

## Notice for the Sitting of Parliament on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2010

### MOTION

#### **PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION:**

That this House, with a view to better preparing our children for school and life, urges the Government to conduct a comprehensive review of pre-school education in Singapore by rationalising issues of continuity to formal schooling, variance in standards and fees, and equal opportunities.

By Mr Viswa Sadasivan (Nominated Member)

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#### **Preamble**

1. Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to move this motion.
2. I started formal schooling in 1966 in Cantonment Primary - a typical neighbourhood school where most of us were from lower income families. I didn't go to Kindergarten, but was fortunate to have parents who emphasised education - even though, and especially because they were hardly educated. More importantly, being the youngest of six children, I had the benefit of being taught how to read at home when I was five. At the age of six, I could count and knew my

multiplication table up to 12 and then 16. Yet, when I went to primary one, the teacher worked on the assumption that we couldn't read or count and so we started with basic lessons on the alphabet and numbers. A handful of us were ahead of most in the class, but we enjoyed the relaxed pace and saw it as revision and, of course, more time to play! Quite a few of those from fairly poor family background, who didn't attend Kindergarten and didn't have the benefit of home tutoring before primary school, caught up pretty fast and became star performers in a year or two. This was only possible because the majority of us were from similar socio-economic backgrounds and the pace of teaching was measured, catering to those who couldn't read or count.

3. By the time we were in Primary 3, it was more or less a level playing field. The differentiating factors were hard work, parental guidance and, to a lesser extent, intelligence.
4. We had equal opportunities to do well, regardless of whether we were from rich, middle-income or poor families - essentially because, from what I could see, teaching was benchmarked at the median performer in class. And at that time, there wasn't much difference between the median and mean because the socio-economic disparity wasn't significant. And the clear emphasis on merit - where the best performer, regardless of his background,

would be rewarded - gave parents from the lower income segment of society enough incentive to push and motivate their children to do their best and have a crack at success in life. And for us, the pupils - because we saw fairly immediate results of hard work, we were motivated to continue working hard. As such, top schools like Raffles Institution and Raffles Girls Secondary School - which had the pick of the top 2% of each cohort - had a significant proportion of students coming from families in the lower income segment of society. Many of these students, such as Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Mr Goh Chok Tong, went on to help lead the country. In fact, many of us of the right vintage would be familiar with the line, “RI ruled the country, and ACS owned it”, because unlike in RI and RGS, students from ACS tended to come from families that were financially and socially well heeled!

5. This was the strength of our education system. Indeed, this was the strength of Singapore society then - where an enlightened and forward looking government acted on the cardinal twin principles of meritocracy and equal opportunity, to give enough hope to parents, rich or poor, that their children would have a fair crack at success, and with that a good life. And education was the ultimate social leveller.
6. Seeing how serious the government was in ensuring that this remains sacrosanct - there was a strong buy-in from the

ground. This belief, coupled with a deep trust in our political leaders - their integrity and sincerity - proved to be a powerful incentive for parents to be that much more driven to push their children to excel. The rewards of hard work were eminently evident.

7. Over the years, we have continued to benefit from our political leadership's unstinting emphasis on education. The result - generations of Singaporeans went to school, got qualifications and skills that meant jobs, and over time, better paying jobs and with that, the opportunity for a better life. We would be remiss if we take this for granted and are not grateful.
8. A better educated workforce provided the ballast for continued economic growth. This, in turn, meant a more sophisticated populace, which, having tasted the good life started to demand more. The result - growing aspirations.
9. At the macro level, growing regional and global competition meant that to continue to grow as an economy, we needed more people with better qualifications and skills.
10. The challenge of managing and maintaining success became acute, especially from the 1980s. This meant having to balance three goals:
  - providing a level playing field for all, based on equal opportunities and meritocracy

- fulfilling the aspirations of an increasingly affluent and demanding population, and
  - producing more better qualified and skilled individuals as prime-movers of economic growth.
11. Clearly, economic growth was, and continues to be, a key determinant of our survivability as a country. To a large extent, therefore, economic considerations underpin educational policies. This, in turn, meant that the goals of producing better qualified and skilled individuals, and fulfilling the aspirations of an increasingly affluent society assumed primacy. I believe that this contributed to key educational policies, such as streaming. There was growing pressure to address the needs of more educated and demanding parents who didn't want to see their children's performance in school retarded by them having to keep pace with the slower performing students in class.
12. The socio-economic demographics of Singapore society has also changed significantly over the past 45 years. An outcome of economic prosperity is that the "haves" outnumber the "have-nots" in our society. This means that the gap between the mean and median student has widened. For the reasons I've highlighted earlier, if economic growth is an overriding imperative, then the mean student becomes the benchmark. Consequently, helping to propel those above the mean to attain peak performance in school naturally becomes the focus as this

is the segment that has the strongest bearing on economic growth.

