The year 1991 has been a busy year for educational policy makers. Though the objectives had remained unchanged and the fundamental structure solid, there was need for fine-tuning the system. In particular, economic imperatives had indicated a need to reduce wastage and to promote a ten-year general education regime; pressure continued for more access and a diversity of routes to tertiary education. Problems had also continued to surface with the implementation of the bilingual policy and new initiatives were required. Finally, a new minister, Mr Lee Yock Suan has taken over and major changes to the structure and curriculum have been announced as a response to these needs.

Primary and Secondary Education

One major area for which change proposals were made is primary education. In March 1991, the Ministry of Education released the report on Improving Primary School Education which proposed far-reaching changes to primary and secondary education. Among the reasons advanced were the following:
(a) additional time was required for weaker students to master bilingualism,
(b) high incidence of lateral transfer between streams made it necessary to postpone streaming by one year, and
(c) VITB institutes were burdened with poorly prepared students resulting in a high incidence of drop-outs.

The main changes proposed are as follows:
(a) provision of a three-stage, seven-year primary education system which placed emphasis on English, the mother-tongue and Mathematics, viz: a one-year preparatory stage (pre-school), a four-year foundation stage (P1 - P4) and a two-year orientation stage (P5 - P6);
(b) revision of the distribution of curriculum time from P1 to P4, setting aside 33% for English, 20% for Mathematics and 20% for other subjects, and retaining the present allocation of 27% for mother-tongue and moral education; schools would be given flexibility and latitude in the allocation of curriculum time according to the needs and abilities of their pupils, especially taking into account the language(s) they used at home;
(c) delaying of formal streaming at the end of P3 to the end of P4 and providing three language learning streams at P5 and P6;
(d) modification of the PSLE from a pass-fail examination to a placement examination;
(e) expansion of the Normal course in Secondary school to include a Normal (Technical) course. This is intended to enlarge educational opportunities for weaker pupils, thus ensuring that more of them will have ten years of general education, and
(f) upgrading the VITB to an Institute of Technical Education.
The preparatory stage proposal is intended to assist pupils from homes where the official languages are not used; early exposure to school languages, it is believed, would assist pupils in making an easier transition from home to school. It is intended as a temporary measure, since it is expensive to provide the additional year, and it is to be discontinued when kindergartens are better able to provide for such pupils.

The announcement of the new streaming policy has generated considerable discussion. Many Chinese educated commentators felt that it would further erode the status of Mandarin. Following the 1991 General Election the government reviewed its proposals and agreed to create a stream to allow students able and wishing to learn Chinese as a first language and English as a third language to do so and to learn upper primary Mathematics and Science at the upper primary level in the mother tongue.

Earlier in the year, Dr Tony Tan had announced the appointment of Mr Ong Teng Cheong to head a committee to look into the problem of teaching the mother-tongue, especially Mandarin, more effectively. The problem, particularly of bright students being unable to master Mandarin, and fears that standards and competence in Mandarin were being eroded prompted the move to identify better teaching methods.

The government also announced that it intended to modify the criteria and admission procedure for Primary 1. Parents had complained about the cumbersome procedure and expressed a belief that the criteria were not equitable, fearing that access to good primary schools would be given to those with siblings studying or having studied in the school, and parents with connections to the school, as well as constituency leaders.

At the same time the Institute of Education was upgraded to the National institute of Education - it now offers degree programmes - and incorporated as part of NTU. It was also announced that in order to maximize human resources in Singapore and to provide working adults with further education opportunities, an open university would be set up in 1992; this proposal was later modified to encouraging a private sector institution to offer distance learning courses. With the addition of Temasek Polytechnic established in 1990 and the announcement of Nanyang Polytechnic to be established in 1992, opportunities for polytechnic education have improved considerably. The Institute of Technical Education will complement the role of the polytechnics in providing technical manpower. Outstanding graduates from the polytechnics and ITE will now have increased access to universities in Singapore and abroad. This broadening of access to post-secondary education is a welcome departure from the more rigid policies of the past and should help Singapore attain the goal of having more of its secondary school cohort in post-secondary institutions.

Changes in Educational Funding

The government is committed to increasing spending on education, from 4% to 5% of GDP if required. Further, two bold initiatives were unveiled in 1991. An Edusave Scheme, an early initiative of Mr Goh Chok Tong, provides grants to be given to each child between six and sixteen years to meet specified educational expenses. The scheme will see the setting up of an endowment fund with a capital sum of one billion dollars to be topped up yearly to five billion dollars. Students will be given grants with income generated from this fund and which could be used for tuition classes in schools, extra courses such as music and computer classes, educational tours, textbooks and part of miscellaneous fees in independent schools. This scheme, as noted by Mr Goh, incorporated an element of choice in the usage of funds, thus serving to customise the usage of educational
facilities according to need. Subsequently, a revised proposal was made. In addition to a reduced grant to individual students, funds from the scheme would be spent on providing scholarships to cover fees of the top 25% of students in independent schools, and annual grants to government and government-aided schools. A major boost was also provided to tertiary education by way of a $1 billion dollar University Endowment Fund which the government launched to support special and innovative projects. The government gave an initial $250 million grant to each institution and promised to match dollar for dollar funds raised by the universities up to $250 million for both institutions.

Education and the Communities

On the community front, a major initiative was the publication of the report of the Action Committee on Indian Education entitled ‘At the Crossroads’. It graphically demonstrated what had become widely known, that the performance of Indian children had slipped considerably at all levels, and it set ambitious targets, the elevation to the national average of the standard of performance of Indian students at all levels by 2010. Particular attention was to be paid to Mathematics, and the education problem was to be tackled on a broad front, involving as well working with Indian parents in the lower socio-economic group. Broadly speaking, the strategy adopted was similar to that pioneered by MENDAKI - community self-help with strong and visible leadership and government support, including financial support. It has also been announced that a Chinese Development Assistance Council has been formed and one of its tasks would be to help underachieving pupils in the Chinese community.

These changes will have major and far-reaching effects on Singapore's education system. It would be naive to think that other changes are unlikely for a dynamic socio-economic environment like Singapore’s needs a responsive education system. If care is taken in the implementation of these changes there are good prospects for a strengthening of the system.