

How the Singapore education system is upgraded

Govt's level of commitment and continuing investment in it recognised at global forum
by Goh Chin Lian



(Picture: Attending a round-table discussion at the 9th World Convention of the International Confederation of Principals yesterday were (from left) Minister of Education Bronwyn Pike of the Australian state of Victoria, Hong Kong Education Secretary Michael Suen, Minister for Education Ng Eng Hen, and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. -- ST Photo)

THE recession has caused some European governments to cut their education budgets, some by as much as 25 per cent.

Others, like Norway, have not done so as they take a long-term view of the value of education and have set aside funds to continue investing in it.

Such a level of commitment to education by a country's political leadership is evident in Singapore, noted Mr Chris Harrison, president of the European School Heads Association, which has members from 36 European countries.

'There's a good balance between recognising the cost of education and the value of it,' he said yesterday on the sidelines of the 9th World Convention of the International Confederation of Principals.

He was commenting on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the opening of the convention, in which Mr Lee spoke of the importance of political leadership in driving improvements to the education system here.

Singapore's leaders not only placed heavy emphasis on education - providing the funds for it and garnering parents' support - but also shielded it from politics. 'Teachers can do what they need to do and not have their work disrupted or confused by extraneous political considerations which are educationally unsound,' he said to applause from 1,500 principals and teachers from 40 countries who were at the opening.

Other key factors accounting for the success of Singapore's education system were: having capable principals backed by competent teachers; giving schools the means to customise programmes to students' needs; and providing strong, but not too heavy-handed central support and guidance.

Mr Lee spent the bulk of his speech laying out Singapore's experience in reforming its education sector - underscored by what educators see as a managed, but responsive approach - as well as taking stock of what the changes had achieved.

When Singapore gained self-governance in 1959, it focused on ramping up school places for the growing population. Attention later turned to dealing with standards and high drop-out rates, as the first wave of reforms in 1979 introduced streaming and a national curriculum that emphasised basic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic.

To keep up with the changing times and Singapore's evolving needs, a second wave of reforms in the late 1990s focused on raising the standards of teachers and principals, and giving schools more authority to innovate.

Mr Lee said the reforms, particularly the second wave, took a long time and required persistent efforts to take effect. But they have borne fruit.

Schools are developing their own identities and expertise, there is a high standard across the board in all schools, and a number of outstanding schools and many models of success have emerged. Students are also well-educated, employable and have a sense of social responsibility.

Efforts to improve the system will continue, Mr Lee said. These include recruiting more teachers, who must be graduates, from 2015; having a stronger body to champion professional development; rebalancing the curriculum to emphasise 'soft' skills; and creating more pathways to success.

Mr Andrew Blair, president of the International Confederation of Principals, feels Singapore can go further down the decentralisation path by giving schools even more say in determining curriculum, such as in Finland.

Singapore's advantages lie in its stable political environment and willingness to take a long-term view of education policy, he said.

'A great weakness of education across the world is 'short-termism' - when you try to turn around performance in a very short time to meet political cycles. Actually, the cycle should be put aside and national interest should be the key driver for education reform,' he said.

Speaking later, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen and his counterparts from six other countries, including the United States, Sweden and Australia, said their priorities at this meeting were to discuss how education systems could improve in order to equip students with skills for a fast-changing future.

They agreed that to achieve this goal, education systems have to focus on attracting teachers with the right attitude and aptitude. They must also be given the best tools such as information and communication technologies.

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