13. I'm not suggesting that there is a deliberate policy to ignore the needs of students who don't perform as well in school. Credit has to be given to the government for continuing to seek ways to lift the overall performance of these students. Regardless, there appears to be a widening gap between the better and weaker performers in school that, in turn, translates to an exacerbation of the widening socio-economic gap in society.
14. If there is no intervention, by way of policy shifts, the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" will continue to widen at a faster pace. In fact, the education system instead of being a social-leveller could become an active contributor to the widening socio-economic gap.
15. Several members of this House have in the recent past raised concerns on this subject. There have been questions about inequality, access to quality pre-school education, whether we should nationalise pre-schooling, and what the goals of pre-school education should be. There is clearly interest expressed in this House to see an improvement in the quality of pre-school education, making it more affordable and accessible to all our children regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.

16. It is evident that, for a maximum shift towards a desirable outcome, we need to focus more on early intervention in education. To this end, the introduction of legislation in 2000 to make primary school education compulsory, and the recent PERI report on primary education by a Committee chaired by Senior Minister of State, Grace Fu, are significant milestones. Both have sent powerful and much needed signals to parents and educationalists alike on the importance of early intervention to strengthen the foundation for a child's ability to reach his potential. I applaud the government for doing this.
  
17. It has been 10 years since primary school education was made compulsory. In many ways, during this time pre-school education has come to have the same impact as primary education, in determining the trajectory of the individual over the years, not only in terms of school performance but also the potential to succeed in life. It is in the same spirit as the legislation in the year 2000, and the PERI Report, that I am now urging the government, through this motion, to conduct a comprehensive review of pre-school education.
  
18. The aim is for us to examine the state of pre-school education in a deeper, more focused manner: to study its impact on the individual and society as a whole in the context of today's realities. My sense is that, overall, our pre-school and primary school education systems are on the

right track. What is needed is some significant fine-tuning to reduce the incidence of unintended, undesired outcomes. On the other hand, the review could very well conclude that we don't need to make any significant changes to the system - but at least we will know that we have arrived at this conclusion after giving this important matter sufficient thought. It is also my hope that such a review will be conducted in an inclusive, consultative and transparent manner - very much like how Senior Minister of State Grace Fu's Committee conducted its study. This is important because there are many stakeholders in pre-school education who have perspectives that are based on expertise and experience. More importantly, I hope that a lively, honest debate in this House, and public participation in the process will help foster deeper awareness of the considerations and importance of pre-school education, especially among parents.

### **Some Observations**

19. Mr Speaker, Sir, let me now briefly highlight three key observations on the state of pre-school education in Singapore.
20. Firstly, it is evident that a child who goes to primary one today without attending kindergarten classes is highly disadvantaged, unless he comes from a socio-economic

background where home tutoring is an option. This is because at primary one, you are assumed to be able to read or at least are expected to know your ABC, and have basic numeracy skills. The fact is that more than 90% of the cohort would fit the bill, somewhat, having gone through kindergarten. The educationalists I spoke to were all in agreement that a child who goes to primary one today, without attending kindergarten education is seriously disadvantaged. There are crash courses in school for such students in primary one - to level up their reading and numeracy skills - but it would appear that their effectiveness is limited. After all, we're trying to pump-prime a child in a few months when other children have taken two whole years to achieve the same!

