Tackling Corruption:  
School Education and Public Awareness  

Catherine Chui  
Community Relations Department, Independent Commission Against Corruption, Hong Kong SAR, People’s Republic of China  

This paper highlights how the Independent Commission Against Corruption, the ICAC for short, tackles corruption in Hong Kong through its school education programme. This comprehensive programme contributes significantly to the increase in public awareness of the importance of the anti-corruption cause in Hong Kong.

The Bad Old Days

2. Before the setting up of the ICAC in 1974, the investigation of corruption allegations was the responsibility of the Police Force. Corruption was a serious problem both within the Government and without. To members of the public, corruption was a way of life and recognised as a necessary evil. But a new citizenry that was young, educated and concerned about public affairs began to demand positive action from the Government. The fleeing from Hong Kong of a senior police officer who faced prosecution for corruption triggered off a storm of public protests and prompted a public inquiry undertaken by a High Court Judge. It subsequently led to the setting up of a dedicated, independent and powerful agency, the ICAC, to deal with corruption, with its Commissioner directly responsible to the then Governor of Hong Kong.

Structuring the Fight Against Corruption

3. When formulating an anti-corruption strategy, the intermingling of motivation and opportunity must always be considered, since both factors must come together for corruption to occur. In devising Hong Kong’s corruption prevention strategies to bring about changes, three key initiatives appeared relevant:

- Creation of a strong deterrent through vigorous enforcement activities to demonstrate that corruption is a high-risk crime;
- Implementation of system changes at the institutional and organisational level to ensure that corruption opportunities are minimised; and
- Transformation of social values and behavioural patterns to reinforce the principles of justice, fairness and transparency thereby reduces the motivations for corruption.
The Three-pronged Attack

4. Consistent with the above thinking, the ICAC adopted at its outset an integrated three-pronged attack comprising all the critical functions of investigation, education and prevention. Its organisational structure is built around these functions and comprises three departments – the Operations Department to put the corrupt behind bars; the Corruption Prevention Department to plug corruption loopholes in systems and procedures; and the Community Relations Department to change public attitudes towards corruption. The work of the three departments is interdependent and each capitalises and builds on the performance of the others.

Community Relations Department

5. The Community Relations Department (CRD) of the ICAC publicises anti-corruption messages through two major approaches: the mass media and face-to-face contacts. The latter is adopted for in-depth corruption prevention education. To ensure that CRD can effectively hammer home the intended messages to different target groups, strenuous efforts have been spent on market segmentation – identifying distinct groups in the community so that their needs and concerns could be duly addressed in CRD’s corruption prevention education. One significant and major target identified is young people, who are essentially reached through the Department’s School Education Programme.

School Education Programme: Basic Philosophies

6. The ICAC is fully aware that for its anti-corruption efforts to be successful, it must bring about fundamental changes in public attitudes towards corruption. During such process, perhaps nowhere is it more important, and more fruitful, than in inculcating in the young minds a firm attitude to resist corruption. Therefore, a fundamental approach to public education against corruption is to help young people form positive attitudes and honest habits. Understandably, this should be done at an early stage i.e. while they are still at schools. Through effective moral education programmes, the young people should develop an inner conviction that corruption is evil and totally unacceptable. The hope is that, in time, fighting corruption will rely less on external controls and deterrents and more on self-discipline and self-motivation towards high ethical values in belief and behaviour.

7. CRD has therefore formulated a school education programme which works through the school system to reach children and young adults from age six to 22 – the most impressionable years of their lives – to promote sound values such as justice, sense of responsibility and integrity.

Education System in Hong Kong

8. To put things in perspective, there is a need for a brief introduction of the education system in Hong Kong. Hong Kong provides nine years’ of
free and compulsory education for all students from Primary One to Secondary Three. As such, the school setting readily provides a captive audience for CRD to impart anti-corruption messages.

9. However, there are some constraints in the school system. The curriculum is extremely packed and the teachers are forever under the tremendous work pressure to cover the designated syllabus. Education is rather examination-oriented and moral education very often plays second fiddle to the impartation of ‘functional’ or ‘practical’ knowledge.

The ICAC Approach

10. To ensure the effectiveness of its School Education Programme, the CRD has developed different strategies, taking into consideration its basic philosophies about educating the young and the various constraints in the school setting.

