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## Speeches

Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education at the 16th Appointment and Appreciation Ceremony for Principals, Shangri-La Hotel, 27 December 2013

**Ms Indranee Rajah**  
Senior Minister of State  
Ministry of Education and Ministry of Law

**Ms Sim Ann**  
Minister of State  
Ministry of Communications and Information and Ministry of Education

**Mr Hawazi Daipi**  
Senior Parliamentary Secretary  
Ministry of Education and Ministry of Manpower

**Ms Chan Lai Fung**  
Permanent Secretary (Education)

**Mr Neo Kian Hong**  
Permanent Secretary (Education Development)

**Ms Ho Peng**  
Director-General of Education

Distinguished guests

Principals

Ladies and Gentlemen

### Introduction

1 Every year, we gather to honour our senior education officers who are retiring, and to formally appoint our principals. It is also a special occasion for us to come together to reflect on our work in the past year, and to inspire each other to do even better in the coming year. I always look forward to this major event on our MOE calendar because I enjoy interacting with all of you, and you play such a critical role in nurturing our students.

## Leaders in Learning

2 We can look back at the past year with quiet pride that almost half a million students have progressed to their next level of learning, and an entire cohort has moved successfully to the next stage of their learning journey in our post-secondary institutions. We can also be pleased that in the 2012 PISA benchmarking study, Singapore's 15-year-olds came out amongst the top five in every category. Even more satisfying is that our weaker students did better this time than in the last exercise three years before, even as our stronger students continued to show mastery. We take heart not because of the rankings we achieved, but because this is an affirmation that the work of our school leaders and educators is translating into deep and effective learning. Our students are acquiring the good foundation for their lifelong journey of learning. Thank you all for your reflective and committed work; and let us strive to continue to work together to encourage our students to learn, grow and persevere.

3 At our MOE Workplan Seminar this year, I said that our students will be entering a more challenging world — a VUCA world — one of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. To be ready for such a world, a student-centric, values-driven education is critical. We must strive to give every student a broad and deep foundation for a lifelong journey of life and learning. This goal seems simple, but carries with it many layers of embedded meanings. Translating this into programmes — indeed, not just programmes, but the insights on teaching and learning within these — requires deep understanding and creativity, and the whole-hearted commitment of our school leaders.

4 As it is, even today, our school leaders are very busy managing a range of complex demands. There are a hundred and one things calling for your decision each day, and your daily challenges may not be obvious to the public eye. There is the list of to-dos from MOE HQ; you have to coach younger teachers who joined us recently; and some parents can be quite demanding. Social media can exacerbate this — I once deleted a post on my Facebook demanding that I sack a certain school leader. Character assassination of this nature has no place in our society. School leaders, you have my assurance that as long as you do the right thing, I stand by you.

5 When we look further back (and our MOE Heritage Centre has some lovely materials), we find the principal was one of the most respected people in his village. Being the only literate member, others sought his help to read and write letters and to advise on a range of matters, and they deferred to the principal on how to educate their children. The good work of successive generations of educators has enabled many more Singaporeans to be better educated. This is a good thing, but the better educated parents are, the higher their expectations of their children, translating in turn into even higher expectations of our teachers and school leaders. Sometimes, these expectations can generate excessive pressure on children. But on balance, it is better that parents care, than if they could not be bothered. Our response to this challenge must be to translate the aspirations of these parents into an effective partnership with us, so that children can learn productively and develop holistically.

6 To do this, our principals need to redefine this leadership position in our society — not because you are the only literate member of the village, but because of your wealth of experience and wisdom as a leader in education.

7 On this occasion last year, I defined the five roles of school leadership as Leading Learning, Leading People, Leading Culture, Leading Change and Leading Nationally. Two of these roles — leading people and leading culture — recognise that, as leaders, we can never do our work alone. Nothing much can be achieved unless we can inspire and develop our team to work together towards a common goal.

The other two roles — leading change and leading nationally — recognise that as leaders in the wider education system and public sector, our work is intimately linked to striving with fellow educators and fellow Singaporeans to build a better education system, a better society and a better future for all. In these four roles, you have much in common with other leaders of organisations.