21. Secondly, the vast majority of those who go to primary one without going to Kindergarten are from families in the lower income segment of society where their parents have limited education. This means that the children come from homes where the exposure to English is limited and whose parents may not be in a position to teach or guide them in language or numeracy skills. Many of the parents may not even have the luxury of spending quality time with their children, let alone teach them, because they work shifts or double shifts. Social workers I spoke to are of the view that children are in a particularly worse off situation if they come from dysfunctional families - and we know that there is a higher incidence of this in lower income households. In

such cases, not only do the children go to primary one without language or numeracy skills, they carry the baggage of low confidence and low self-esteem. We know that these retard educational performance. Educationalists I spoke to are of the view that such children would benefit especially from exposure to pre-school education which will help socialise them early to being in a controlled, group environment. In most circumstances, it will also help to compensate for their home environment and boost their self-esteem and confidence.

22. **Thirdly, in some cases where even when the children have undergone Kindergarten education, they are not able to read or count when they enter primary one.** Thankfully, it would appear that such cases are minimal. I've been serving as a SINDA volunteer for the Reading Programme - where once a week, I read to a primary school child for an hour at his home. A primary 4 boy I used to read to was not able to read even one sentence in English when I first met him. I was told by some educationalists and social workers that many of these children come to primary one without being able to read and struggle to catch up after that, because of the general pace of the class and especially when there are more than forty students per class. It is a challenge for the teacher to pay enough attention to kids who are trailing far behind. It is not for want of interest - it is just a practical problem. This throws up the question

of what is taught in our kindergartens and the quality of pre-school education.

23. I was hoping to present findings of local studies on the state of pre-school education in Singapore. Unfortunately, I have not been able to come across any. In comparison, there are numerous studies on the subject conducted outside of Singapore - all of which appear to stress the growing importance of pre-school education.

## **Trends and Findings**

24. Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me now to spend a few minutes to highlight some global trends and key findings in the area of pre-school education.
25. Numerous studies have drawn attention to direct links between early childhood experience, brain development and social outcomes. It has been shown that early intervention can improve the life outcomes of the individual, minimise inequality and mobility gaps, and boost the national human capital necessary to face today's challenges.
26. As a result, there has been growing recognition, especially amongst developed nations, of the importance of pre-school education. The **Obama administration**, for

example, has pledged a US\$10 billion investment in early childhood education, one of the largest initiatives to boost childhood education in the USA since the 1960s. US Education Secretary Arne Duncan explains the reason for this emphasis: *“Early learning has come into its own and is recognised as the first and most critical stage in human development. It is time to transform early learning from a system of uneven quality and access into a system that truly and consistently prepares children for success.”* For the same reason, major philanthropic foundations have also committed significant investments in pre-school education in the USA. **The Buffet Early Childhood Education Fund** has pledged more than US\$18 Million a year on advocacy projects for high-quality early childhood education, especially for disadvantaged children. **The W.K. Kellogg Foundation** pledged US\$16.5 Million in 2009 to similar projects. Recently, the member states of the **European Union** have pledged to provide free or subsidised full pre-school education for at least 90% of children under the age of 6.

27. This is in line with the trend amongst **OECD nations** to raise pre-school education standards and move towards a more universalised system. Many OECD countries, where social inequalities have widened in tandem with strong economic development, have national development plans that emphasise access to quality early childhood education, focusing on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

28. Similarly, **The European Parliament** has formally affirmed the power of pre-school education in preventing delinquency, school dropouts as well as improving the upward mobility of children from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds. It's actively seeking ways to consolidate education policies with a focus on access to quality pre-school education to better manage what appears to be an increasing incidence of these problems.
29. Apart from teaching basic literacy and numeracy, it has been established that early education is fundamental in building character and practical life-skills. Research from **The Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University** point to the cognitive skills, emotional well-being, social competence, as well as physical and mental health developed in a child's pre-school years. The study concludes that these are vital in building the necessary foundation for the individual's success in school and adult life. Significantly, this Harvard research highlights that all aspects of human capital are built on capacities developed during one's childhood.
30. Let me now move on to the effect of pre-school education or its absence on socio-economic equity.
31. Several **studies in the UK, USA and Australia** have shown that while in school, children already display striking disparities in development, which are predictive of their

later academic and occupational achievements. In a seminal report published in 2002, researchers from the **University of Michigan, Valerie Lee and David Burkham**, conducted a scientific study of the cognitive abilities of pre-school children. The study found that the average cognitive scores of children from the highest socioeconomic group are about 60% above the scores of children in the lowest group. Children from middle-income families were found to know about three times as much vocabulary as their counterparts from low-income families with less educated parents. Another seminal study, which focused on evaluating child care subsidies, was conducted in 2007 by **ABT Associates**, a top government and business research firm in America. It showed that 4-year-old children below the poverty line can be up to 18 months behind what is considered normal at this age group, and this gap persists throughout that child's life. Timely intervention at pre-school level is the most effective way to reverse this trend. Likewise, **The Millennium Cohort Study** conducted in the UK documented how significant socio-economic inequalities that a child faces from the age of three can persist throughout the individual's life.

