

EMPATHY TEACHING KIDS ABOUT DOING GOOD RATHER THAN DOING WELL **B9**

EDUCATION



Former Education Minister Heng Swee Keat (with red tie) with students at a physics class during a school tour last month. Many educators have praised his contributions to the sector. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

A study in bold moves

Mr Heng Swee Keat left a mark as education minister, shifting emphasis from grades to talent, and from qualifications to skills

Sandra Davie
Senior Education Correspondent

When Mr Heng Swee Keat was appointed Minister for Education in May 2011, it marked only the second time that a new Member of Parliament had been catapulted straight into Cabinet.

His appointment was surprising also because many had expected him to head to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, or Ministry of Finance, as he had served as permanent secretary for trade and industry, and then as the central bank chief from 2005 until his election.

In fact, Mr Heng became Minister of Finance this month.

But despite having spent only one term – four years and four months to be exact – in MOE, parents, educators and university heads said that the soft-spoken Mr Heng has left an indelible mark on education.

Several parents, educators, university heads and academics were asked: “What will you remember former education minister Heng Swee Keat for?”

A veteran literature teacher replied: “I will always remember him for doing away with school rankings altogether.”

She recounted how she jumped for joy when, just a year after taking up the education portfolio, Mr Heng announced that he was abolishing the league tables for secondary schools that had been in place since 1992.

Over the years, the annual exercise brought on many complaints from parents and even educators who felt that it skewed the priori-

ties in education.

“In the later years, they placed schools in bands, but it was still ranking. Mr Heng had the courage to pull the plug altogether on it,” said the teacher who had first-hand experience of the downside of ranking.

She had taught literature in her secondary school for more than a decade. But a few years after ranking was introduced, she was asked to teach English language and geography instead as, in her school, only one class offered literature as an O-level subject that year.

Several educators spoke about the slogan Mr Heng popularised: “Every school, a good school”.

It was a much-misunderstood slogan and, on several occasions, Mr Heng took pains to explain that it did not mean that every school produces top achievers in the national examination.

Rather, it spelled out his vision – to make every school good in its own way, seeking to bring out the best in every child.

School heads such as Mrs Lay See Neufeld of Damai Primary said it energised educators, especially those serving in heartland schools.

She said the minister walked his talk by ensuring that heartland schools such as hers in Bedok had more funds and resources to ensure that every child could be helped to reach his fullest potential.

Mrs Neufeld said: “He enhanced and expanded various help programmes – from the English and maths support programme to raising the ceiling for MOE’s financial-help scheme. Students were given free uniforms and textbooks, and schools were given additional mon-

ey to dispense more aid to needy students.”

PSLE SURPRISE

For about half a dozen parents interviewed though, what came to mind was Mr Heng’s surprising move not to name the top scorers in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

A year later, the ministry took it a step further by not even revealing the highest and lowest scores, which had been listed on every pupil’s result slip since 1982.

The policy of not naming the top scorers also extended to the other national examinations – the N-level, O-level and A-level exams.

MOE said it was to redress the overemphasis on academic results, and shift it to a student’s holistic development.

Despite some rumblings from parents who asked if MOE had gone too far, Mr Heng, who spoke about it at the inaugural The Straits Times Education Forum last year, stuck to his guns on the policy.

“It’s a way for me to recalibrate the system, to say other things matter, and matter greatly, too,” he said.

Focus on the “intangibles” of education, such as character, values and socio-emotional development, he told parents at the forum.

This is a point which has stayed with parents such as Mr Andrew Tan, 41, a manager with two primary-school children.

“I initially thought, what nonsense. What’s wrong with celebrating success? But after listening to him at The Straits Times Education Forum, I began to appreciate what he was trying to do.”

MORE UNI PLACES

Mr Heng also extended the idea of a widened definition of success to higher education.

During his term, MOE undertook a major review of the higher education sector and announced the creation of more university places, so that by 2020, up to 40 per cent of every age group will have a place in local universities.

MOE also diversified university education.

The Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University became Singapore’s fifth and sixth universities, taking an applied, hands-on learning approach to nurture graduates with deep knowledge and skills.

But even as MOE expanded the university sector, Mr Heng set up a panel headed by then Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah to study how polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates could take other pathways to build deep knowledge and skills, and enjoy career success.

This review resulted in several initiatives, including the Earn and Learn programme in which polytechnic and ITE graduates can work and further their qualifications at the same time.

National University of Singapore president Tan Chorh Chuan praised Mr Heng’s efforts to shift the emphasis from grades to talent, and from qualifications to skills, to get Singaporeans to embrace a broader definition of success.

“It’s not easy, but it’s an important shift – especially at this stage of Singapore’s development.”

“The world is changing. The very nature of work is changing. We need people with different types of skills, who can take on different kinds of jobs and be versatile enough to switch careers.”

“To achieve that, we cannot have

a rigid view of success. That gets in the way of developing the capacities and skills that everyone has.”

SIGNIFICANT LAYERS

National Institute of Education don Jason Tan said over the years, Singapore has built a world-class education system that is student-centric and offers various pathways for students to fulfil their aspirations.

But this is not the work of Mr Heng alone, he said, adding: “As the minister himself said, the education system has been built up, ‘layer upon layer’ over the years. He built on the strong foundation laid in previous years.”

But Mr Heng has definitely added a few more significant layers, Associate Professor Tan said.

“Some of them were bold moves, such as doing away with ranking, and changing the School Excellence Award so that schools do not go chasing awards in sports and other CCAs,” he said.

Parent S. Rajenderan, 43, said he was struck by Mr Heng’s farewell message to his colleagues in the education fraternity.

The father of three had to switch to part-time work after developing a heart ailment two years ago.

“My wife and I were worried about my three kids in school, but they all had extra help from school, thanks to Mr Heng enhancing financial help for kids. It took care of all their needs.”

“What I found most helpful was after-school care provided by the student care centre.”

Referring to Mr Heng’s recent farewell note that thanked teachers for the “heart” that they put into their jobs, Mr Rajenderan said: “To me, Mr Heng put his heart into his job as education minister. Thank you, Minister.”

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sandra@sph.com.sg