

**Speech by the Prime Minister
Mr Lee Hsien Loong**



**at the
9th World Convention of the International Confederation of Principals
Tuesday, 7 July 2009**

1. Welcome

- (a) 1,400 principals and teachers from 40 countries;
- (b) Education Ministers here for the inaugural International Education Roundtable.

2. Education is the most vital investment that societies can make in their future:

- (a) Only sustainable basis for prosperity and progress;
- (b) Vital for building a society with a sense of cohesion and identity;
- (c) Lift the poor and help disadvantage communities to advance;
- (d) Crucial for developing economies.

3. Education also bridges dissimilar cultures and promotes understanding between different people.

4. Therefore, a key priority for all countries is to improve their education systems:

- (a) This Convention is a chance to share our experiences and glean good ideas;
- (b) Today I will talk about what Singapore has done;
- (c) Later hope to learn of your experiences.

5. The Singapore Education System evolved from the British education system:

- (a) Generally 6 years of primary education and 4 to 5 years of secondary education;
- (b) We have 170 primary schools and 170 secondary schools;
- (c) Under our laws, compulsory education is only through Primary level;
- (d) But some 99% complete 10 years of schooling;
- (e) About 9 in 10 progress further into publicly funded ITE, Polytechnics and Junior Colleges.
- (f) Eventually nearly half of cohort obtain degrees – half of these from our public-funded universities and the rest from overseas and private universities.

6. Given our limited natural resources, our human capital is of paramount importance:

- (a) We have to ensure that we teach our people the best we can;
- (b) Our system today emphasises rigour and relevance at all levels;

- (c) We have achieved good outcomes spending 3.5% of GDP on education – lower than the OECD average (5.8%);
- (d) Wherever they graduate from, students receive a solid grounding and education, and gain valuable skills for life.

7. We did not start off like this:

- (a) Even up till 1980, less than 30 years ago, only 60% completed secondary school;
- (b) We made many reforms over the years;
- (c) I will explain how we got here, focussing on the Primary and Secondary levels.

8. Starting point 1959, when Singapore first gained self-government:

- (a) Rapidly growing population;
- (b) Desperate need for school places;
- (c) Huge expansion in capacity;
- (d) Result predictable – lowered standards, high drop-out rates, illiterate school leavers.

9. Major reforms started in 1979 under Dr Goh Keng Swee – *Systems Overhaul*:

- (a) He brought in system engineers and overhauled the education system;
- (b) Tuned it into an efficient “teaching machine”;
- (c) Introduced streaming, starting at primary 4;
- (d) Developed a national curriculum that emphasised basic skills – the 3R’s;
- (e) Directed the schools to teach it, and allowed little room for deviation;
- (f) Gradually, failure rates fell and grades started improving.

10. System was suited for our rapid industrialisation:

- (a) But as Singapore progressed and the world changed, our education system had to evolve as well;
- (b) Prepare the new generation for a new world;
- (c) Basics of numeracy and literacy remain critical;
- (d) But new competencies needed to:
 - i) Critical and creative thinking;
 - ii) Working effectively in teams;
 - iii) Life skills and social competency;
 - iv) Ability to adapt and continue learning in a changing environment.
- (e) Needed to:
 - i) Inculcate these new skills;
 - ii) Raise standards across the board;
 - iii) Create more diversified avenues for students;
 - iv) Create more peaks of excellence.
- (f) Weakness of system:
 - i) Control too centralised;
 - ii) not enough authority and resources devolved to schools;
 - iii) Not enough “support structure” to oversee and guide schools;
 - iv) Not enough attention on keeping teaching an attractive vocation.

11. Hence launched the next series of reforms in the late 90s – *Focus on School Leaders and Teachers*:

- (a) Put in more resources, built new infrastructure (new schools), deployed technology (IT), but these were not the key factors;
- (b) New skills cannot be taught through edicts or textbooks;
- (c) Need enthusiastic and dedicated teachers;

- (d) Led by resourceful and passionate principals;
- (e) Supported by high quality staff at HQ;
- (f) Nothing short of revamping the entire system was needed.