32. **The Report of the 1998 Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children in Washington D.C.**, alongside other studies, pointed to how early childhood education can break poverty cycles and give all children a stronger start in life in a more equitable manner.

33. Other studies have emphasised the importance of quality pre-school education that is accessible to the rich and poor alike, that will effectively reduce achievement variations between children of well-educated, affluent parents and children who are from less-educated families. **Emeritus Professor of Psychology, and expert in Child Development at Yale University, Edward Ziegler** argues that it's not only children from low-income families who benefit from early childhood education, but also children from middle class families, who are able to close the gap between themselves and children from wealthy backgrounds. Therefore, it's not just pre-school education but quality pre-school education made affordable to a wide cross-section of society that is important.
34. Let me now move on to studies that have shown a strong correlation between investment in accessible quality early childhood education and strong, sustainable economic growth. This is especially relevant for countries such as Singapore where human capital is the primary resource.
35. A report in 2007 by Harvard University's **National Scientific Council** summed up the connection between early childhood experiences and national development in the following words: *"...all aspects of adult human capital, from workforce skills to cooperative and lawful behaviour, build on capacities that are developed during childhood, beginning at birth."*

36. Perhaps the most authoritative thesis on this subject was presented by **Nobel Laureate Economist James Heckman**. Through his research, Prof Heckman devised a simple equation that related investing in young children's education early to future productivity growth: Invest + Nurture + Sustain = Gain. It is explained as follows:
- (a) **Invest** in educational and development resources for disadvantaged families to provide equal access to successful early human development; PLUS
  - (b) **Nurture** early development of cognitive and social skills in children from birth to age five; PLUS
  - (c) **Sustain** early development with effective education through to adulthood; EQUALS
  - (d) **Gaining** a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends for generations to come.
37. Prof Heckman argues that the cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional competencies of the individual are shaped by the experiences of the developing child. Investing more in quality pre-school education and making it accessible reduces the occurrence of poverty, low-income related crime, and delinquency. This means fewer resources would have to be committed to address the social burden imposed on the State's increasingly limited resources.

## Three Key Suggestions

38. Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me now to suggest three key areas that I feel the review should focus on.

### Improving the Quality and Consistency of Kindergarten Education

39. First, the need to improve the quality and consistency of kindergarten education, across the board. Currently, there are a total of 498 kindergartens operating in Singapore, with the PAP Foundation managing 247 of them. This has resulted in a wide range of offerings by the various vendors in terms of curriculum and teaching methodology. I am not going to suggest that we should aim for complete standardisation - this goes against efforts by MOE to open up the system, and for good reasons. I am all in favour of letting a thousand flowers bloom in this space. After all, the charm of pre-school education is that there are diversely interesting ways to stimulate our children cognitively and to build character. We should certainly not take away the rich entrepreneurial spirit we see in many who run these kindergartens - that ensures the children have fun and are engaged as they learn. Also, choice is important.
40. However, we need to accept the reality that kindergartens today, unlike in the 1960s and 70s, play a more significantly

critical role in preparing our children for primary school education. Children who will go to an overseas primary school operating in Singapore with a curriculum that is less rigorous than a primary school governed by MOE need not have the same concerns. As I've highlighted earlier in my speech, there appears to be too wide a variance in the quality of kindergarten education offered by the different operators - resulting in some kids being highly proficient in literacy and numeracy skills, while others are not able to read or count even at a basic level when they go to primary one and end up struggling to catch up for years. And regrettably, it would appear that the quality of kindergarten education has a correlation with the fees charged, which in turn means that those who can afford to pay more are better assured of better outcomes.

