

S'pore's pursuit of excellence needs open meritocracy, a broader definition of success: *Chan Chun Sing*

At a lecture on Feb 11, as part of celebrations marking SG60 and his ministry's 70th anniversary, Education Minister Chan Chun Sing spoke about the need for shifts in mindset and culture in the face of new challenges. Here is an edited extract of his speech.

This year, we commemorate SG60, MOE70 and NIE75. It is timely for us to look back on how our education system came to be, and look ahead to envision how it will need to be.

PHASE 1 – FOUNDATIONS: FRAGMENTATION TO UNIFICATION

Singapore achieved independence in 1965. But our survival was not a given. Our education system would be key for Singapore's success and survival as a nation.

The pioneers of Singapore were convinced that we needed a unified education system, that would achieve three goals – ensure our people had the skills to find jobs, build a nascent Singaporean identity, and foster cohesion amidst simmering racial tensions.

In the early years, our pioneers had to confront three very immediate and immense challenges.

First, our education infrastructure threatened to buckle under the weight of a growing population. There was a critical shortage of schools. Many had been damaged or destroyed during the war. Teachers were also in short supply.

Second, the education system was split along language fault lines. Schools were classified by language streams which each had their own separate curriculum and examination requirements. Without intervention, we faced the possibility of raising generations of disparate groups of citizens, with different world views, who could communicate only with those in their own language stream. Command of English was also increasingly required for new jobs.

Third, the education system was fragmented. Schools were provided for by various organisations and quality varied widely.

We overcame the capacity issue by the 1970s. Access to education was widespread.

Industrialisation had also created many well-paying jobs.

But as our schools began to take in students with varying levels of ability, the problems of the language fault line and quality became more pronounced.

Global competition was also intensifying. To secure our longer-term economic growth, we had to move up the value chain into more capital- and skill-intensive industries. The quality of our workers' skills had to improve significantly.

PHASE 2 – PROGRESS: POTENTIAL TO PERFORMANCE

Against this backdrop, in 1979, then DPM Goh Keng Swee led a team to produce a ground-breaking report which formed the foundations of a new education system. The report acknowledged that a one-size-fits-all approach to the education system would no longer be adequate. If we hoped to unlock the full potential of our diverse population, we would have to cater to students of different needs, strengths and aptitudes.

A key recommendation of Dr Goh's report was streaming, where students would be grouped into different courses depending on their language proficiencies and academic abilities. This

allowed schools to meet students where they were and foster an environment in which they could reach their potential.

To further support students at every part of the academic ability spectrum, other targeted initiatives were implemented like the introduction of the Gifted Education Programme and Learning Support Programme, and establishment of the Institute of Technical Education.

To match these ambitious changes, we had to make concurrent efforts to further support our educators. In 1973, the Teachers' Training College was revamped to become the Institute of Education, which was the predecessor to NIE.

PHASE 3 – NEW PATHS: ACADEMIC TO HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

By the late 1990s, these moves had borne fruit and our students were performing well at international tests and platforms.

But with the rise of the internet, the world was rapidly changing and reshaping our vision of education and work. Those who could innovate faster would get ahead.

The Thinking Schools, Learning Nation reforms introduced in 1997 marked the beginning of the third phase of our education system. Led by then Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean, we pushed for greater customisation for different learner profiles, to make learning more varied and enriching.

We moved away from a focus on students knowing their factual content – to sharpen their ability to distil and discern information. We developed a new policy framework to support a more holistic curriculum, reduced the national curriculum, and developed the first Information Technology Masterplan in 1997.

We also began creating more open and diverse pathways in the education system. We introduced different programmes and school types to cater to more varied abilities and aspirations, including the Integrated Programme and more specialised schools like Singapore Sports School and Spectra Secondary School.

These key moves were complemented by fundamental system-level changes to empower both educators and schools. Educators' salaries were made more competitive. In 2001, a new three-track career structure for educators was also introduced: consisting of the Leadership Track, Teaching Track and Specialist Track. It was the first of its kind in the world. It signalled that teaching was a multifaceted profession, with diverse peaks of excellence. Schools were also granted greater autonomy to deploy their resources to best meet the needs of their educators and students.

More recently, we continued to strengthen holistic education and diverse pathways. The Enhanced 21st Century Competencies (21CC) was launched in 2023 to place a greater emphasis on adaptive and inventive thinking, communication and civic literacy. The PSLE T-score system was replaced by the Achievement Level system in 2021. Just last year, we fully implemented subject-based banding, replacing the old system of streaming. We are reviewing the Gifted



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Education Programme and Direct School Admission. The number of government and community-funded special education schools has also grown.

We took a lifecycle approach to our investments in education by strengthening both the pre-school foundations and lifelong learning. The Early Childhood Development Agency, jointly overseen by MOE and MSF, was formed in 2013, to oversee the pre-school sector. The SkillsFuture movement was launched in 2015, the first nationwide effort to promote lifelong learning. It set us apart from other countries, which traditionally focused on learning in the foundational years.

