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**Wednesday
9th March, 2005**

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
SINGAPORE
OFFICIAL REPORT
CONTENTS**

Permission to Members to be Absent (Col. 2056)

**Estimates of Expenditure for the Financial Year 1st April, 2005 to 31st March, 2006
(Cols. 2056-2240)**

Considered in Committee of Supply [6th Allotted Day]

Head O - Ministry of Health (Cols. 2057-2109)

Head K - Ministry of Education (Cols. 2109-2240)

Adjournment (Col. 2240)

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES SINGAPORE

OFFICIAL REPORT

TENTH PARLIAMENT

PART I OF SECOND SESSION

VOLUME 79

Wednesday, 9th March, 2005

The House met at 12.00 noon

PRESENT:

Mr SPEAKER (Mr Abdullah Tarmugi (East Coast)).

Mr Ang Mong Seng (Hong Kah).

Dr Balaji Sadasivan (Ang Mo Kio), Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts and Ministry of Health.

Mr Alexander Chan Meng Wah (Nominated Member).

Mr Chan Soo Sen (Joo Chiat), Minister of State, Ministry of Education.

Dr John Chen Seow Phun (Hong Kah).

Mr Chew Heng Ching (East Coast), Deputy Speaker.

Mr Steve Chia Kiah Hong (Non-Constituency Member).

Mr Chiam See Tong (Potong Pasir).

Assoc. Prof. Chin Tet Yung (Sembawang).

Dr Chong Weng Chiew (Tanjong Pagar).

Mr Davinder Singh (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Gan Kim Yong (Holland-Bukit Panjang).

Mr Andy Gan Lai Chiang (Marine Parade).

Dr Geh Min (Nominated Member).

Mr Goh Chok Tong (Marine Parade), Senior Minister, Prime Minister's Office.

Mdm Halimah Yacob (Jurong).

Mr Hawazi Daipi (Sembawang), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education and Minister for Manpower.

Mr Heng Chee How (Jalan Besar), Minister of State, Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Mdm Ho Geok Choo (West Coast).

Assoc. Prof. Ho Peng Kee (Nee Soon East), Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Law and Ministry of Home Affairs.

Mr Inderjit Singh (Ang Mo Kio), Deputy Government Whip.

Ms Indranee Rajah (Tanjong Pagar).

Prof. S Jayakumar (East Coast), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Law.

Mr Khaw Boon Wan (Tanjong Pagar), Minister for Health.

Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan (Hong Kah).

Assoc. Prof. Koo Tsai Kee (Tanjong Pagar), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence and Minister for the Environment and Water Resources.

Dr Lee Boon Yang (Jalan Besar), Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts and Government Whip.

agreed that sexuality education is more complex now than ever before, how are teachers basically being trained to tackle this issue. I am just wondering whether a more discussive approach instead of really teaching it will actually help students have a better understanding of the issue and, on a personal capacity, for them to actually approach their teachers. So that helps them to understand this whole issue better.

Mr Hawazi Daipi: Sir, we approach this programme in a different way for different levels of students. Let me start by saying that we are providing more teaching resources to schools so that we can counsel and teach pupils issues of sexuality.

We have trained teachers to teach sexuality education. We are providing more trained teacher counsellors to schools. For example, from this year, counselling provision in schools will be further enhanced. We will be sending trained teacher counsellors to all secondary schools this year. On top of that, we will also be sending full-time school counsellors to schools. All secondary schools will have full-time school counsellors by next year. We will do so over a period of three years for primary schools and JCs. On top of that, we also engage a team of professionals in helping students with sexuality problems. These comprise specialists in guidance, psychologists, medical and legal professions too.

How do we teach students on issues of sexuality? Generally, we teach students through subjects like CME so that they understand issues of sexuality. The Member asked whether we use discussive approach. Yes, we do that, especially for students at a higher level, ie, at the JC level. Students will understand through discussions, through viewing videos together and through analysing situations.

As I have said, we are providing more trained teachers to schools, including JCs, in the next one to three years at different levels so that we can enhance further sexuality education in our schools. I hope that answers the Member's questions.