12. We strengthened the Education Minister HQ:

- (a) We had not built up the Minister HQ enough, to supervise the running of the school system, and to plan ahead to develop and upgrade the system;
- (b) With over 340 schools, we needed more brainpower in the centre;
- (c) We brought in more high calibre people, both generalists and specialists:
 - i) Generalists (Administrative Officers) who understood the broader needs of the nation and could develop an education system and policies to meet these needs;
 - ii) Specialists (Education Service Officers) who understand education and our pupils, who could develop curricula, programmes that would work in the schools;
 - iii) We intended to devolve authority to principals and schools;
 - iv) But even then we still needed a highly competent HQ to oversee the system.

13. We created a “support structure” to guide schools:

- (a) The “fan-out” ratio 1:340 was ridiculously high;
- (b) Hence we introduced the school cluster system;
- (c) Created clusters of around a dozen schools;
- (d) Each supervised by an experienced principal, who became the cluster superintendent;
- (e) Schools in the same cluster could share resources, exchange ideas, organise joint activities;
- (f) This also allowed us to try out younger, less experienced but promising teachers as school principals.

14. We strengthened the teaching service:

- (a) Pay had fallen behind;
- (b) Teaching was not seen as an attractive career:
 - i) Too few wanted to become teachers;
 - ii) Too many teachers were leaving the service;
- (c) Raised teachers’ pay by 15% and principals’ pay by 1/3:
 - i) Paid trainee teachers a fully salary instead of just training allowance;
 - ii) Set explicit private sector salary benchmarks, and continued to adjust regularly as private sector moved;
 - iii) Allowed us to recruit better quality teachers;
 - iv) Including those who came in mid-career, and brought with them a range of valuable experiences;
- (d) Enhanced career development:
 - i) Created more promotion possibilities;
 - ii) Developed different advancement tracks – teaching, senior specialist and leadership;
 - iii) Created opportunities for further training.
- (e) Introduced performance assessment and performance bonuses:
 - i) Not easily accepted by teachers at first – Dr Goh had decided in favour of a simpler seniority-based system in the first wave of reforms;
 - ii) We implemented formal appraisal systems and promoted and rewarded teachers on merit;
 - iii) Teachers and the union were brought on board;
 - iv) Principals and HOD’s had to acquire people assessment skills;

- v) So they would make the right judgements which were accepted and respected.
- (f) Devolved promotions to personnel boards, in tandem with developments in the entire public service:
 - i) Under the old system, promotions for all public officers were centrally decided by the Public Service Commission (PSC);
 - ii) PSC could not handle the workload of 20,000 teachers;
 - iii) Also the system gave the Ministry and supervisors too little say over who was promoted and when;
 - iv) Typically promotion exercises for teachers were only held every other year;
 - v) We changed the system to vest promotion decisions in a system of Personnel Boards, comprising senior management in the education system;
 - vi) For senior grades we had a Senior Personnel Board, which included permanent secretaries from other ministries;
 - vii) The top post – the Director General of Education – was still appointed and promoted by the PSC;
 - viii) Move may seem like an operational matter, but it was in fact critical to all changes;
 - ix) In the first year after the devolution, more than half the teachers were promoted (including many back-logged cases)!

15. We advanced young and promising officers to become HOD's and principals:

- (a) School leaders, especially principals, critical to school performance;
- (b) With a good principal, whole school blossoms;
- (c) With a bad one, keen, idealistic young teachers quickly lose their enthusiasm and "switch off";
- (d) Now we have some school principals who are in their late 30s;
- (e) We also have more senior principals, a good number in Superscale grades.

16. We gave schools the authority to innovate:

- (a) To structure the teaching as they judged fit (e.g. doing away with some exams);
- (b) To experiment with new approaches;
- (c) To go beyond the basics, to enrich activities.