8 But it is the first role — Leading Learning — that defines the school leader. Imagine you are in a room of CEOs and parents who are in various fields of endeavours. You stand out and are respected because of your insights, your deep understanding, and your accumulated wisdom as a leader in education. After all, the core of an educator’s work is in teaching and learning.

9 Notice that I used the word ‘wisdom’ instead of knowledge. I believe that as a leader in education, you need to combine the science and the art of teaching and learning. Over the years, research in education practices and in cognitive science has given us practical insights into how humans learn. I read up avidly on these areas. I am delighted that, even as the experts share their latest insights, somewhere in our schools, our school leaders are already testing out new ideas in teaching and learning. In my visits to schools, I see many innovative practices in action.

10 But wisdom does not come just from mastering the science of learning. The science itself is evolving and there is much that we do not yet know. Wisdom includes the art of education, which is about abiding by timeless values and principles, and making judgments on whether specific practices that seem to have worked well elsewhere are relevant in our context. This art is honed by many years of practical experience at the frontline, and by reflective practices.

11 I am delighted that Peng, our Director-General of Education, by personal example, leads such a fine group of specialists and frontline teachers and school leaders. The rare combination of being open to new ideas, keeping rigorous about the evidence, staying unswayed by fads and fashion, and having a real touch-and-feel of what works, developed over many years of practical experience, allows our leaders in education to make the right decisions and to do the right thing in our schools. This is the wisdom of our experienced leaders in education that we must continue to nurture in our new leaders.

## Push the Frontier of Learning

12 As a leader in learning, our school leaders must continue to push the frontiers of learning. We must always ask: “How do I help the students in my school learn better?”

13 Across our schools, there are many stories of how students are motivated and inspired by their teachers, there are many good programmes which we celebrate and share through awards and showcases.

14 Take for example our continual improvements in deepening core learning, especially in numeracy and literacy. STELLAR, our language and reading programme, is built on the insight that children learn better when their imagination is ignited. Our principals have become passionate advocates for STELLAR, and take a personal interest in motivating our children to read and learn. Mr Eric Leong of Coral Primary School even dresses up as one of the characters in the STELLAR books. Needless to say, the children and their teachers find the story and lessons quite unforgettable. For numeracy, by paying attention to how children really learn and being prepared to challenge conventional methods, we tested several approaches to enable students to “see” math in action through pictures and hands-on activities.

15 Besides continually improving on core learning, a second frontier is to attend to social-emotional learning, help students gain confidence, and set them on a positive path of learning, growth and success.

16 Recently, I got a letter from a parent whose son was not doing well, and had to repeat his Sec 2 year at Changkat Changi Secondary School. At the end of Sec 3, however, he surprised his mother when he brought home three A's and the Model Student Award. The proud mother sent me his report card, saying it was all thanks to his principal Mrs Yeow Lee Lin.

17 She wrote: "My son was addicted to computer gaming and did not go to school for nearly half a year when he was in Sec 2. It was Mrs Yeow's indirect support and guardianship that helped him to improve. Without her help, my son could have dropped out of school or remained at home with his computer, or worse, maybe even mixed with bad company. With her busy and tight schedule in the school, she still constantly monitors my son's progress and even gave me advice on how to get along well with my son by putting more trust in him."

18 She went on to describe how the teachers for different subjects helped her son. Through the mother's eyes, I see a whole team working together to develop the child social-emotionally, in the way that best suits him, so that he may really learn.

19 A third frontier that our school leaders can push is the one within each child — expand the horizon that each child believes is open to him, broaden his exposure and catalyse new interests. I met a Singapore Polytechnic student recently. She studies mechatronics. I asked her how she got interested in this field, and she said it was by chance in Hai Sing Catholic School. When she was choosing a CCA, she initially thought she should do the "girl thing" but decided to give the school's Robotics Club a try instead. The activities ignited her passion, and she hopes to get into SUTD to pursue this field, or to start her own mechatronics company.

20 You never know what will spark a child's passion. The privilege of the educator is to create those opportunities for a child to encounter his passion. It is to start such sparks that we launched the Applied Learning programmes. And it is to attend to social-emotional learning that we are launching the Learning for Life Programmes.

21 I am very heartened by how our school leaders are pushing the frontiers of learning across these domains. I am confident that your wisdom as leaders in education will grow. Underpinning this wisdom in the art and science of education is of course your love for the children under your charge.