WHERE WE NEED TO GO

As we look ahead to the future, we must be clear-eyed about both the opportunities that our high educational base gives us and the potential pitfalls that lie ahead.

Firstly, the proliferation of social media opened the Pandora's box of confirmation bias, echo chambers, and misinformation – which threatens to polarise societies. Beyond just being able to distil information, learning to discern truth, quality, and relevance has become more critical.

Secondly, artificial intelligence has now become easily accessible. If our people can harness this technology, we will punch above our weight. But if we fail to ride this wave, we will be left behind.

Thirdly, protectionism continues to rise globally. As a small city-state, we must work doubly hard to reach out and build partnerships across the world.

We must also guard against complacency on one hand, and overly pressurising our students on the other.

Tests like those run by the OECD measure abilities that are valuable today. But they cannot measure emerging skills needed in the future.

Even as we strive to help our students realise their fullest potential, we must resist narrowly

focusing on grades and hotheadedness in schooling years, which will quash curiosity and a love for learning.

We also need to move away from the focus on internal relativities. The real test is not whether our students surpass one another in their first 15 years in schools but whether they will keep surpassing themselves in the next 50 years.

Our predecessors have passed the baton on to us. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels. We must be obsessed with the future, and what it will demand of us.

We will make two structural shifts, which have already been in progress for years.

First, we will continue to support greater customisation of education to meet diverse abilities, needs, interests and aspirations.

Second, as a society, we must embrace learning beyond schools and books. As an education system, we must resist the urge to overprovide, overprotect and overstructure. The school cannot be our world; instead, the world should be our school. We must also continue to foster a spirit of lifelong learning.

These shifts must be complemented by continued efforts to upskill and support our teaching force, to help them meet these more complex demands. Teaching has never just been the didactic transmission of knowledge.

Even as we make structural shifts, bilingualism must remain a cornerstone of our education system.

REFLECTIONS FOR OUR CONTINUED SUCCESS

Thankfully, we are not starting from scratch. I have the following reflections for our continued success:

First, we must maintain our pursuit of excellence while upholding an open, continuous and compassionate meritocracy.

We cannot be satisfied with "good enough". Each of us must strive to fulfil our fullest potential – be it in academics, or any other field.

We must distinguish the pursuit of excellence in context, from the pursuit of perfection without context, which risks irrelevance. In an uncertain world, we must do the right thing well – not just the same things well.

In our pursuit of excellence through meritocracy, we must guard against becoming an "inheritocracy" of privileges. Our policies must constantly evolve to balance our goals for societal mobility and cohesion. We must intentionally foster inclusion and mixing in our educational policies.

Second, 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. Mindsets and culture must change in tandem with system changes for lasting impact.

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system will ever reduce stress and help us appreciate our diversity of talents. Neither will the removal of mid-year exams reduce students' pressure if we, as parents, pile on what MOE reduces.

All policies will have trade-offs, especially in the short term. Policy consistency and commitment in execution over generations will also be key. We must have the conviction to do the right thing for our people, even when it is unpopular or inconvenient.

Third, we are only stronger together. Educators across MOE HQ, professional institutions, and schools must remain as one unified fraternity.

It cannot and will never be the case that "good teachers only go to good schools". Nor can we allow a divide between those making policy and educators who implement the policy on the front lines of our schools.

We must continue to foster mutual trust, as well as facilitate the flows of people, ideas and best practices across our education system. This ensures that we never become stale and siloed, and that when we level up, we do so together.

Fourth, a society's respect for educators determines the quality of our educators, which in turn shapes the quality of our education system.

Education is fundamentally a human endeavour. It guides a population; it is the inculcation of values, life skills, national identity and a sense of cohesion in our people. Hence, no amount of funding or technology can replace the guidance and personal connections made by our educators.

Our attitude and behaviour towards educators will determine the quality of people that will join us in educating the next generation.

Lastly, students are and always will be at the heart of our education system.

When I look into the bright, expectant faces of our students, filled with hope and possibility, I see the progress we have made – but more importantly, the challenges that remain and the work that lies ahead.

The work to ensure every student has access to education, according to their needs; the work to instil strength of character; and the work to create an environment in which they may fulfil their aspirations.

For 60 years, Singapore has survived and even thrived against the odds. Steered by pioneers who envisioned a shared future even if they did not share a common past – united by common ideals of meritocracy, incorruptibility, multiculturalism, and most fundamentally a commitment to this island and its people.

The education system that we build must not only seek to realise the fullest potential of each student, but also imbue a sense of purpose that inspires them to contribute to Singapore, and the gumption to continue defying the odds.

We have done much. Much is at stake. Yet much more needs to be done.

Education Minister Chan Chun Sing speaking at a lecture organised by MOE, the Institute of Policy Studies and National Institute of Education at Anglo-Chinese Junior College on Feb 11. We must have the conviction to do the right thing for our people, even when it is unpopular or inconvenient, he said.
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