

Speech by Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for Education & Second Minister for Finance, at the 9th appointment ceremony for Principals on Thursday, 28 December 2006 at 3pm, Shangri-la hotel, Island Ballroom.

Mr Gan Kim Yong,
Minister of State

Rear-Admiral Lui Tuck Yew,
Minister of State

Mr Masagos Zulkifli,
Senior Parliamentary Secretary

Fellow Parliamentarians,

General Lim Chuan Poh,
Permanent Secretary

Mrs Tan Ching Yee,
Second Permanent Secretary,

Miss Seah Jiak Choo,
Director-General of Education

Distinguished Guests,

Principals,

Colleagues,

Ladies & Gentlemen,

BUILDING ON INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN OUR SCHOOLS

1. Today's Principals Appointment Ceremony is an important occasion for MOE. This year, we mark the appointment of 50 Principals. I want to extend my warmest congratulations to the 17 new Principals as well as the 33 experienced Principals who are assuming new appointments.

2. To the experienced Principals, your new appointment is an affirmation of our trust in your leadership. I commend you to leverage on your experience, knowledge and skills to bring the schools entrusted to you to even greater heights.

3. For the newly-appointed Principals, today's appointment presents a major milestone in your leadership journey. This is an opportunity for you to reach out to more students, to share with more people what you know and believe in, and to make a bigger impact on Singapore education. MOE will support you every step of the way, in your highs and lows, as you lead your schools.

Renewal and Sharing in School Leadership

4. Our system of school leadership is a key strength of the Singapore education system. It is a system built on both individual and collective strengths in school leadership, that makes Singapore education quite distinct. We combine three features - school autonomy, which gives the Principal and his or her team considerable leeway to shape school-based programmes; second, the regular refreshing and recharging of school leadership; and third, the continuous borrowing and transfer of expertise across the system, from one school to another. All of this will always be work in progress, but we have made major strides in each area since the Ministry initiated changes from the late 90s. Many other

countries have expressed interest in our system of school leadership, and sought to borrow from it.

5. We put considerable effort into selecting and developing school leaders, through the LEP (Leaders in Education Programme) and other means, on and off the job. We want the right individuals to run our schools. My counterparts in other countries often rue the fact that they inherit a seniority-based system - which means schools where Principals or Headmasters usually take on the mantle a few years before retirement. This fact alone makes Singapore quite different. From early in the career of an education officer, we seek to identify and develop those with an interest in taking on leadership positions and the right traits. We are also bringing in some individuals from other backgrounds, mid-career, to be developed as leaders in education.

6. We must keep renewing the system. With today's appointments, almost two out of every five schools (38%) would have Principals who have been newly appointed over the last 5 years. The newly appointed Principals range from their early 30s to late 40s, providing a useful blend of youth and experience.

7. Existing Principals too are taking advantage of the sabbatical scheme that was introduced in 2003. So far, 57 Principals have used their sabbaticals to recharge, get new ideas and grow as leaders.

8. The system of rotation of school leaders is also a key feature of renewal in schools. It allows us to raise the overall quality of school leadership - by transferring experience and strengths from one school to another and from schools to MOE HQ and back. It often strengthens and grows individual leaders too, by exposing them to new situations with new opportunities and challenges.

9. We have extended the average tenure of leadership in schools - it is now slightly over 6 years on average - to give Principals more time to shape their own cultures within a school, and to follow through and embed any improvements or initiatives that they introduce. But the system of rotation of Principals remains an essential in our system of collective leadership.

Mentoring Scheme for Newly-Appointed Principals

10. We must keep looking for ways to pass on and share expertise, within our school clusters and more broadly. This too must be a key strength. Our compactness as a system allows us to achieve much greater sharing of knowledge compared to larger countries.

11. What we are promoting is a culture of school leaders taking responsibility for grooming their peers, sharing ideas and raising the quality and professionalism of the leadership community as a whole. The LEP for a start is providing a platform for each cohort of newly appointed Principals to develop bonds and a support network, which they can call upon in their leadership journeys.