Prof. Ivan Png Paak Liang (Nominated Member): Sir, I wish to pick up on a point made by the hon. Member, **Mr Alex Chan regarding rootedness and belonging.** One thing, which may be an unintended consequence of our Education Ministry's reorganisation and shifting of schools, is that we have lost some sense of belonging and rootedness.

Just the other day, I found out Telok Kurau School is now in Ubi. I mentioned in this House that River Valley School is quite far from River Valley and Raffles Institution has been in three places in recent history. I think it is very important that if we want to have people establish roots here and, have a sense of belonging, it is important to respect place and name, and have these institutions endured so that the school kids, when they graduate, will know where they belong and will go back, and feel a sense of belonging. Moreover, these schools will be rooted in their respective communities. But we shuffle them here and there, and change their names. Crescent Girls' School is –

The Chairman: So, what is your question?

Prof. Ivan Png Paak Liang: He knows what I mean.

Mr Hawazi Daipi: **Prof. Png talks about geographical rootedness.** What is more important is the spirit of rootedness, not geographical rootedness of our pupils to the schools they belong to or they have their education in.

We have seen in many schools the spirit of togetherness and the sense of identity, which have been developed over

[Mr HAWAZI DAIPI]

the years through games and achieving common objectives together. Sir, it does not matter where the school is located. If River Valley High is located in Pandan Loop or Teban Gardens, the spirit of River Valley High remains intact. If RI is now located in Bishan, the spirit of RI remains the same as 50 years ago. I do not come from RI, but I understand that spirit of the rootedness among former RI pupils.

I do not think it is necessarily significant to develop rootedness among pupils on the basis of geographical location.

Mr Alexander Chan Meng Wah: I thank Mr Hawazi for the explanation of the many activities that the Ministry of Education is doing. I fully appreciate that. Just as much as the education process totally immerses the students in the content and experience, this other thing about CCA and CIP is, we have more of a "smell the flowers" approach at this time. I hope that in years to come, it is going to go beyond that. Then you do not have a situation, like the one which was brought up by the hon. Member, Mdm Ho Geok Choo, where you have a disabled person being ostracised within his own community. I hope that we can go truly down into rootedness, not about the physical thing but about the spirit.

Mr Hawazi Daipi: Sir, I agree that CCA and CIP have done a lot in inculcating that spirit of service, that sense of belonging to not only the school but also to the larger community. I think they can certainly do more. As we have seen through our experiences handling SARS, the way the students and the community, in general, responded to the development in our neighbouring countries following the tsunami disaster, we have reasons to be proud in how that spirit of togetherness and sense of belonging to ourselves, being Singaporeans, have developed over the years.

It is always tempting to cite anecdotal examples and we always remember unpleasant examples. I think it is not fair to schools, in general, for us to just cite one example and then generalise it. There are examples of students who help others through buddy reading programme. There are those who help the physically handicapped. There are many good examples which have been highlighted by the press. So I do not think it is fair to our education development, in general, to our students, teachers and our institutions to cite a single example and generalise it.

I appreciate Mr Chan's views on the importance of CCA and CIP, and we have done a lot for our students. They might have smelt the flowers, but we have already introduced that liking towards flowers. Why not? In my personal view, if at the end of the day, only 1% of each student cohort continues to do community service seriously after they have grown up, I think we have achieved something. 4,000 to 5,000 Singaporeans of each cohort doing community service is not bad at all. So the cumulative effect must be good for Singapore.

5.15 pm

The Chairman: All right, I allow one last question. Prof. Ong Soh Khim.

Assoc. Prof. Ong Soh Khim (Nominated Member): Sir, I have three points with regard to Minister Tharman's earlier reply. The first one is on the topic of streaming.

The Chairman: Can you keep them to the end of the debate, when time permits? We are covering topics currently under debate. All right, we will move on.

Teachers

Mr Gan Kim Yong (In Mandarin): In the past few years, our education system has undergone great changes in order that our

students could be taught according to their talent and potential. This basic principle is correct. However, I feel that for our education system to be thoroughly successful, it would still depend very much on our teachers. Therefore, we should review our teaching service.