41. The Straits Times ran a feature on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October this year, titled "Tuition for Tots". It highlighted a growing number of parents who send their children for extra tuition classes on top of their pre-school programme. The main reason cited for this was that the parents felt that pre-schools didn't do enough to prepare their children for primary school. We can choose to dismiss this as an act by the typical "kiasu" parent. But they have the right to have these concerns, especially given the rigorous curriculum in primary school - where even educated parents are finding it a challenge to coach their children. If we can help give the assurance to parents that regardless of which kindergarten

they send their child to, they can expect a minimum standard that is sufficient for the child to cope in primary school, I am certain that this will help alleviate much of the anxiety and stress felt by parents.

42. Currently, the responsibility for pre-school education is shared between the **Ministry of Education (MOE)** and the **Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS)**. While MOE oversees kindergarten education and MCYS takes charge of play-schools and nurseries, there is no clear lead agency in pre-school education as a whole. Since pre-school education is now a critical preparatory phase for primary school education, it makes greater sense for MOE to be the lead agency to ensure greater continuity and congruity in the early education of a child. This would make for easier coordination of policies, as well as the setting and monitoring of standards. A key concern that some educationalists and parents I spoke to, is that MOE would over-regulate what ought to still remain an essentially fun and exciting few years of pre-school education. I am confident that MOE is able to draw the line between setting broad policies and curriculum guidelines, without micro-managing. This is what the ministry has been doing, and quite effectively with the schools, especially in the past few years.
43. MOE has already started taking steps to raise the standards of the pre-school sector by setting guidelines to improve teacher-child ratio, the quality of teachers as well as the

quality of the curriculum. This year, the minimum qualification for pre-school teachers was raised. Also, there is now a voluntary quality assurance standard and accreditation framework, called the Quality Rating Scale that pre-schools are encouraged to use to maintain the standards of their facilities. However, in my view, such measures do not go far enough in achieving the desired outcome of *ensuring* that our children are adequately prepared for primary one. Because this is a voluntary framework, it still gives pre-school centres latitude in deciding whether they want to impose these standards. And I suspect, bottom-line considerations are likely to be a disincentive. Also, currently there is insufficient regulation to ensure a more consolidated approach to teacher training and pedagogic programming. Experts in pre-school education whom I spoke to, assert that some enforcement in these areas is essential to ensuring much needed consistency in the quality of pre-school education offered by the many operators on the ground.

44. It would be useful for MOE to consider stipulating a **core curriculum** for all kindergartens. If this constitutes no more than 50% of the overall curriculum, operators would still have enough flexibility in curriculum, methodology and style in keeping with their brand proposition.
45. Introducing a mandatory core curriculum with easy to measure KPIs would not only help to improve the overall

continuity between kindergarten and primary school education, it will also reduce the disparity in the level of preparedness of primary one children regardless of whether they attend a \$1,000 a month or \$100 a month kindergarten.

### **Better Standardisation of Fees charged by Kindergartens and Publicity of Subsidies**

46. My second suggestion is to consider a review of the fee structure and publicity of the range of subsidies available. This is to ensure that the steep variance in fees does not result in excessive disparity in the quality of kindergarten education offered by the various operators. While generally we should let market forces decide on fees, when it comes to services which we consider essential - such as utilities and transport - the government does provide and enforce guidelines. Even for schools that come under the purview of the MOE, there are clear guidelines on fees. Since it is evident that kindergarten education too is an essential service, and it comes under the MOE's oversight, why can't there be guidelines on fees that can be charged, regardless of whether it's a privately run kindergarten or one that is eligible for government subsidies? So as not to be unduly imposing on operators for whom bottom line considerations are important, and rightly so, they can be given a broad enough range where the maximum fees

chargeable per month is stipulated. Currently, the range is very large - \$100 per month to \$1,000 per month!

47. A narrower range of fees pegged to a lower maximum fee chargeable, would give a lot more options for the largest segment in our society - the middle class, where aspirations are probably the highest. Currently, many middle class parents desire to send their children to some kindergartens because of the curriculum or pedagogy, but can't afford to because of the steep fees. By stipulating the maximum fees, we are not only providing more options to parents, but will also help make it a more level playing field, which over time will have a positive effect on reducing the disparity in the quality of outcomes in the various kindergartens. Pricing is an important instrument in democratising opportunities.
  