12. Our experienced Principals are a valuable resource. They have built up considerable knowledge in running schools and managing people. A fair bit of this is tacit knowledge, not stuff that can be compiled in brochures. We should find ways to enhance the transfer of this knowledge from one generation of Principals to the next. All the more, in a system where we have continuous renewal and refreshing of Principals.

13. It is for this reason that the Academy of Principals will be partnering with MOE to pilot a 1-year mentoring scheme for newly-appointed Principals. Starting with those who are newly-appointed today, interested Principals will be paired with experienced school leaders from the fraternity, identified by the Academy. Similar mentoring schemes are in place in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

14. This new way of supporting new Principals and passing on tacit know-how will add further to our collective strength in school leadership. The mentorship scheme will build on and augment the practices already taking place within our school clusters. It will involve partnerships, and I'm sure involve two-way learning, with ideas and reflections being passed on from both experienced and new Principals.

Common Features in Successful School Leaders - Inspiring Vision, Sound People Management and Active Engagement of Stakeholders

15. We know of course that there is no single model of school leadership, no one model to achieve success. There are many wonderful examples in our Principal fraternity, each with their own character and style. But we also know that some things are always there in a good school leader - some unchanging, essential traits. Let me briefly highlight three of these common features that we observe in quality leaders across our system.

16. The first is always an *inspiring vision, and confidence in ones values and purpose*. Perhaps more than in any other profession, leadership in schools must also be anchored in a strong sense of purpose in education. Especially where we are giving Principals greater autonomy, this sense of purpose must ensure that we are not side-tracked into making short-term gains. We have to stay close to our vision and values in providing an all-round education to our young, even where the gains are not easily measured.

17. Miss Rosalind Heng, who will be retiring after 38 years of service in education and after 28 years as Principal at SCGS, stands out as an example of a leader with a clear sense of purpose. Rosalind has been steadfast in her belief that every child can learn, and must receive a holistic education. She has sought to groom young women who, in her own words, are "emotionally stable girls, happy that theyve had a happy school life." I was glad to see her featured in todays newspapers. Her courage in staying true to what she believes has won her the respect and love of her students, staff and many parents and colleagues.

Leadership Focuses on People Development

18. The second feature of quality leadership has to do with *grooming and nurturing teachers, including new leaders* among your staff.

19. Mrs Helena Song, another retiring Principal, is a good example. Helena spent her last 7 years as Principal of Woodgrove Secondary School, establishing it as a school of choice in the Woodlands neighbourhood.

20. Helenas management philosophy is to be people-focused. She is a great developer of people, and has in fact served as a Steward Principal for participants of the Leaders in Education Programme over the last 4 years. She has a knack for drawing out the potential in young officers, and mentoring them. During her stint as Principal, Helena successfully groomed two young heads of department to become Vice-Principals. I quote a tribute from one of them, Mrs Oh Lay Ling, "Thank you for grooming me to what I am today. You have imparted to me and many of us the ability to wonder and dream bold dreams. Thank you for having faith in me that I can make things come true. You have the gift to make us feel great and gifted!"

21. We should never lose sight of the importance of nurturing our teachers and giving them room to grow and excel. Our recent internal surveys show that that 94% of our teachers believe that the teaching profession provides them with a sense of doing something worthwhile, and are willing to put in effort beyond what would be normally expected of them. Further, students tended to rate their school experience more positively in schools where the teachers themselves reported greater job satisfaction and career commitment.

22. In the case of St. Hildas Primary, recipient of this years Best Practice Award for Teaching and Learning, the direction was set when the outgoing Principal, Mrs Foo Sook Fong, together with her Vice-Principal, Mr Danny Poh, championed the importance of innovative teaching by leading staff workshops and forums. Sook Fongs thesis was that "If our students have not learned well, then we have not taught well". Her efforts and commitment helped motivate her staff to explore, discover and redesign their teaching practices. An example of this is the use of teacher-led, student-designed online blogging for the languages English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, where teachers were empowered to experiment with open tools on the internet. Through these activities, students learned to express themselves with imagination and creativity. It has also improved the students command of the languages and enhanced their writing ability.