First of all, the Ministry of Education should evaluate the workload of our teachers. Now that they are required to teach less and make the students learn more, the traditional teaching methods can no longer be used. The teachers have to be innovative and deploy creative ways to teach, and have more time to interact with the students. They also need more time to prepare their teaching materials. With the heavy workload they are having now, they may not have the space to carry out this innovation.

Second, the curriculum has also been changed and reformed. Teachers need to be trained to adapt to them. I think we should have the teachers' consent because some of them grew up in the old system. We should listen to their views and adjust our policies.

Third, perhaps we should provide our teachers with more administrative assistants so that they could concentrate on teaching. This may incur more cost, but I think it is worth it, for the benefit of our next generation. Teachers are very important in this reform of the system. No matter how good our policies are, we need to have dedicated teachers so that the reform could be successful. We always say that teachers are the engineers of our souls. I think we should improve their working condition.

The Chairman: Mr Charles Chong is not here.

Schools of the Future

Mr Zainudin Nordin: Mr Chairman, Sir, I would just like to describe a scene. The

scene is familiar. A teacher stands at the front of her room, children sit in the centre, their seats arranged in rows or semi-circles. There is a chalk-board or white-board, a wall map and a globe. This could be a classroom in 2005, 1995, 1859 or even 1795. Although the details may vary, school design has seen few changes in the past 200 years.

Mr Chairman, Sir, with the aim to provide our children with a balanced and well-rounded education, develop them to their full potential and nurture them into good citizens, we continue to invest heavily in public education infrastructure and facilities. However, are we designing our schools to be education factories? Have we looked into aspects of architectural design, space planning, natural flow and ergonomics? We should be concerned with not only the software but also the hardware. The infrastructure and the facilities must align with MOE's vision. To encourage creativity and balance, the hardware need not necessarily be hard and cold and we should factor in design aspects that create a soft and warm environment, which is more inviting, conducive and reflect the new thrust in our education system.

In this respect, Sir, may I propose that MOE be involved and work closely with the designers and architects, who share the vision of MOE, to develop our future schools that are progressive and modern in nature. Study has shown that students' achievement and behaviour relate to the physical building conditions and overcrowding has an effect on their performance. Good facilities appear to be an important pre-condition for student learning.

Programme for Rebuilding and Improving Existing Schools (PRIME)

Prof. Ivan Png Paak Liang: Sir, my point is somewhat related to the point made by the hon. Member Mr Zainudin.

[Prof. IVAN PNG PAAK LIANG]

PRIME is a programme, worth over \$1 billion, to upgrade schools. One of the key deliverables is larger classrooms to fit enhanced technology. However, since PRIME was initiated some years ago, the Ministry has decided to recruit more teachers and reduce the student/teacher ratio and so, therefore, classes are going to be smaller, with fewer students.

In this case, could the Ministry not realign PRIME so that there would be less need to enlarge classrooms and money could be saved or used for other purposes?

Special Education Schools

Mr Iswaran: Mr Chairman, Sir, this is regarding special education. Today, the way we have special education seems to be in two sort of quite disparate models.

The first is the kind of integration model where students with special needs go to mainstream schools where they have the ability to keep up or cope with the curriculum there and, normally, they have to take some kind of test or be assessed before they could be admitted. This is an ideal model, particularly from the special needs students' perspective, but very few could actually benefit because of the high demands of our mainstream system.

The other model at the other end of the spectrum is the customised special education schools, which cater to the specific needs of students with special educational requirements. It has the advantage of being able to cater to a far wider ability range among such students. But the disadvantage remains that it is decoupled from the mainstream and from students who are really part and parcel of the society that students with special needs and mainstream students are integrated within.

I think it is generally acknowledged that interaction between the two groups is desirable and of mutual benefit to both sides, both in terms of character development, to some extent pedagogic development and, in general, part of our own social and civil consciousness of being part of the society.

So the question really is: can we pursue some other model or some other means of promoting this kind of integration? One of the thoughts that has been thrown around in the past is the idea of co-locating special schools and mainstream schools, so that they are physically on adjacent premises. What that allows is for integration for certain aspects of the curriculum, be it, for example, in art or physical education or some of the ECA and social activities, and yet allowing for separation for the pursuit of academic matters and so on. The advantage of such a system is that the interaction amongst the students would occur quite naturally and would not have to be orchestrated in the sense that there is actually a special excursion or event when the two groups of students come together to go wherever it is. So the question I have really is whether the Ministry is pursuing this model and, if so, what is the state of development of that idea.