48. Similarly, the modalities for kindergarten subsidies should be more transparent with greater effort by the government in ensuring that parents are aware of them early enough so that they are in a position to make important decisions in a considered manner. Almost all the parents with pre-school aged children I spoke to - especially from middle and lower income segment - were either not aware of government subsidies or didn't know how to access them. This creates unnecessary anxiety for parents, especially when today, as assured by the Minister for MCYS Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, no child would be denied kindergarten education because his

parents can't afford it. The current Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) helps to pay up to 98% of kindergarten fees, up a cap of \$98. On top of that are Start Up Grants for registration fees, uniforms and other miscellaneous costs. These are very useful for parents to know, but many of them are absolutely not aware of. There should be a greater effort in proactively publicising the subsidies and other assistance schemes available for kindergarten education.

### **Universal Pre-school Education**

49. This takes me to my third suggestion - carefully studying the need to make kindergarten education universal or, to put it more directly, compulsory.
50. In 2008, 870 children did not attend pre-school. In the CoS debate earlier this year, the then Senior Parliamentary Secretary Masagos Zulkifli estimated that around 350 children in this year's primary one cohort had not attended kindergarten. When asked why kindergarten education isn't made universal, this House was told that the government saw greater value in persuasion instead of legislation, and that it was effective as the vast majority of parents were responsive.
51. While I am sure this light-touch approach is fairly successful, and I am sure MOE puts in the effort to reach

out to parents, the fact remains that 350 seven year olds have not benefited from it. These children have started primary school at a disadvantage. Each one of them has the right to aspirations like the others - to do well in school and in life. Why should they be denied that right for reasons they are not responsible for? Why should a child be placed in this unfair position if, for example, his parents simply didn't see kindergarten education as important enough? Why should children be made to pay a price - and possibly a heavy price that could set them back for life - for their parents' irresponsibility? Yes, 350 is not a large number - but we are dealing with mere digits here, are we? The State has the responsibility, the duty to protect the rights and interests of each of these children, especially if they come from families that are disadvantaged or unenlightened.

52. In 2000, the Committee on Compulsory Primary Education recommended compulsory education at the primary and secondary level despite the fact that only 3% of the cohort was not enrolled in national primary schools at the time of the review. Former Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong stressed that "Every Singaporean Matters" and that every Singaporean child must attend school in order to get the same head start in life, to develop his or her potential. Ten years on, today, the starting point for getting that "same head start in life" has shifted from primary one to kindergarten. This is a reality we fail to recognise to our

peril.

53. One of the reasons cited by MOE in explaining why it did not find it necessary to make kindergarten education compulsory, was that it could force “school-readiness” at too early an age, hence, over-emphasising the academic and classroom environments too early in life. I am happy, especially as a parent, that the government is concerned about this and that we should avoid subjecting pre-schoolers to undue stress. However, the reality is that there is already a significant amount of stress built into the system, which starts from primary one, and it rises on a fairly steep curve year on year. What this means is that if you don’t want children to go through stress during pre-school, you are merely deferring the stress, which is likely to hit the child harder when he starts primary school.
54. Related to this is a concern that other parents I spoke to expressed: if you make kindergarten compulsory, it is going to take away the joy of pre-schooling for our children. I share this concern and for the record, am against any step that will unduly increase the stress on our kids. But let’s take a step back and ask ourselves if this is a likely outcome just because we make pre-school compulsory. Highly unlikely, for the simple reason that it is not going to make a material difference to the level of stress for children because more than 95% in each cohort is already attending pre-school! If at all there is any added stress, it

would be felt by the 350 children who are currently not attending kindergarten.

55. But even for the parents of these children, if effort is made to assure them that if they can't afford to pay the fees help is available that can offset almost 100% of fees, I am sure they will be quite happy to send their children to kindergarten. Similarly, if effort is made to show parents that kindergarten education helps their kids acquire important social skills that make them more confident, most parents would be enthusiastic. The truth is that most parents do care for their children and want the best for them.
  
56. Legislation is necessary to ensure that parents can no longer act in an irresponsible manner. Today, with the light -touch approach if a parent refuses to send his child to kindergarten despite efforts by MOE officers to persuade him, there is effectively nothing that can be done to 'rescue' the vulnerable child. But with legislation, the irresponsible parent is required to send his child to kindergarten or face legal consequences. In many ways, the spirit of making pre-school education compulsory is similar to that of the Maintenance of Parents Act - which is targeted at the relatively small proportion of children who refuse to provide financial support for their parents who need that support.

