

Speech by Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for Education, at Academy of Principals Global Education Conference on Monday, 8 November 2004, at 9.00am

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Principals

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

I am pleased to join you this morning to open the Academy of Principals Global Education Conference.

2 The conference comes at a time of change and refinement in Singapore's education system. We have a sound education system, that has been a key source of strength for Singapore. Whether as teachers, parents or students, Singaporeans take education seriously, and set high aspirations for themselves. We have also ensured that all our schools are well-resourced, staffed with capable and reflective leaders, and thinking teachers. We have avoided the large disparities in educational standards seen elsewhere, between a few schools at the top and those for the masses. You do not have to go to a school in a top residential district to do well in Singapore.

3 Most importantly, it is a system that keeps looking forward. The fundamentals in Singapore education have not only served as well in the past but remain relevant to the future. But it is precisely the fact that our fundamentals are in good working order, that allows us to look ahead, identify the gaps that we need to close, set new directions, and move forward with confidence.

4 The process of reflection and change that is taking place in our schools is not just a matter of educational debate. It is the key to how Singapore will keep its edge as a city, and retain a special advantage for Singaporeans in a new world, 15-20 years from now. It is how we will make our mark, not just by being competent and efficient but by being a leading Asian hub for new ideas, for business innovation and for enterprise.

5 Our key strength will be in our intangible characteristics. We will not be the cheapest player in Asia. But we are unique in our multicultural orientation, in being a trusted player, and in being open to business and people from all over the world. We will only be useful to China, India and Southeast Asia if we retain these special characteristics. We have to keep our open and cosmopolitan character, rather than make ourselves just like them. It is how we will stay relevant.

6 We also have to nurture Singaporeans who are willing to be different. We need Singaporeans with different talents and different ways of thinking, willing to test ideas and new approaches off each

other, and with people from around the world who will be part of what defines Singapore.

7 But it is equally important that we build strength of character among our young - a willingness to bounce back from mishaps or failure and try again. And a willingness to stand and fight in a team. These are critical skills for the future. They will help our young push and redefine the boundaries, and to create new opportunities for themselves and for Singapore.

8 To nurture these habits of mind and character, we have to begin young. They are habits that are formed quietly, over years of schooling - in the classroom, on the performing stage or on the playing field. They require a total approach to education, that extends well beyond preparing our students for their examinations. That is why our schools are placing greater importance on providing an all round education for their students.

Evolving the Assessment System

9 We are gradually moving towards a new balance in education, so as to develop these life skills that our young need for the future. We must arouse a passion among our young for knowledge and learning that carries through life. We have to place equal emphasis on the non-academic curriculum, that will help them make the most of their years together in school, interacting, roughing it out with each other and making friendships. And most fundamentally, we have to accept and promote more diverse measures of merit, even if they cannot be summarised in a single score.

10 The introduction of a more diverse school landscape with new types of schools and new secondary school programmes supports this new orientation in education. So too will the new frameworks for admission into secondary schools, JCs and universities, which will allow students with achievements outside of their examinations to be given recognition.

11 But we also have to keep evolving our teaching and assessment methods, so that we reduce the need for students to memorise large amounts of information for their examinations. We have to encourage students to learn more actively and independently, and be less reliant on model answers and lecture notes. We cannot make this move in a big leap, but have to take gradual steps to take us forward towards our goals in education.

12 Our secondary and JC curriculum and examination system was inherited from the British. Over the years, we have made several refinements and changes to the system. We have selectively adopted practices from other countries, and made innovations of our own to serve our changing educational needs and remain relevant to a changing international environment.

13 The most major change we undertook, a decade ago, was the introduction of a technical stream of education in secondary schools, leading to the ITEs at the post-secondary level. It recognised the different needs of our academically-oriented and technically-inclined students, so as to allow the vast majority of students to complete a secondary school education and go on to a good, post-secondary education. It is an approach that has served Singapore well. Even as we introduce flexibilities in the system, for example to loosen the streaming system, we will preserve the integrity of the technical route in education.

