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Singapore: Review of Educational Events in 1993

S. Gopinathan



1993 can best be described as a year of consolidation. Particular attention was paid in the Ministry to developing implementation guidelines for the beginning of the Normal (Technical) stream at the secondary levels and to implementing Edusave.

Implementing Edusave

In 1993 all Singaporean students between the age of six and sixteen began receiving a grant of \$50 from the government. The grant may be used to help pay for approved extra-curricular activities or other programmes organised by schools. In addition there were 2,000 scholarships worth \$500 for the top 5% of pupils in government and aided schools and 2,000 scholarships worth \$300 for students in the next 5%. The top 25% of pupils in 8 independent schools also received grants. The government also, under the Education Endowment Scheme, announced that each secondary school would receive annual grants of \$100,000 each. The principal aim of the scheme was to allow schools to use the additional resources to develop enrichment programmes for pupils.

These quite considerable transfers of funds to students and schools are proof of the government's aim to develop human resource potential in Singapore. The Edusave Endowment Fund will eventually amount to \$5 billion. With the transfer of \$1.5 billion to education via these funds in 1993, expenditure on education was estimated at 5.5% of GDP.

Implementing the IPSE Report

As noted above a particular concern of planners was the implementation of the proposals of the IPSE Report. The Ministry announced that there would be four core subjects, English, Mathematics, Computer Application and Basic Mother Tongue. Additional subjects would be Science, Technical Studies and Home Economics. The course of studies would lead to the 'N' level examination with high achieving pupils being allowed to sit for the 'O' level examinations. It is estimated that about 10 – 15% of each cohort of primary school pupils will go to the new course.

An Enriched Arts Curriculum

The National Arts Council announced in January a three-part Arts Education Programme for primary, secondary and junior college students. The Council said its aim was to reach 50,000 students in 1993 with 376 music, dance and drama performances. The three parts are an Arts Exposure Programme, Arts Experience Programme and Arts Excursion Programme. The scheme promises to create greater interest in the arts among students and well compliments the Art and Music elective programmes.

Schools Ranking Exercise

The ranking exercise initiated by the *Straits Times* with the assistance of the Ministry continued to generate considerable interest. Some principals were reported to have said that the rankings raised the motivation of teachers and students

to do better. The rankings showed that while the performance of top schools was consistent, there was considerable mobility among the lower ranked schools. Some neighbourhood schools improved in their performance and some principals attributed poor performance to poor facilities and poor attitude among students. There were suggestions for improving the reliability of the ranking exercise, one of them being the creation of a "composite aggregate" based on the PSLE mean, average grades of students . . . and five relevant subjects and the percentage of students with at least 5 'O' level passes.

Concern with School Dropouts

In two speeches, the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong highlighted the problem of school dropouts. He said that the primary and secondary school dropout rates among the 1981 Primary 1 cohort for all races added up to 6.7% or 2,800 students. The figures, he noted, were increasing among Tamil and Malay students. A common characteristic of these pupils was that they came mainly from large families, had poorly educated parents and lived in smaller HDB flats. He said

that all communities, the Ministry of Education and the schools must lead in the battle to get potential dropouts to continue schooling. "The schools", he said, "played a critical role in spotting potential dropouts, guiding and encouraging them to stay in school."

Principals' Conference

The Principals' Conference was an idea mooted by the Prime Minister and intended to promote better leadership in the profession. The first conference was held in September and organized around the theme "All Children Can Learn and Achieve: The Schools' Challenge." Speaking at the Opening Ceremony, the Prime Minister spoke of the need to attract and retain talent in the education service. He said that teachers' salaries would be adjusted and more promotion opportunities would be provided for promising young officers. Mr John Yip, Director of Education urged principals to create teaching and learning conditions that would allow pupils to be daring and creative and overcome the "one-right-answer" syndrome.