

Mindsets must shift for education changes to have lasting impact: Chan

Structural reforms alone will not ease academic pressure, says minister

Gabrielle Chan

Changes in education must be accompanied by a shift in mindsets and culture to have lasting impact, Education Minister Chan Chun Sing said.

Structural reforms alone – such as changes in the Primary School Leaving Examination scoring system or the removal of mid-year exams – will not ease academic pressure or broaden the definition of success unless societal attitudes evolve as well, he said on Feb 11.

Mr Chan was speaking at a lecture organised by the Ministry of Education (MOE), Institute of Policy Studies and National Institute of Education (NIE), as part of celebrations marking SG60 and MOE's 70th anniversary.

Addressing about 500 graduating student-teachers from NIE and guests, he said that having consistency and conviction in carrying

out policies is important.

"Timing is everything. We must have the shrewd instincts to know when to lead the way with conviction and the wisdom to know when to pace ourselves with society's shifts," he said in a nearly hour-long speech tracing how Singapore's education system has evolved over the years and the challenges ahead.

Policies such as academic streaming were introduced despite initial resistance due to their long-term benefits, he pointed out, while introducing bilingualism required a gradual transition.

"Dr Goh (Keng Swee) and our pioneer leaders went ahead to implement streaming in 1979, even though it was not widely accepted by society," he said, noting that while it would have been far more politically expedient to not roll out the policy, that would have led to high levels of school dropouts and illiteracy.

More recently, full subject-based

banding – where students take subjects at levels according to their strengths – was put in place when conditions were ready and schools had the resources and capability to implement it, Mr Chan said.

The change is meant to address stigma and meet evolving aspirations.

On the other hand, a gradual approach was taken for language policy, he noted. "Rather than immediately shutting down vernacular schools, we waited for the right conditions to develop."

It took nearly two decades after introducing bilingualism before English was finally used as the main language of instruction in schools, he said.

Mr Chan said having consistency in policy and conviction in executing policies will be key to making changes to the education system.

"Many countries failed not because of the lack of good ideas," he said, adding that not having political continuity or stability prevented governments from seeing through tough but necessary policies to reap long-term benefits.

"All policies will have trade-offs,

especially in the short term," he said. "We must have the conviction to do the right thing for our people, even when it is unpopular or inconvenient."

Another thing that Singapore must do to continue to succeed is to keep on pursuing excellence while upholding an "open, continuous and compassionate meritocracy", Mr Chan said.

As educators work to realise each individual's fullest potential, inclusion has to be intentionally fostered in education policies, he added. "Our policies must constantly evolve to balance our goals for societal mobility and cohesion."

The education sector also needs to stay united, said Mr Chan, rejecting the notion that "good teachers only go to good schools".

He added: "Nor can we allow a divide between those making policy and educators who implement the policy on the front lines of our schools."

"Our attitude and behaviour towards educators will determine the quality of people who will join us in educating the next generation, which will, in turn, determine the

quality of our education system and the quality of our people."

In his speech at Anglo-Chinese Junior College in Dover, Mr Chan said that while Singapore's education system has made significant accomplishments, more needs to be done.

"We must not rest on our laurels," he said, laying out the work ahead for the education system to compete at a global level.

He cautioned against complacency as "other countries have greater resources, sheer population size and many are increasingly bilingual".

Students increasingly have more customised education options to meet their diverse abilities, needs, interests and aspirations, said Mr Chan, as part of two ongoing shifts by MOE to help them thrive in an era of increasing "uncertainty, volatility and fragmentation".

He said: "In an ideal future, we would be able to leverage artificial intelligence and data to customise lessons according to the unique needs of each individual student."

The second shift is pushing ahead with lifelong learning efforts

and encouraging people to pick up new and relevant skills after leaving school, said Mr Chan, adding that the science of teaching and learning for adults needs to be better understood.

These shifts have to be complemented by efforts to support the teaching force to help them meet more complex demands, he said.

In his speech, Mr Chan outlined the changes in Singapore's education system since its beginnings in the 1940s, from building foundations to raising standards and opening up more pathways.

He said the focus in the early days was to unify a fragmented education system by ensuring access to schools and implementing the bilingualism policy.

By the 1970s, issues such as varying levels of ability and language gaps became more pronounced, and against this backdrop, a ground-breaking report proposing structural changes like streaming by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee was produced.

In the third phase, from 1997 till the present, the emphasis has been to provide greater customisation in learning and education pathways, as well as shift towards more holistic development in thinking skills and creativity.

"We realised an overemphasis on academics led to a narrowing of the notion of success in a time when we critically needed a diversity of strengths," Mr Chan said.

Singapore has to be "clear-eyed" about the opportunities and potential pitfalls that lie ahead, he added.

Looking ahead, Mr Chan said global trends such as the spread of social media, rapid technological developments and rising protectionism pose new challenges.

Students must create new "value propositions", connect with others and build bridges across different cultures and draw upon a diversity of strengths, he noted.

Bilingualism must remain a cornerstone of the education system in a time of increasing fragmentation, he said.

"We must redouble our efforts to strengthen bilingualism," Mr Chan said, particularly as English has become the dominant language for most Singaporean homes.

At a panel discussion during the event, Mr Chan was joined by Professor Liu Woon Chia, director of NIE, and National University of Singapore Associate Professor Elmie Nekmat. The session was moderated by Singapore University of Social Sciences president Tan Tai Yong.

They spoke about the importance of lifelong learning, the use of technology for mass customisation of education, class sizes and the importance of teacher quality.

Mr Chan answered questions ranging from the impact of the tuition industry and ways to assess students beyond academic achievements.

The difference between tuition teachers and MOE teachers is that the latter "do not get to choose the students (they) teach", adding that they are in a better position to help students understand their own strengths and weaknesses instead of simply pushing them to match someone else's success, he said.

Teachers have the responsibility of adding value to students' lives, not just in terms of learning but also in building character, he added.

On alternative forms of evaluating students, Mr Chan said aptitude-based assessment comes with "subjective judgment", which people must be ready to accept if they want to recognise gifts and talents beyond standardised testing.

Such tests will assess "not just current performance but future potential", and that is a challenge that all selection systems will face, he added.

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