I raised this under the Ministry of Education because it is not clear to me whether this initiative, if undertaken, would fall under the Ministry of Education or under MCYS, or whether it requires a joint response.

Compulsory Education for Children with Disabilities

Ms Eunice Elizabeth Olsen: Sir, when the Compulsory Education Act (CEA) was introduced in 2000, children with

Budget FY 2005 – Committee of Supply – Ministry of Education

spreading of the load. But we can achieve more than this. With greater capacity in schools, the teachers will have more time to plan and experiment with teaching approaches that will deliver the best education outcomes for their students as well as to respond to their needs.

We have also looked at other sources to recruit teachers. For example, we have introduced a new adjunct teacher scheme since October 2004 to attract former trained teachers, eg, those who have retired or who have left service, to rejoin the teaching profession. We feel that this scheme will not only support our teachers but also provide an avenue for the Ministry of Education to retain the expertise and institutional knowledge of experienced teachers.

Special education was also mentioned. In order to provide more specialised support for students with learning disabilities in our schools, the Ministry of Education will also recruit, over the next five years, about 230 Special Needs Officers. These officers will focus on helping students with problems like dyslexia and autistic spectrum disorder in designated mainstream schools. This should help in further integration of the children.

Over the last few years, we have increased the administrative capabilities of the schools by introducing positions like Administration Managers and Operations Managers. They handle administrative and support functions at the school level. Currently, each school has about nine to 22 administrative posts, depending on their enrolment size.

To coordinate the overall administrative support to schools, I am happy to announce that we will be introducing a new post called Vice Principal (Administration) or VP (Admin) position in schools. The VP (Admin) will be positioned to help the principal manage

resources strategically to drive excellence in administration as well as innovation at the school level.

As we provide more resources and autonomy to schools, as schools design various niche programmes for their pupils, as schools take active part in planning upgrading, we need to build up the planning capacity and capability of our schools. This will be one of the key challenges for the new VP (Admin). In addition, the VP (Admin) will also oversee all non-curriculum areas ranging from, eg, human resource management to estate management, quite a big job – literally, *pau sua, pau hai*.

The VP (Admin) positions will be created based on justifiable demand. It is not that every school will automatically get a VP (Admin), because different schools have different needs. Schools with large student enrolment, good programmes and a large network of stakeholders will conceivably need a VP (Admin) more in order to ensure that resources are well-utilised.

The first few VP (Admin) will be assigned based on these general guidelines. VP (Admin) will be selected from our current pool of Executive and Administrative Staff as well as mid-career entrants. They will be appointed probably in June this year. The appointment will be part of the overall grooming process for talented individuals in MOE. To note, the VP (Admin) need not be an Education Officer, because his or her job is basically resource management.

Mr Zainudin Nordin said that the classroom has not changed since 1895. I will invite him to visit some of our schools. It appeared that whatever he saw in the classroom when he was in primary school had stayed in his mind. In fact, the school designs have changed quite a lot, and we have incorporated building specifications to ensure that new

[Mr CHAN SOO SEN]

demands and requirements are built in. In fact, it is because of the need to incorporate these new demands that we initiated this programme called PRIME – Programme for Rebuilding and Improving Existing Schools. This is a \$4.5 billion programme that was launched in 1999 to upgrade our schools. For example, Pasir Ris Primary had innovatively created resource corners in classrooms by constructing "L-shape" classrooms during PRIME. With this layout, it is possible to split a class into small groups to engage in different activities – you may even be able to run a small opera in the classroom. It is not like the old days where everybody sat in the middle, in rows or in circles, listening to the teacher.

I am also pleased to announce that the Ministry of Education will be providing greater administrative flexibility for primary and secondary schools. This is part of our continuing efforts to give more resources to the schools. We are going to do this by freeing up 10-15% of the physical capacity in schools through adjustments to the planned enrolment. Each school will have the autonomy to decide how best to make use of the physical space thus created and freed up for their educational programmes.