17. We also gave them resources to match:

- (a) E.g. Edusave, Opportunity Fund, Financial Assistance Schemes;
- (b) To run their schools, to go beyond the basic curriculum, and to ensure that poor students could afford;
- (c) Initially, principals not sure what to do:
 - i) I once asked an experienced and passionate principal what she would do with more resources;
 - ii) She paused, because she was not used to having resources, or having the authority to decide;
- (d) But soon the schools learnt, and embarked on a rich array of programmes:
 - i) Extra admin staff to relieve teachers;
 - ii) Special programmes in arts, drama, etc;
 - iii) Computers for poor kids;
 - iv) Study trips abroad for kids who have done well;
 - v) Enormous impact and enriching experiences for all the students.
- (e) Schools also got the community involved;
 - i) Enterprising Principals roped in parents, VWOs and companies;
 - ii) Schools built up local and even international networks;

- iii) These give schools additional resources and ideas to do more for their students;
- (f) Result – better morale, discipline, motivation and academic results.

18. One thing we did not do was to reduce class size:

- (a) This was a conscious decision on the part of the government;
- (b) We came under some pressure to do this, including in parliament;
- (c) But small classes meant taking in more teachers, and if our system was not ready, the quality of teachers would suffer;
- (d) So we resisted the pressure and focused on the other reforms.

19. Only recently have we revisited this issue:

- (a) Size of each cohort has come down;
- (b) Teacher recruitment has increased, with quality being maintained;
- (c) Hence we are starting to improve the teacher-student ratio;
- (d) Recently reduced lower Primary classes from 40-30 pupils. Additional teachers targeted to help weaker students and to start new programmes. More time for teachers for professional development called "timetable time".
- (e) Also adding a new group of people in our schools – allied educators who work in counselling, support children with mild learning disabilities and helping teachers in classrooms.
- (f) So more attention can be devoted to each kid.

20. Many other reforms too:

- (a) Curriculum – Teach Less Learn More;
- (b) Structure of schools – more diverse options in secondary schools;
- (c) Admissions – to allow schools to admit not based strictly on exam results;
- (d) Will skip over details today.

21. This second wave took a long time and persistent efforts to take effect:

- (a) But gradually, we began to see positive signs;
- (b) Not all schools have the same student profiles;
- (c) Not all students do equally well;
- (d) Some schools are better than others;
- (e) But achieving main aim:
 - i) Schools developing their own identities and expertise;
 - ii) A high standard across the board in all schools;
 - iii) A good number of outstanding schools;
 - iv) Many models of success;
 - v) Students who emerge well-educated, employable, with a sense of social responsibility.
- (f) Principals and teachers proud of what they are doing, and proud of their students.

22. This system is helping us to produce a competent, creative people:

- (a) Literate;
- (b) Well-socialised;
- (c) Leaders of tomorrow.

23. McKinsey has done a report which suggests three essential ingredients to produce best-performing schools:

- (a) Getting the right people to become teachers;
- (b) Developing them into effective instructors;

- (c) Ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

24. Our experience corroborates the report findings:

- (a) System to produce energised, capable Principals backed by competent teachers;
- (b) Resources for schools to customise programmes according to the needs of their students;
- (c) Strong central support and guidance;
- (d) Political leadership:
 - i) Driving the process;
 - ii) Putting heavy emphasis on education;
 - iii) But also shielding the education system from politics.

25. We are continuing to improve our system. Several things we want to do:

- (a) Enhance capacity of teaching force:
 - i) All graduate recruitment from 2015;
 - ii) Stronger body to champion professional development;
- (b) Re-balance our curriculum to place more emphasis on “soft” skills;
- (c) Find ways to give more opportunities for all, and create more pathways to success.

26. Our educators are keen to learn from successful models in other countries:

- (a) Despite our different contexts, there are common lessons;
- (b) Look forward to sharing experiences;
- (c) Always room for improvement;
- (d) We owe it to our children to constantly upgrade our education systems.