14 We took greater ownership over our A-level examinations in 2002, while continuing to tap on the expertise of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). The introduction of the broader and more flexible A-level curriculum in Singapore in 2006, will be the next major change in our curriculum and examinations. It will also involve a reduced overall curriculum load for JC students.

Greater Control of GCE O-Level Examination

15 Just as we took greater ownership of the A-levels in 2002, the Ministry of Education (MOE) together with the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB) will assume greater control over the GCE O-level examination from 2006. We will take greater responsibility for developing examination syllabuses and formats, setting standards, and awarding grades. The move will enable us

over time to customise the curriculum and examinations to our educational needs, while maintaining the high standards that Singapore is known for.

16 As with the new A-levels, MOE and SEAB will continue to work closely with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) in the new GCE O-level examination. We will tap UCLES expertise in designing syllabuses, although we will take full ownership of the syllabuses. We will continue to outsource to UCLES the setting of question papers and marking of examination scripts.

17 Unlike the new A-level curriculum that we will introduce in 2006, however, we do not expect to make major changes to the structure of our O-levels for the foreseeable future. The O-level curriculum will be refined in an evolutionary fashion.

Refining Project Work Assessment

18 Another area that we intend to refine is the assessment of Project Work (PW) in the Junior College curriculum. PW is a sound innovation in our curriculum. It gives students the opportunity to work in teams, see interconnections between different disciplines, undertake research using multiple sources and make credible presentations of their findings. It develops useful skills, that students will find useful when they go on to university, and in working life.

19 Since its implementation as part of the JC curriculum two years ago, teachers and students have gained an understanding of the processes and learning outcomes of PW. However we have identified some areas in the assessment of PW that need to be modified, so as to ensure that students find PW engaging and meaningful, and do not just go through the hoops for the sake of meeting the requirements. For example, students have found the assessment criteria too detailed, and the documentation requirements too extensive.

20 We will make refinements to PW from next year, which takes into account the feedback we have received. The number of assessment criteria will be reduced significantly. Each student will be required to submit no more than three documents for assessment. The scope of the PW tasks will also be broadened, to give students greater flexibility and choice in shaping their projects.

21 These modifications are part of the process of continuous review and of learning from the experience of schools as they implement PW. This feedback loop, from experience on the ground to the design of curriculum and assessment, is essential for any successful innovation in education.

Educators as Leaders

22 Ultimately, the quality of education is decided on the ground. It is shaped by thoughtful school leaders, whom teachers trust to lead them in the midst of change. Teachers must have leaders – principals – who inspire teams, and give them ownership over their teaching.

23 APS aids in the professional development of principals through both formal and informal training platforms. APS also exposes its members to differing views and new perspectives on education. For instance, I am told that APS makes a deliberate effort to hear from industry leaders, most of whom can be disconcertingly frank on the areas that they think we can do better in.

24 I am pleased to see that APS in collaboration with EDB Ventures Management has established the Principals Academy Inc (PAI). PAI, with the help of the Singapore Tourism Board, has successfully launched a series of training programmes for educational leaders from the region. More than 150 Principals and other senior educators from Asia have undergone training in school leadership and management skills under its training arm. About 500 local educators have also attended training programs. One of the areas which has been identified for further growth is in brain-based theories of learning, to help educators customize the learning environment to meet the needs of students.

25 Another initiative by PAI is the organisation of a centralised certification testing to facilitate the entry of foreign students who wish to have a truly Singaporean education. Instead of taking tests in

individual schools, this system will allow candidates to take a centralised test. To date more than 1,100 candidates have taken the certification test.

26 Working together with SEAB, PAI will explore other opportunities to help serve the needs of education in Singapore. PAI's efforts to carve out a local and a regional presence had a certain spirit of enterprise. To have principals modeling this spirit is commendable.

27 Finally, let me congratulate APS and ILC for having organised this international conference. I wish all participants an enjoyable conference, and our foreign visitors a pleasant stay in Singapore. I now have the pleasure of declaring the conference open.