Incorporation into Formal Curriculum

11. The desirability of including ICAC elements in the formal curriculum is well appreciated. ICAC staff sits on various curriculum development committees of the Education Department to inject, as far as possible, ICAC elements into the primary and secondary school curricula which are relevant, like the subject of Government and Public Affairs. While this is in fact the most effective means, there is a limit to the extent in which it can be done, given the extremely packed curricula.

12. To supplement the above efforts, good liaison is maintained with textbook publishers and writers to encourage them to include ICAC elements in language subjects which are less restrictive. Articles with ICAC messages are provided for them to use in comprehension exercises. This helps to strengthen ICAC elements in the formal curricula.

13. As an extension to the above efforts, the ICAC’s School Education Programme is expanded to all universities in Hong Kong to better prepare the would-be professionals and managers to develop a strong sense of work ethics. Priority is given to students in the ‘professional’ and business-related faculties. To achieve this, all universities are urged to include at least one ethics module in a mandatory course for their first year students. Instead of preaching values, the emphasis of the programme is to equip students with the necessary skills to analyse and make the right decision in face of ethical dilemmas.

Partnering Approach

14. In view of the huge size of the student population, it is difficult, if not at all impossible, for the 100 strong CRD staff to disseminate in-depth messages to each and every student personally. A significant part of ICAC’s School Education Programme is to form allies with significant partners in the field of education and youth work. In fact, teachers and youth workers could
act as effective multipliers of ICAC messages.

15. To encourage and facilitate busy teachers in disseminating ICAC messages at schools, the ICAC produces various forms of teaching materials. Such materials are produced for use in a variety of settings, including the classroom, school assembly, form period and extra-curricular activities. In other words, the entire formal and informal curriculum and the whole of the physical environment of the school are fully utilised for conducting ICAC’s School Education Programme.

16. A wide range of professional expertise goes into the development of such teaching materials. The process is an ideal demonstration of ICAC’s partnering strategy. Besides ICAC staff, teachers, heads of schools, education technologists, psychologists and youth workers are invited to take part in the process of researching, creating, testing and producing these packages. The end products are materials highly suited to the Hong Kong school environment and the temperament of their users. Participatory activities are also often used during which students and teachers explore together the many facets of moral life. Each package is self-contained and self-explanatory, with clear instructions given for usage but designed with sufficient flexibility for the enterprising teacher to adapt to suit his own students.

17. The ICAC introduced an initiative in 1998 to invite primary schools to take part in a project entitled “ICAC Week”. This is a project to promote positive values to primary pupils through a series of school-based activities. To facilitate teachers in organising “ICAC Week” activities, a portfolio, including reference materials and teaching aids was produced for use by teachers to support the activities planned. A total of 239 primary schools organised the “ICAC Week” in the past two years reaching 170,000 young students. Feedback from schools indicated that the portfolio provides useful support for teachers and the activities are effective in arousing pupils’ awareness of the evils of corruption.

18. As for university lecturers, reference portfolios on ethics are produced for their flexible use so that they could integrate elements of professional and managerial ethics into their teaching materials as appropriate.

Direct Dialogues

19. The ICAC does not rely solely on teachers and lecturers to disseminate its messages. It believes that there is a merit of having personal contacts and direct dialogues with this target group. As such, arrangements have been made with all universities for ICAC staff to conduct face-to-face presentations for their final year students. Such presentations are tailored to the specific needs of the students and cover in detail the legislative provisions governing corruption, fraud and other malpractice, with illustrative examples. Case studies, with reference to the various academic disciplines undertaken
by the students, are also used. This will help equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to face and handle the numerous temptations they are likely to encounter in their future career.

20. Besides arranging presentations for university students, the ICAC also arouses younger students’ awareness of the corruption problem and the evils of corruption through classroom talks to senior secondary students. Last year alone, 1,760 talks were conducted for 77,000 secondary school students who were alerted to the evils of corruption and encouraged to play an active role in the fight against corruption.

**Active Involvement**

21. It is understood that young people are more versatile and prefers active involvement to passive reception of messages. To improve the interest level and enhance the impact of secondary classroom talks, an activity format using a more interactive approach has been adopted since October 2000. Anti-corruption messages are conveyed through discussion and group games involving students’ participation.

22. At the same time, the ICAC introduces an interactive drama performance at schools to impress upon the students the evils of corruption. This is particularly important because our younger generation, which is not exposed to the bad old days, might not be too alive to the dangers of corruption. To serve this purpose, a professional drama group was hired to perform an interactive play that illustrates the evils and consequences of corruption. The actors even invited students to express their views on different scenarios and participate in the performance at a selected section.