57. In signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we have recognised the rights of the child as a vulnerable member of society. As such under Article 18, governments should “*...render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities...*” Where the parent is unable to fulfil his role and responsibility to the child, the state must step in.
58. In fact, MOE itself has on various occasions affirmed the vital importance of pre-school education. Mr Masagos stated that “*MOE acknowledges that pre-school is especially important for children from lower-income families as it gives them a good start. They tend to lack home support. But pre-school will develop important areas in them - areas like communication, motor and social skills.*”
59. MOE states that we align ourselves with international best practices, and that there is no such practice of universal, nationalised pre-school education to follow. While this may be true, many of the industrialised nations that form the OECD are moving towards the trend of universal education that begins at the early childhood level. MOE has cited Finland as an example of a country that has a very successful education system, but has not yet seen the need to make pre-school education compulsory. However, the incentives and the educational environment in Finland are

quite different from the case in Singapore. Firstly, in terms of affordability, pre-school in Finland is free of charge for low-income families. Furthermore, the formal education system at a primary level does not have national standardised testing that divide students according to their performance levels at an early stage. Unlike Singapore, social inequalities are not quite as sharp and neither is the school environment as competitive, thus the consequences of not attending pre-school are not as heavy.

## Conclusion

60. Mr Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, let me first reiterate two key points I've highlighted in my speech as fundamental to ensuring that our education system remains faithful to its goal of serving as a social leveller. First, we need to ensure that quality is constant and consistent and does not vary significantly based on how much more you are willing or able to pay. In other words, regardless of where you send your child, you are assured of a minimal standard of education that prepares him for the next level. Second, there should be universal access to this quality education. No child should be denied the right to education because his parents can't afford it, or because they are irresponsible.

61. With the MOE paying close attention and with primary school education made compulsory, these two issues of consistency of quality and universal access to education are very much in place. This is hardly the case when it comes to pre-school education, partly because MOE does not assume principal accountability for it. This needs to change. Given the realities of today where a child going to primary one without kindergarten education is significantly disadvantaged, pre-school education is as important or possibly even more important than primary school education. I've highlighted enough studies to demonstrate the consequences of absent or inadequate pre-school exposure for a child. Effective early intervention is key, and this has to start not when the child is 7 but when he is between 3 and 5 years old.
  
62. Meritocracy and equal opportunity - which are at the core of our collective consciousness as a society - have served us well. The rapid progress we have made over the years can be attributed to a large extent to our government's unstinting commitment to these two principles. Today, with growing income and class disparity - as an unintended but natural consequence of economic growth and affluence - it's even more important that equal opportunity is given as much importance as meritocracy, as they don't complement each other like they used to up until the early 1980s.

63. Michael Young, the well known British historian who coined the term “meritocracy” in 1958 has written quite extensively of the pitfalls of societies focusing primarily on meritocracy. He said that, “*...ability of a conventional kind, which used to be distributed between the classes more or less at random, has become much more highly concentrated by the engine of education...with an amazing battery of certificates and degrees at its disposal, education has put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of disapproval on the many who fail to shine from the time they are relegated to the bottom streams at the age of seven or before...*”
64. Over the years we have painstakingly nurtured a social compact that is the envy of many. This compact is predicated on the intrinsic faith the people has that each one of us matters, regardless of race, language, religion or which socio economic class we belong to. This faith in a system that is fair and equitable while rewarding hard work and talent has resulted in the high level of trust that we have come to enjoy in our society. Not only has it contributed to economic growth, but also to the harmony and the growing sense of camaraderie as a people. We can't put a price on this. Neither should we take it for granted.
65. Given how important it is for parents that their children have a decent crack at success and the good life, education

as the key means to that end is critical. It can be a lightning rod for dissonance and tension if parents feel the system is unfair and biased in favour of the more privileged. Increasingly the burgeoning middle class is likely to feel less privileged and frustrated if they feel their children don't have the same opportunities as the well off.

66. By tweaking the pre-school education system at the right points, I am confident that we'll be able to better realign meritocracy and equal opportunity. We'll never be able to perfect the alignment, but the effort will be a testimony that economic success hasn't forced us to suspend the very values we have been taught to believe in, as a people.

67. Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move the motion. Thank you.

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