported was only 9 years old.

As an ordinary citizen, out of my love for children and my faith in doing something practical for their physical and mental health, I am eager to step up and speak for the hundreds of millions of kids who're being tortured by the "exam-oriented education."

I have reasons to believe that Ministry of Education is more informative than me of the current education situation. They knew better the fact that more than 200 million middle school and primary school students are stressed out by piles of homework, and dozens of suicide cases are reported every year.

For 30 years, the so-called "exam-oriented education" has caused severe negative consequences. Few clauses in the Compulsory Education Act were practically implemented. Educational resources weren't distributed fairly. High quality educational resources became part of the interest groups tied with real estate industry. The establishment of key middle school and primary schools led to under-table operation of the school selection procedures, bringing more students to an unfair situation. The teachers and schools evaluation system put forth by the education administrative departments is nothing but profit-oriented and test score-oriented. The ecological environment of teachers and students was deteriorating day by day. The physical and mental health of teachers and students was being jeopardized. Teachers dedicated to imparting knowledge and educating people were bearing high pressures and facing all kinds of challenges. Supplementary education companies secretly collaborated with schools, seeking for huge profits. Facing with the deteriorating education environment,
most parents have to join hands with schools and put more pressure on their kids. The biggest source of all these educational chaos is the so-called “exam-oriented education”, which focuses only on test scores.

The number of students who ran away from home or even committed suicide for not being able to finish their homework is so astounding. How could you be unaware of this fact and not being shocked by this fact? Administrative departments of teenagers’ mental health in each province and city certainly have provided you with the astonishing number of students with mental illnesses or even break down. According to statistics provided by Dr. Ye Yituo, among 6,091 children from young kids to high school students, 20.1% of primary school students were diagnosed to have psychological problems; the number was 43.8% for junior high school students and 52% for high school students! All these statistics are not merely abstract numbers. Each of these numbers represents a child and a family tragedy.

Every morning, fatigue children go to school with heavy school bags and inadequate sleep. Every night, they struggle with their homework under lamps with endless yawns. The endless tortures make them cry and even want to end their lives to get out of the misery. Every holiday, kids bustle around among various afterschool programs and institutions, or take extra classes “voluntarily” at school. Countless families are kidnapped by the “exam-oriented education”, and countless students, parents and teachers are struggling in the tragic abyss of “exam-oriented education.”

As far as I know, the situation is especially severe for students who are going to taking junior middle school entrance exam, high school entrance exam or college entrance exam. They’re all leading an anguishing life. Few of them can sleep over 6 hours a day. Some can only sleep for 4 or 5 hours. In 2011 and 2012, the State Council released two guidelines to reinforce school PE classes and ensure students’ physical health. But for the students with endless homework, who don’t even have enough time to sleep, how can they find any time to exercise?!

It is reported that among the 75,256 Beijing students who took the 2011 health examination for students enrolling in college, only 10 percent were totally qualified. 86.15% had visual debility. Isn’t this the consequence of the current educational system? When I read a blog written by a respectful Chinese teacher appealing for legislation efforts to ensure 8-hours sleep for students, I deeply felt that it’s the shame of our country. On Nov 20, 1989, Resolution 25 of the 44th United Nation Session passed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stated clearly that “children under the age of 18 shall have the same right with adults as prescribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Children shall be respected for expressing opinions, for their rights of ideology, religion, association, peaceful assembly, and personal life.” I don’t know how can we discuss about “respect” children and teenagers in a country where children’s 8-hour sleep hours cannot be ensured? They can’t even receive the most basic humanity care!