



**COMPASS CONVENTION 2009:
BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION IN
OUR YOUNG: HOME-SCHOOL
PARTNERSHIP TO INCULCATE VALUES**

OPENING ADDRESS BY MS GRACE FU, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, AT THE COMPASS CONVENTION, ON SATURDAY, 24 OCTOBER 2009, AT 9.00 AM, AT THE TEMASEK CONVENTION CENTRE, SINGAPORE.

Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Senior Parliamentary Secretary,
Ministry of Education and Ministry of Home Affairs

Miss Ho Peng, Director-General of Education

COMPASS members

Ladies and Gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

1. A very good morning and on behalf of COMPASS, I would like to welcome you to the convention. Thank you for your presence and support.

2. Since the inception of COMPASS more than ten years ago, the Council has looked for ways to

strengthen and promote home-school-community collaborations. Platforms such as the biennial COMPASS Conventions are good avenues for schools and parents to commit to and renew these purposeful partnerships for the holistic education of our children. We have made a lot of inroads but there is still room for further improvement.

3. This year's COMPASS Convention focuses on some issues that have garnered a lot of media attention over the last two years, such as cyber wellness and adolescent sexual trends. Our expert speakers, Dr Munidasa Winslow, a mental health and addiction consultant, Dr Priya Sen, from the Department of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) Control, and Mr Poh Yeang Cherng from TOUCH Cyber Wellness & Sports, bring with them many years of field experience and will share with us their expertise and perspectives on these issues.

CHANGES TO FAMILY STRUCTURES IN SINGAPORE

4. The theme for today's Convention is "Building a Strong Foundation in our Young: Home-School Partnership to Inculcate Values". It reinforces the need for home and school to work hand-in-hand to build a strong foundation for our children's optimal learning in school.

5. Many older Singaporeans would remember growing up in an extended family, where mothers stayed home to mind the children and grandparents were on hand to keep an eye on the grandchildren. Values like respect for elders and doing the right things were passed on, through both word and deed, as children watched how their parents treated their own parents. For example, inviting the elders to start dinner before digging in themselves.

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6. Today, most Singapore children grow up in nuclear families, while a minority do not even enjoy that, growing up in single-parent homes. The Singapore General Household Survey of 2005, which sampled close to 1 million households, showed the emergence of the nuclear family, with about 59% of the households surveyed consisting of a couple and at least one child¹. The survey also showed that about 13% live in families without the presence of a married couple, for example, a single parent living with one or more child.

7. With education and economic opportunities, more mothers are now in the workforce. Dual-income nuclear families are bringing up children without the traditional support structures of grandparents and an extended family of adults. Child-minding and even

¹ The above statistics was computed based on the Singapore General Household Survey 2005, *Table 64 - Resident Household by Household Living Arrangement and Number of Working Persons in Household*. [source: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/ghsr2/t62-66.pdf>]

the nurturing of children may well be delegated or relegated to the domestic helper.

8. These social changes have significant impact on our students' social and emotional well-being and character development. Research has highlighted the negative effects of parent absence on many areas of child and youth well-being, including health, educational attainment and assessments, behaviour problems, and psychological well-being². Observations of our key counselling personnel in schools have highlighted an emerging area of concern to be relationship issues within the family leading to our students having communication problems with parents, or, being affected by absent or disengaged parents³.

² Brown, Susan L. (2004). Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 66(2): 351-67.

The Urban Institute. (2006). Parents and Children Facing a World of Risk: Next Steps Towards a Working Families Agenda. http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311288_parents_and_children.pdf.

³ MOE Annual Counselling Survey 2007 (Sect E). Emerging Trends Perceived by Key Counselling Personnel.

REINFORCING HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS TO INCULCATE VALUES

9. Society rightly expects our schools to play a key role in values inculcation. And indeed our educators take this role seriously. However, our schools and educators can at best be partners and play complementary roles to parents and the home.

10. This partnership works well when all partners are aligned in the goals that they seek to achieve, and in the approaches they take in moulding the child's character. I am happy to note that many parents do support our schools and reinforce schools' efforts.

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11. Mr Thahir bin Ali⁴ would attest to the benefit of giving such support. Some years back, his son Dharmiri, from Bukit Panjang Government High School, was a wayward student – he played truant, smoked and fought in school and was even caught for stealing.

⁴ Mr Thahir's story was featured in "Educating Junior, Hand In Hand" (Episode 2), a television series commissioned by MOE in 2008 and broadcast on MediaCorp Channels.

Things got to a point where Dharmiri had to be caned in school, and Mr Thahir knew he had to set a plan to steer his son back on track. He worked closely with Dharmiri's discipline master to monitor the boy's movements while supporting the form teacher's effort to build up his son's confidence through the school's "Good in Studies, Good in Sports" programme. Eventually, Dharmiri made progress and was named the "Most Improved Student" in class, and now aspires to be a policeman, just like his father.

