

Speech by RADM (NS) Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence at the appointment ceremony for Principals on 28 Dec 2001 at 3 pm, the Stamford Ballroom, Westin Stamford and Westin Plaza.

Distinguished Guests, Principals, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1 I am delighted to be present today to share this special occasion with you. This is the 4th Appointment Ceremony for Principals since the inaugural one in 1998. My warmest congratulations to the 71 principals being appointed today. To the 27 new principals appointed, a very warm welcome to the fraternity of Principals.

2 For the newly-appointed principals, today's ceremony marks a major milestone in your professional career as educators. It also signals a new level of responsibility entrusted to you. You are taking on the apex job in schools and will be responsible for leading your teachers, and working with parents and other stakeholders to shape the lives and future of our young. I hope you will build on your experience and training, and rise to these new challenges with vigour and enthusiasm.

3 For the 44 serving principals who will be taking on new appointments, this ceremony is no less significant. It symbolises a renewal of your mandate as school leaders, and reflects our faith in your abilities to help our students achieve the Desired Outcomes of Education.

The Challenges Ahead

The Changing Profile of Teachers

4 We face several key challenges in education over the next five to ten years. One important challenge is the changing profile of teachers. Good teachers form the foundation of a strong and robust education system. Many of the experienced and dedicated teachers who were recruited in large numbers in the 1960s will be retiring over the next few years. The retirement of more senior teachers and the recruitment of many young teachers mean that the age profile of the service is changing rapidly.

5 Instead of having an experienced teaching force, with about half the teachers older than 40 years, we will have, within the next 5 years, a teaching force with about two-thirds of its members aged 40 or below. This is a fact which principals will need to recognise and work with.

6 What this means is that we cannot assume that many of the things we take for granted today will continue. We used to recruit about 1,000 teachers a year, but in the past few years, we have recruited more than 2,000 teachers a year. When the number of new teachers entering the profession was small relative to the overall teacher population, we could rely on the natural process of learning-from-doing and from observing other teachers to imbibe the values and ethos that shape the profession. And as each new batch of new teachers could expect to stay for up to 30, 35 years in the profession, each of them had plenty of time to internalise these values and ethos and eventually do his part to pass them on.

7 Today, we do not have this luxury of time. Educators need to be more explicit and direct in articulating what you stand for as a profession, and spend time to pass this on, so that new and aspiring members of the profession have a vision to inspire them, and a compass to guide them. They can then use these to chart the best path to develop into competent and committed professionals.

8 Principals, as school leaders, play an important role in providing stability and continuity as we build up a new core of experienced and dedicated teachers to take over from those who will retire. Principals are role models for teachers. You should embody and inspire in your teachers a sense of dedication to nurture young lives and the belief that teachers can make a positive difference to the life of each child. These are the values that lie at the heart of a teachers calling and distinguish the contributions of the Education Service from those of other professions.

Continuity in School Leadership

9 Just as the profile of teachers is changing, the profile of our principals is also changing, albeit at a more gradual pace. The median age of our principals has remained at 52 years for the past 5 years. However, we expect the median age of principals to decline gradually in the coming years. The

proportion of principals aged 45 and below has increased from 17% in Jan 1998 to almost 30% in Jan 2002. This is because we have been appointing new principals, the bulk of whom first become principals when they are in their late 30s and early 40s.

10 The increase in the proportion of younger principals is part and parcel of a healthy process of leadership renewal to provide continuity in school leadership. We now have a system in place to ensure that there is a steady stream of younger officers who are ready to take the place of our older and more experienced principals as they retire. With half of our 361 principals aged over 52, we can expect that over the next 10 years, we will continue to appoint about 30 to 35 new principals a year to take into account retirements, the appointment of principals as cluster superintendents and other senior positions in the education service, and to cater to the needs of new schools.

11 The younger principals we have been appointing are of high quality. We have in place a rigorous system for identifying and selecting our principals from among our capable officers. We also have a comprehensive milestone course conducted by the National Institute of Education to train our principals. This year, all 27 new principals have been through NIEs Leaders in Education Programme or its predecessor, the Diploma in Educational Administration. In addition, 10 of the new principals have Masters degrees.

Working with Stakeholders

12 The next challenge for educators arises from the changing expectations of parents and other stakeholders. As the social and economic fabric of our society evolves, there will be differing levels of involvement from parents and the community. However, there will be the same high expectations of education. Principals are the MOEs front-line contact with the public. Parents will look to you for advice on their childrens progress. They will also look to you to clarify their understanding of school programmes and changes in the education system. The move towards greater autonomy in schools is to enable school leaders to be more responsive to the needs of the stakeholders. This will result in closer scrutiny of principals in the public domain. They will be made more accountable for their actions and decisions. In such an environment, we need high quality, responsible and dynamic principals to lead our schools so they can make the best use of this autonomy for the benefit of their students.

13 I am pleased that our principals have reached out to, and built, good links with your different stakeholders, especially with parents. The number of Parent Support Groups and Parent-Teacher Associations in schools has almost tripled from 60 in 1998 to 156 this year. This means that 40% of our schools now have a formalised parent involvement programme. Another 25% of schools have informal groups of parent volunteers assisting in ad-hoc programmes. In addition, principals have steered their schools towards developing strong collaborations with community groups such as voluntary welfare organisations, self-help groups, and CDCs/CCs/RCS. Such collaborations are mutually beneficial and serve to anchor the community as a partner in education. I hope that you will continue to work with your school governing bodies, school advisory committees and management committees, alumni and parents to further develop such links.

The Academy of Principals

14 Given the demands of the job, principals need to be proactive in furthering your own professional development. You need appropriate forums to share best practices and to learn from each others successes and experiences. I am happy to learn that the three existing professional associations - the Association of Principals of Primary Schools, the Singapore Secondary School Principals Association, and the Singapore Educational Administration Society - have decided to amalgamate and form the Academy of Principals.

15 This initiative is spearheaded by the principals themselves. The Academy of Principals will serve as a forum for professional discussion and sharing. It will help to foster greater support, understanding and a sense of fraternity and collegiality amongst school leaders. By pooling together the expertise and resources of the three existing professional associations into one professional body, the Academy can enlarge its sphere of activities to better prepare principals for the challenges ahead.

16 Membership in the Academy will be drawn from the ranks of Principals, former Principals who may be presently serving in MOE HQ or in other capacities, and senior professional staff from the National Institute of Education. Retired principals, as well as Vice-Principals can apply to join as associate members.

17 Such a gathering of senior educators makes the Academy of Principals a rich reservoir of experience and knowledge in educational leadership. Through its activities, which will include workshops, publications, school-based research, and networking with counterpart associations overseas, the Academy can harness the power of collective learning, enhance the profile of school leaders and play a part in developing Singapore as an educational hub. I wish the new academy all success and assure it of the full support of the Ministry of Education in its mission of furthering the professional development of our Principals.

Conclusion

18 As principals, you play a vital role in providing creative leadership in schools and in the education service. You should look to teachers for ideas and harness their energy to improve the school environment. At the same time, you should also build up strong networks of support with your fellow principals and tap on each others ideas and knowledge in the course of your work. I commend you for taking a step forward in this direction by setting up the Academy of Principals. It is a bold initiative that can help to reinforce the sense of professionalism and solidarity among school leaders.

19 In closing, I congratulate you once again on your new appointment, and urge you to give of your best as you work actively with your colleagues in schools, with your stakeholders in the community, and with the Ministry in moulding the future of our nation.