

Committee of Supply

Debate on the Estimates of Expenditure for the Ministry of Education

Amendment Speech (6.5 min) by Viswa Sadasivan, NMP

Letting Teachers Teach

Preamble

1. The “Goh Report” of 1979, authored by a team led by the then Minister for Education, Dr Goh Keng Swee, heralded the introduction of the New Education System which has been the basis of our education until today. The expressed purpose was to “eliminate wastage” in education and increase employability. Indeed, the education system achieved both, and today has earned respect especially for its systematic approach and rigour in delivering results.
2. The New Education System has served us well thus far, but it is increasingly evident that it may not be enough in preparing us for the present and especially future challenges where what is certain is uncertainty. We need a new breed of people, especially young people, with abilities, to cope with adversity and succeed not just technical skills. Definitely, if we want to boost productivity and have greater innovation - we need to produce more lateral thinkers, problem solvers and very importantly, a lot

more people who take pride in what they do, and think beyond just themselves.

3. The key desired outcome of education today therefore would be to inspire a confident, self assured and driven young population, with skills to analyse, the propensity to come up with out-of-the-box solutions, and that is socially conscious. This spells character and attitude. Teachers are an intrinsic and vital factor in this equation. They need to have the time, indeed, the emotional bandwidth to imbibe this in our youth. Each one of us here can attest to one or two teachers who have made that impact in our lives. I remember my primary 2 teacher, Mr Tang, who, through our many conversations made me realise that if there's something important enough to me I should just do it and not wait for someone else to do it. This has had an impact on me. Yes, I was fortunate to have a teacher like Mr Tang. But today, I am not sure if the same Mr Tang would have the time, or the energy to do the same - given the pace of life, and the workload that teachers have.

Expanding Teachers' Bandwidth - Some Suggestions

4. Over the years, the MOE has introduced measures to free-up time for teachers to interact with students. The "Teach Less, Learn More" initiatives, the adjunct-teacher and teaching-aid schemes, and having retired senior officers

from the SAF to become operational managers and VPs in schools are examples. Yet, I am still meeting teachers who seem frustrated by the amount of administrative and other non-core duties that leave them with too little time and energy to teach, let alone interact with, students.

5. The non-core activities cited by teachers include NE lessons and activities, planning and organising special activities and events such as school visits by VIPs, Speech Day, career festivals, entrepreneurship workshops and formalised community engagement activities. In addition, some teachers tell me they are also roped in for marketing and PR initiatives for the school. While they acknowledge the need for these activities, they seem frustrated by the opportunity cost: less quality time with the students. In fact, even some school principals, I get the sense, would prefer more time to focus on improving the teaching and character building aspects instead of the administrative aspects of their job.
6. To give principals and teachers even more time to focus on teaching and character building, I have 3 suggestions:
 - ***Engage a professional CEO for each school*** - we now have a strong pool of retired corporate CEOs and others with credible management experience and network that would prove invaluable in the administrative, financial, business development, marketing, PR and fund raising aspects of running schools. There could be

two leaders in each school - the CEO, who would be the administrative head, and the Head Master/Mistress who has the final say on all academic and pedagogical matters. This is a system that is similar to that in many hospitals where the CEO is a non-medical professional, who on medical issues takes the cue from the Chairman, Medical Board - a seasoned doctor. From what I understand, the system has worked well in hospitals. By engaging experienced, retired personnel to be CEOs and possibly other positions in schools - not only do you allow teachers more time to teach as non-core tasks are off their plate, you also give experienced retirees another meaningful way of contributing. Of course, there are principals today who have strong management ability - if they are interested in that career path, naturally they should be given the opportunity.

- ***Greater community involvement*** - this is a core practice in many western countries, where individuals, groups (possibly NGOs) and corporate entities in the locale contribute extensively to the school. Some schools in Singapore do this, but often on an ad hoc basis. Schools could have stronger outreach programmes to make the community feel more welcome and participate in formal programmes such as adoption of specific initiatives.
- ***Involve the Alumni more meaningfully*** - alumni are a rich resource waiting to be invited back 'home'. It is a

shame if we can't see beyond fund raising when we think of alumni. I remember when I was in school in RI most of the sports teams were trained by highly committed, passionate old boys - and we did exceptionally well. We seem to have lost this tradition.

Conclusion

7. I would like to conclude by acknowledging that this is not an easy challenge to tackle, and that the MOE has been paying a lot of attention to it for sometime. Nevertheless we have to be unrelenting in our effort as, to a large extent, the quality of Singaporeans is dependent on how well we imbibe character and resilience in our young, not just knowledge and skills which, increasingly, are just hygiene factors.
8. I would like to end by quoting Barry Schwartz, a renowned psychologist whose thoughts on the link between economics and psychology and education are gaining traction. He said, "...teachers should strive to be the ordinary heroes, the moral exemplars, to the people we mentor... the single most important thing kids need to learn is character. They need to learn to respect themselves. They need to learn to respect their schoolmates. They need to learn to respect their teachers. And, most important, they need to learn to

respect learning. That's the principal objective. If you do that, the rest is just pretty much a coast downhill....”

9. Madam Chairperson, I thank you.