23. At the system level, MOE has developed the teaching career track to provide better development opportunities for teachers who excel in curriculum and instruction. The GROW package, announced earlier, also comprises initiatives like enhancements to the Professional Development Leave Scheme to support teachers in their development. Principals should leverage on these initiatives

together with structures like the Enhanced Performance Management System, especially to develop and give recognition to those who are exemplary in their classroom instruction.

Leadership Engages the Community

24. However, developing the child is not the sole responsibility of the teachers and schools. Beyond your teachers and students, your vision should also reach your broader stakeholders. Many parents and the community want to contribute. We need to take the initiative to engage them and leverage on their contributions to complement our efforts.

25. Take the NorthLight School, which is just starting out but has already managed to reach out and engage the community in its vision. Many individuals have come forward to offer their services towards the schools mission. One of them is Mr Albert Tang. Mr Tang shared in his email to the school that he did not excel academically when he was in school. Nevertheless, he worked hard and after some years, started his own printing company with a friend. He added that he could identify with the students and was prepared to work with them to produce a NorthLight publication where they could share their stories with others. In addition, Mr Tang was also prepared to provide training to help the students run small businesses as part of the schools strategy to operate its own multi-purpose cooperative.

26. Others, too, have come forward. Like Mr Low Kok Wai, Ms Noorlinah Mohamed and Mr Paul Grosse who have stepped forward to help NorthLight School develop an aesthetics programme that infuses character development. These are professionals with many years of experience in their respective fields of dance, drama and music, who have chosen to help the school simply because they believe in the vision.

27. For the past 3 years, Mrs Judina Cheong, Principal of Montfort Junior, together with her Operations Manager, representatives of the alumni and parents, have been distributing mandarin oranges and newsletters to residents and shopkeepers around the school. She would give out name cards so that the residents and shopkeepers can call the school if ever they spot gangs accosting her students or her students misbehaving. This is a simple though exacting act of reaching out to the community. But as a result of Judinas commitment, the stature of the school within the neighbourhood has risen over the years. The community now feels part of Montfort Junior, even calling the school to give feedback on different issues.

28. Mrs Daisy Yip, Principal of Gongshang Primary, has likewise been actively engaging the different stakeholders to support her students learning. Her Parents Support Group and School Advisory Committee have helped conduct enrichment lessons, serve as adult volunteers as well as arrange work attachments for her teachers. The school also partners with *Rediffusion* for their students to broadcast programmes to promote language learning in the school. These successful partnerships reflect Daisies leadership style and passion for people. She actively seeks to help her teachers see how the partnerships, though time-consuming initially, could eventually benefit the students. Support and recognition are also given to the partners wherever possible so that their efforts will not go unnoticed.

29. In Pasir Ris Primary, the Principal, Mr Justin Arul Pierre and his school team have brought about a culture where the school, parents and other stakeholders view one another as equal partners in education. One example of Pasir Ris strong partnership in the area of teaching and learning is their collaboration with Marshall Cavendish in the production of their own, authentic Kamashibai story cards. Kamashibai story cards come from a traditional art of Japanese story telling. The school partnered the company in organising a Kamashibai story card design competition for their primary 4 to 6 students, providing them with the opportunity to discover their talents through the weaving and drawing of their own stories and pictures based on common themes found in English textbooks and local contexts. The school is currently working in partnership with Marshall Cavendish to publish the works of their students as a possible teaching resource for educators in primary schools and kindergartens, extending what they have started to an even wider community.

Tribute to Retiring Principals

30. There are many other examples of inspiring school leadership. They bear testimony to the evolving of leadership in our system. I would like to recognise the contributions of the 20 Principals who are retiring today. While I am unable to list all your many contributions to the education service, I am sure that the people you have led, the lives you have touched and the foundations you have laid will

stay on in our schools for many years.

31. Finally, to the rest of the Principal community, both new and experienced. The future of our nation lies in your hands. Stay true to your values and keep focused on your purpose. As you lead, grow leaders and give teachers the space to soar. Inspire those within as well as around your school with your vision and goals. Let us in this way strive for greater excellence in our schools.