23. Both these new formats were met with favourable responses from schools. Feedback shows that the students are able to appreciate the negative impact of corruption on society and individuals through participation in these activities. They considered such activities more effective in hammering home the intended messages than the traditional classroom talks.

24. The ICAC also believes that involving young people in anti-corruption activities is the best way to implant positive values in them. Through personal participation in such activities, they would fully appreciate the evils of corruption and thus take a firm stance against it. In 1999, a total of 67 activities comprising leadership training camps, seminars, conferences and competitions were jointly organized by the ICAC and youth organizations reaching about 400,000 young people. In the summer of 2000, a youth summit, well attended by 800 young people from Hong Kong, Mainland China and Macau, was conducted to discuss the role of young people in cultivating a clean and fair society. The participants were responsive during discussion sessions and they pledged full support to the anti-corruption cause.

**Starting Early**

25. The ICAC believes that moral education for the young should start
as early as possible. Therefore, it is taking its message to kindergartens. A TV cartoon programme was produced to disseminate positive values like honesty and integrity to young kids. To reinforce the messages put forward by the cartoon series, a teaching package comprising a video, games and storybooks based on the cartoon programme is distributed to all kindergartens. Through these activities, young children are helped to grasp abstract concepts like fairness, honesty and obeying the law at the very beginning of their formative years in an informal, relaxed and lively learning environment.

26. To ride on the momentum generated by this cartoon programme, parenting forums are also conducted regularly to harness parents’ support in the moral education of young children. This also demonstrates the importance of the partnering approach described earlier.

Due Regard to Target’s Interest

27. Well aware that young people are frequent web surfers, the ICAC launched a Youth Web Site called “Teensland” in April 2000 to publicise anti-corruption messages through computer games and web page activities. Hyperlinkage with cyber campus and schools was arranged to boost viewership. Students were also recruited to contribute to the web site as young reporters, web designers and content producers.

An Integrated Approach

28. The ICAC hopes that all of the above educational efforts will impart suitable anti-corruption messages to students at every stage of their academic pursuit and cultivate in them an ingrained intolerance of corruption that will remain intact as they mature. The task is not easy but possible with a captive audience of a million student population, a good partnering approach and due regard to the students’ interest and allies’ needs.

29. There is no doubt that the key to success in the fight against corruption lies in young people who will be the future pillars of Hong Kong. Presently, corruption is no longer a way of life. The ICAC has broken the back of syndicated corruption and turned an attitude of meek acceptance into a high level of intolerance of corruption. The following statistics is revealing: In 1974, only about 30% of the complainants who reported to the ICAC were willing to identify themselves. Now nearly 70% of them would do so and more than 90% of corruption reports come direct from the public. ICAC’s opinion survey in 2000 revealed that 83.7% of respondents did not tolerate corruption. 99% of all respondents said the ICAC deserved their support.

Issue of Public Concern

30. The ICAC will endeavour to keep corruption an issue of public concern. How can such public awareness be sustained? Apart from educating the young generation through school education, the ICAC also devotes considerable resources on inculcating in the public a firm attitude to
resist corruption and reinforce their support to its work through the mass media and face-to-face contacts. To ensure that the anti-corruption message goes deep into the community, the ICAC established a number of regional offices in strategic locations of the community. These offices act as a base for receiving corruption complaints and for direct contact with all strata of the community. Anti-corruption messages are tailored to suit the needs of different community groups including civil servants, businessmen, housewives and community leaders, to name a few.

Conclusion

31. Looking back, the ICAC has achieved no less than a quiet revolution in changing public attitude towards corruption in Hong Kong. There has been a complete change in our culture, from tolerance of corruption to clear rejection. We now have an honest and efficient civil service serving the community and a level-playing field for investors. In recent years, Hong Kong is consistently rated by international surveys as the second least corrupt place in Asia. The ICAC has the complete backing of the community and the public is generally aware that corruption is repugnant and should not be tolerated.

32. To conclude, it could be said that the ICAC has made significant progress in tacking corruption through its school education programme. Such programme contributed a lot to enhancing public awareness of the need to put anti-corruption work high on their agenda. Nothing is more reflective of the ICAC’s efforts than its mission statement which reads: “With the community, the ICAC is committed to fight corruption through effective law enforcement, education and prevention to help keep Hong Kong fair, just, stable and prosperous”. This mission has served the ICAC well in the past. It will continue to lead the ICAC into the new millennium.