In general, the planned enrolment will be reduced at the Primary 1 level in all Government primary schools from 2006, if possible. Government-aided schools will be given an option to adjust their enrolment, as reduction in enrolment will affect their respective communities, just in case they feel obliged to take in more students from their respective communities that they are serving.

Prof. Ivan Png asked why is there a need to build bigger classrooms if the class size has been reduced. I just want to say that the class size was reduced only for Primary 1 and Primary 2. The Primary

1 class this year was reduced from 40 to 30. The class size from Primary 3 onwards has not been reduced and therefore it is justifiable to build bigger classrooms as part of the PRIME requirement.

Mr Gan Kim Yong, Mr Iswaran, Mdm Ho Geok Choo and Ms Olsen spoke about special education, and some of the speeches were really passionate. First, I want to outline the framework for special education. In general, we have the Special Education (SPED) schools run by the voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs), because we believe that VWOs have got much greater passion in serving their respective case clients. What the Government does is to work hand in hand with them and give them support.

SPED schools cater to children with more severe disabilities. Those with mild disabilities and are able to cope and possible to be integrated, we will allow them to attend national schools. This approach acknowledges that different children have different needs, and it is better that we do something that is sensible for each of them. So some will go to SPED schools and some will go to our schools.

Ms Olsen asked why not make it compulsory. There are some children who are really medically unfit to attend school. This number, however, is pretty small. We currently have 10 from the 2003 Primary 1 cohort and 12 from the 2004 Primary 1 cohort who have difficulty attending school because of their condition. If you look at the history of compulsory education, we actually introduced compulsory education pretty carefully. We legislated compulsory education when we had more or less achieved universal enrolment. In the case of special education, we are also not in a hurry. As we improve on the number of children with special needs attending the school, as we achieve near 100% enrolment, then

*Budget FY 2005 – Committee of Supply –
Ministry of Education*

Assoc. Prof. Ong Soh Khim: A short question instead of a long question. The Minister earlier has said that MOE will cap the fees increase at 10%. Sir, the university can very intelligently increase it at 9% every year and the resulting fees will still be very high. So how can the Ministry prevent this?

Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam: We will have to be satisfied with their meeting the performance targets. We have to be also satisfied that the cost increases are justifiable. A university cannot simply jack up costs and tell MOE, "Can you please fund me 75%?", and tell students to fund the extra. Because we look at the costs of the universities as a whole. Universities that want to launch major new costly initiatives will have to raise money from outside for such a purpose. We will keep track of this because we are not doing this for ideological reasons. We are doing it for very practical reasons. We must have our eye on the ball. We will be monitoring the situation, particularly in the early years, because autonomy will require several steps and I think financially autonomy is not something we want to leap towards –

The Chairman: I think we are past the moment of interruption, Minister. Mr Gan Kim Yong, can you withdraw your amendment?

Mr Gan Kim Yong: Mr Chairman, I would like to thank the Minister and his colleagues for their very interesting response. With their response, commitment and vision, I am very confident that our future is in good hands. On this note, Sir, I beg leave to withdraw my amendment.

The Chairman: Is the Member given leave to withdraw his amendment?

Adjournment

Assoc. Prof. Ong Soh Khim: No.

Prof. Ivan Png Paak Liang: No.

The Chairman: I think leave of the majority is given. I heard more "yes" than "no". **The amendment is withdrawn.**

An hon. Member: Hear wrongly.

Prof. Ivan Png Paak Liang: Division, please.

Assoc. Prof. Ong Soh Khim: No.

The sum of \$5,089,240,820 for Head K ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$1,075,968,100 for Head K ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

The Chairman: Order.

Thereupon, Mr Deputy Speaker left the Chair of the Committee and took the Chair of the House.

Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam: Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to report that the Committee of Supply has made further progress on the Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2005/2006, and ask leave to sit again tomorrow.

Mr Deputy Speaker: So be it.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

"That Parliament do now adjourn." – [Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam].

Adjourned accordingly at
Fifteen Minutes to Seven o'clock pm.