22 Mrs Lysia Kee, Principal of Bukit Batok Secondary School, who is retiring this year after 36 years in service, puts it this way in a farewell letter to her principal mentee. She says, "The Principal is a leader who is more than a CEO. She is a leader whose first duty is to care and love and this duty embraces the willingness to take every opportunity to nurture, to guide, to lead." Take every opportunity, as Mrs Kee says.

### Lead amid Trust and Support

23 Just as our students are on a learning journey, you too are on a journey, one of leadership — and you take this journey with friends and supporters. HQ is committed to support you to grow your leadership knowledge and capability. Some of you have benefited from the structured Learning Series

for newly-appointed Vice-Principals. All of you have attended NIE's 'Leaders in Education Programme', where a big part of the experience, beyond professional learning, is the camaraderie and bonding within each LEP cohort of educators. **New principals come into your own under a two-year mentoring scheme by the Academy of Principals (Singapore).**

24 School leaders already meet to share your experiences at the cluster level. I've seen the quarterly 'we-Lead' e-magazine that MOE produces for School Leaders. I am glad it is now a portal so you can access resources easily, and can connect across all schools and clusters. Do tap on this fraternity of school leaders, learn and discourse together, and grow collectively in your leadership.

25 **The Academy of Principals (APS) also actively supports your development. This year, APS organised the inaugural Asia-Pacific Education Assessment Conference to help principals engage subject matter experts both locally and abroad. Principals appreciated this first conference, and APS will continue to organise it every two years. Together with the biennial APS Global Education Conference, and the six-monthly collection of stories Principia, APS provides school leaders with a steady stream of lessons and inspiration.**

26 **I have asked the Academy of Principals to help me arrange an opportunity to spend more time with our school leaders — I would like to hear from you about your ideas, challenges, and hopes. I look forward to a good exchange as members of a community of support and trust.**

27 Now, I wish to express my appreciation for 23 Senior Education Officers who are retiring or leaving us. Collectively, you have served an amazing 862 years as teachers, principals and at MOEHQ. Many are indebted to you for your guidance, counsel, encouragement and inspiration.

28 One of our retiring principals, Mrs Chan Kwai Foong of Yishun Primary School, has made such an impact that her school's Exco felt moved to write me, Peng and some others a letter of appreciation. Their words reveal a principal who shows leadership in caring for and developing all her students and teachers. She checked up on students who were ill, kept up with her teachers' family lives, even helped one teacher to get married! Once, Mrs Chan insisted on being present for a graduation tea despite being ill, saying it was impossible for her to miss it. Mrs Chan's Exco wrote, "We could not help but feel a 'sense of loss' in us — not only losing a well-regarded principal but a fellow educator, a mentor and most important of all — a mother."

29 Of our retiring principals, the longest-serving is Mrs Chin Shin Wea. Over a span of 27 years, she has led Fuhua Primary, Chongde Primary, Seng Kang Primary, Loyang Primary and Kranji Primary to greater heights. In her own way, Mrs Chin has married character and values education with social emotional development. Because she gives student leaders the chance to share their thoughts during morning assemblies, students grow in confidence and also help each other learn about good values like showing appreciation for teachers and keeping the environment clean. Peer sharing shapes the students in an organic way, and the wider community finds Mrs Chin's students to be appreciative, well-mannered and disciplined. Examples like Mrs Chin's show the positive impact of strong school leadership. There are many more such stories.

30 To all of you, we say thank you, not goodbye. I hope you will keep your association with our schools, and continue to share your wisdom and experience with successive generations of principals.

Conclusion

31 To the Principals receiving your appointment letters today, you will read this in your letter: “Through your hands passes the future of the nation.” Education is a journey for our students. For our school leaders, it is a relay of leading this journey. Each of you receiving your appointment today is being passed the torch. The school you lead is entrusted into your care. Honour the good work of the principal before you. Build on it to lead your school and students into their next phase of growth. Pass on an even brighter torch to the next principal. In this way, each school is shaped, lovingly and steadily, by many pairs of hands that, over changing times and challenges, will make every school a good school.

32 I wish you every success in your new appointments. And I wish you joy and meaning on your leadership journey.

33 Thank you.

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