

Separate exam sites for HIV students spark controversy

A special school for HIV students has caused controversy by arranging for 16 of its students to take the gaokao exam in separate classrooms from non-HIV students.

The 16 students – 11 boys and five girls – will sit the gaokao, China's college entrance exam, on June 6-7 in two classroom-turned exam rooms at Linfen Red Ribbon School in northern China's Shanxi Province, the country's only school for HIV children.

The students, aged 17 to 21, are the first group of high middle school graduates from the school, previously called "A Tiny Classroom of Love," opened by Linfen Third People's Hospital for medical staff to teach four HIV children. The school was officially founded in 2011, offering both primary and middle school education.

The gaokao is of vital importance to Chinese students, with millions of candidates participating every year.

"We just made the place where they study and live as the exam site," said Guo Xiaoping, principal of the school and former president of Linfen Third People's Hospital.

He said the decision to set separate exam rooms was out of care for the children, who were infected with HIV from mother-to-child transmission.

"The school is a half-hour ride from the general exam site. It is not convenient to take them to go to another place for the exam," Guo said. "If the children take the exams with other candidates, I fear they may feel nervous and others will protest."

However, after many years working against AIDS discrimination, the school underestimated growing acceptance of people with HIV.

"Separate exam rooms objectively create a discriminatory atmosphere," Wang Linghang, a doctor with Beijing Ditan Hospital, told Beijing News. "Obviously, there is no transmission risk when HIV students take the exams together with other candidates."

"The personal privacy of HIV people should be protected. If these children do not take the exams in separate rooms, who will know they are HIV carriers?" said Bai Hua, leader of a Beijing-based AIDS organization. "The exam rooms are distributed randomly to candidates. Other students will not know they are HIV carriers."

However, some supported the school's decision.

"Separate sites can remove the worry of others and provide free space for

people with HIV infection. This is not discrimination,” said a user of Weibo, a Twitter-like service. “The social reality is that many people are afraid of contacting AIDS and that cannot be changed currently.”

“It is not a matter of discrimination, but the kids’ safety. We could not rule out any possibility of infection, such as the virus passing through blood in wounds,” said another internet user.

Xiong Bingqi, of the 21st Century Education Research Institute, said the separate exam rooms were meant to provide a good environment, and it was important that the students were given equal education rights.

“There is still a long way to go to completely eradicate discrimination against people living with AIDS/HIV,” he said.

In China, about 654,000 people live with HIV/AIDS.