

News

National Day Rally

Greater role by Govt in pre-school education

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NOW three of his children might be able to attend pre-school, thanks to the Government playing a more active role in pre-school education.

Mr Sim Kim Bock is heartened to know that the quality of pre-schools will be improved, and more support will be given to low- and middle-income families.

This and other initiatives were announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech. (See reports below.)

Mr Sim, 42, lives with his wife, Madam Emy Khimayati, and four children in a three-room flat in Ang Mo Kio.

Their eldest child, Jerald, six, is Indonesian. The other three children are Singaporeans – Jayden, four, Justin, two, and Jasmine, who is just a week old.

They made the news when Madam Emy gave birth to Jasmine by the roadside last Tuesday.

More active role

Last night, Mr Lee said the Government would play a more active role in pre-school education and invest substantial resources in it.

First, the Government will establish a new statutory board to oversee pre-school education.

Second, it will provide and upgrade pre-school teacher training to raise standards.

Third, it will bring in new anchor operators and upgrade existing ones.

In addition, it will pilot a few Government-run pre-school centres to test new concepts in kindergarten education.

It will also give more support to low- and middle-income families, so that pre-school education stays affordable.

“But we will not nationalise the pre-school sector,”



“I’m happy the Government is emphasising more on pre-school. I sometimes worry how I will pay for my kids’ kindergarten fees in the future.”

– Mr Sim Kim Bock (above with his family), an air-con technician who makes about \$2,000 a month. He has three children who are not yet in kindergarten



ROOM TO IMPROVE:
Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the Government would play a more active role in pre-school education but will not nationalise the sector.

PICTURE:
LIANHE ZAOBAO

said Mr Lee.

“Having a mix of operators offers diversity and choice. We shouldn’t deprive parents of this choice.

“We should raise the base, make sure that wherever you go, it’s a good kindergarten.”

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports will follow up on how exactly to do this.

Mr Lee said: “The transformation will take some time, but I’m confident that in five to seven years, we will be able to see results.”

Mr Sim, an air-con technician who makes about \$2,000 a month, welcomed these moves.

He said: “I’m happy the Government is emphasising more on pre-school.

“I sometimes worry how I will pay for my kids’ kindergarten fees in the future.”

While none of his children is in kindergarten now, little Jayden will be starting next year.

Said Mr Sim: “His school fees will amount to about \$130 a month. It worries me.”

Madam Emy said her eldest son, who

is in Primary 1, already goes for Chinese tuition, which costs \$80 a month.

The 29-year-old housewife added: “If pre-schools are cheaper, my burden would be much lighter.”

Mr Lee also announced that the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM) will become Singapore’s fifth and sixth universities.

SIT will expand and will award degrees in its own name, in addition to the partnerships it has.

UniSIM will add full-time programmes to its part-time courses and will build on its strong industry links, but it will remain a private university.

In that way, the schools will increase current full-time university intake by a total of 3,000 students a year by 2020.

This means that the 13,000 students taken in every year will increase to 16,000.

Happy for more chances

Said Mr Sim: “I don’t know if my children will one day be able to go to university. It really depends on whether they can study or not.

“But I’m happy that if there are more university places available, they will have more chances to get in.”

Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, who teaches sociology at the National University of Singapore, told The New Paper: “Given that the pre-school landscape is very diverse, I hope this announcement will close the gap between the various programmes and provide a level playing field for children.

“But I hope that parents will not go overboard on the importance of pre-school and start competing even earlier.

“I hope they heard the Prime Minister’s reminder not to rob children of their childhood.”

We can write our own happy ending

COMMENT: **EUGENE WEE**
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WE ARE not making enough babies.

The cost of living is rising at a rate that many in the lower- and middle-income groups are finding hard to cope with.

Parents are getting more stressed out by the competitive education system.

And the public transport system is being overwhelmed by the influx of the foreign workforce.

Ask many Singaporeans, and this seems to be the narrative so far in their own Singapore Story.

Will there be a happy ending?

They will say they’re not so sure, judging by commentaries posted on several socio-political websites.

Last night, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke about how the Singapore Story is still being written, and how its authors hope to pull out all the stops to ensure a happy ending.

His title for the next chapter? A home with hope and heart.

And he listed a slew of initiatives that were being looked into to improve education, health care, housing, transport and other areas that are impeding the plotline from developing.

What of the characters?

What of the individual characters in the Story?

Look around, and you will see many who have seen happy endings to their own stories.

Like Mr Toh Phee Seng, a resident in PM Lee’s Teck Ghee ward, who is illiterate and works in the construction industry.

Though he did not get a proper education, his children did – one is an accountant, and the other is a research scientist.

Or Mr Omar Haron, a former vehicle electrician who served with PM Lee in the armed forces. His son is now a cardiologist.

Stories with similar happy endings were trotted out by other ministers in their opening speeches last night.

Naysayers, especially on the Net, will say that the Government is not doing enough to ensure that all Singaporeans will have similar happy endings.

But, as PM Lee said, the Government can’t write the whole story. Singaporeans need to be involved as authors in their autobiographies.

Like former marketing agency boss Josephine Ng, who gave up her agency to give back to society by starting a social enterprise called Alteration Initiative. It employs women in need, trains them as seamstresses and pays them a decent wage.

Or Mr Farhan Firdaus, an active youth volunteer who founded Voluntarius, an organisation that brings youth together to volunteer for good causes.

We are currently in a tumultuous chapter of the Singapore Story.

But with patience and the prospect that more Singaporeans will jump in to help change the negative narrative, this happy ending can be a reality, and not just a fairy tale.

EXPANDING minds

Other initiatives announced

Pre-schools

- A new statutory board to oversee pre-school education
- Government will provide and upgrade pre-school teacher training
- New anchor operators of pre-schools will be brought in and existing ones will be

upgraded

- Pilot government-run pre-school centres to test new concepts in kindergarten education
- More support for low- and middle-income families

Universities

- SIT and UniSIM will be Singapore’s fifth and sixth universities
- Intake for full-time university courses will be increased from 13,000 now to 16,000 by 2020
- Government loans and bursaries will be extended to UniSIM part-time students

INITIATIVES UNDER STUDY

Housing

- Giving couples with young kids priority in booking HDB flats.
- Letting singles buy flats directly from the HDB

Children

- Giving fathers paternity leave

Health

- Creating a Medisave account for each child at birth, and putting in a “small hongbao” to help defray childhood medical expenses