

MOE to get two new acting ministers

Amelia Teng

The Ministry of Education (MOE) is set for a major change in leadership as it welcomes two new acting ministers next month, both of whom will be on an equal footing.

Newly elected Ng Chee Meng and Ong Ye Kung will share the ministry's workload, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

Mr Ng, 47, a former defence chief, will oversee pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, and the junior college level.

Mr Ong, 45, a former top civil servant, will be in charge of matters related to higher education and skills training. This covers the Institute of Technical Education, polytechnics, universities, private education, and continuing education and training.

In their new positions, they face a range of programmes already under way, as the ministry continues the work of ensuring that every child has access to opportunities regardless of family circumstances.

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, who has held the post since 2011, has pushed for every school to develop areas of strength, be it in aesthetics or sports.

PM Lee had said two years ago that the Primary School Leaving Examination would be revamped, but no details have been released since.

In the higher education sector, new universities such as Singapore

Institute of Technology have been set up, and the Government is still in the midst of implementing its SkillsFuture initiative to better prepare students for the world of work.

Mr Lee said yesterday that he has known Mr Ng and Mr Ong before they joined politics and that they "have potential but need the exposure and experience. I'm able to supervise and oversee and mentor them".

Mr Ong served as Mr Lee's principal private secretary from 2002 to 2005 and was also NTUC deputy secretary-general.

Mr Ng retired from the Singapore Armed Forces last month after some three decades in service.

Both outlined their priorities but without going into detail.

Mr Ng said: "Singapore and Singaporeans recognise that education is one of the best gifts we can give our children and we've consistently invested in this area."

His immediate priority is to work with Mr Ong to understand issues in education.

Mr Ong is looking forward to being part of the MOE family.

"My top priority is to really know how the ministry works, get to know our people and partners," he said, adding that it is a "complex and very important role".

The ministry is also getting three other new office-holders.

Associate Professor Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim and Ms Low Yen

Ling will take up parliamentary secretary positions there next month.

In January, Dr Janil Puthuchery joins as minister of state, a position he will also hold in the Communications and Information Ministry.

Education experts said it is useful to divide the responsibilities so ministers can tackle different issues.

Professor Simon Marginson, from University College London's Institute of Education, said it is not an uncommon practice in Australia and Europe to have more than one education minister as "it is a large area of government responsibility".

Dr Timothy Chan, director of SIM Global Education's academic division, said having two ministers signals the Government's continued emphasis on education. "At the lower levels, it's building the foundation, and at higher levels, it's preparing students for jobs. Both ministers can be more focused and pay more attention to different issues," he said.

Commentator Ho Kwon Ping said the move signals, among other things, the emphasis "on using education as a lever for change and restructuring society".

He described the education portfolio as "one of the most important ones and is usually a prerequisite for someone en route to being a PM".

He added later: "Splitting the portfolio also allows for both ministers to be tested simultaneously."

ateng@sph.com.sg