12. Mr Thahir's example shows that when parents support and work with the school in tackling their children's behavioural problems, a lot can be accomplished. They will certainly see a change in their children. A change for good. When a parent takes interest in his child, he can be sure that he is exuding a positive influence on not only his child's school performance but also his morale and values.

13. Conversely, when family values and school values are incongruent, we have a problem on our hands. I wish to share my concerns about some incidents, which are symptomatic of such a mis-alignment.

14. In January 2009, a local newspaper reported that a mother had called an ambulance and the newspaper reporter to the JC where her daughter was studying⁵. Reason? The girl had been caught behaving in an unbecoming way in public, and the school had asked her to stay back to write some reflections. Her mother was worried and claimed that the girl had called her and complained of dizziness and discomfort.

15. In this case, the mother's actions might have been prompted by concern for her daughter's well-being.

⁵ Newspaper report in Shin Min Daily News, *Female student "detained" by school to pen reflection as punishment* (Hong Xiaohui, SM, 20/1, p2). Shin Min Daily also noted the school's version of the incident. The VP said that girl was allowed to leave school at 1pm but did not want to as she did not bring her keys. The school counsellor and her friends visited her regularly while she waited for her parents to pick her up.

But let's pause to think. Is calling in an ambulance an appropriate action? What about calling in the media? What is the message that the parent is sending to her child by taking these actions? The end result – the child shielded by the parent, probably not learning from the episode. On the part of the teacher and principal, time and effort in managing media and filing report could have been put to much better use. It is a lose-lose result.

16. Our teachers and school leaders have to handle a fair number of such cases. While our schools and teachers will continue to do their utmost in imparting knowledge and nurturing the character of the students under their care, it is crucial that parents support our schools' efforts in values education and discipline.

17. Exhortations in speeches may help to send a message out to the larger public. But there is also much that we can do to help anchor productive relationships between schools and the wider community.

18. Our schools today are strong advocates of home-school-community collaboration. 96% of our mainstream schools have either a Parent Support Group or a Parent Teacher Association. This is indeed good news because it means that our children have greater support from all quarters. Parents and educators have to work closely to provide a reciprocal and mutually influencing quality for the child's home and school experiences. The success of any home-school collaboration depends on a belief of shared responsibility for educational outcomes.

19. That is why I cannot emphasise enough to parents today that we need to adopt appropriate parenting skills to nurture our children. Our eyes are open to many possibilities when we share our experiences and learn from other parents, including tapping on external sources such as parenting experts, and joining the Parent Support Group in schools.

20. In fact, the outcome of collaborations between parents and schools can benefit more than just the students. For Mdm Iris Sim⁶, a parent volunteer with Hougang Primary School, her decision to get involved became a major shift in her life. Iris used to be the stereotypical “kiasu parent”. She was constantly worried over exam results and quarrelled frequently with her son about his studies. But when she started helping out with the school’s outdoor adventure activities, she began to see the values of

⁶ Mdm Iris Sim’s story featured in “*Educating Junior, Hand In Hand*” (Episode 1), a television series commissioned by MOE in 2008 and broadcast on MediaCorp Channels.

the school's programme in a different light. The school programme was purposeful and designed to inculcate the right values. She realised that character development is just as important in creating self-motivated and disciplined learners. This changed her view of the role of the parent and improved her relationship with her children.

21. Stories such as Iris' and Mr Thahir's are proof that parents and families are our schools' powerful allies in education, and it is a partnership that we want to see grow further so that both parents and teachers can tap on it.

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THE WAY FORWARD

22. Moving on, we see a need for greater parent engagement in the schools. This year, COMPASS has proposed the formation of a Parent Ambassador Taskforce who will help to communicate educational

policies to parents from a parent's point of view. We have found Parent Ambassadors to be useful in making the connection with other parents. Some Parent Ambassadors have already started to share tips and experiences at public seminars organised by MOE. We want to see these Parent Ambassadors provide a bridge or a link for parents to give their feedback and concerns on educational issues to MOE. The channels of communication could be in the form of townhall meetings, newsletters, for example, MOE's online newsletter for parents, Schoolbag.sg, or some form of social networking platform. There is much we can achieve together and I urge parents here today to step forward and become a Parent Ambassador.

23. The Taskforce will also be setting up a database of all the Parent Support Groups in our schools so that information on MOE's policies and initiatives can be

disseminated directly to them and they can help to cascade the news to other parents in the schools.

CONCLUSION

24. In many ways, schools today need families, and families need the school. This mutual need may be the greatest hope for change to give our young the best learning environment. So let us all be champions of this meaningful partnership.

25. I wish you a fruitful day ahead at today's convention.

Thank you.

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