

## Speech At Early Childhood Conference 2014

### Introduction

1 Good morning everyone. Always good to see all of you here. I only get this chance once a year; for the rest of the days in the year, all of you are working very hard taking care of our children and I thank you for that. May I just applaud you for your effort in the last year?

2 I was told by the organisers this morning that many more of your colleagues would like to join us today, but unfortunately we have a space constraint and we're only able to take in one thousand plus. I promise you that we will look into this and to see if we can have a bigger conference next year to allow more of your colleagues to come and join us. This is so that we can all share and partake in the knowledge and experience gained, and ultimately to build a higher and stronger quality sector that we all desire for our children.

### Accessibility, Affordability and Quality

3 By now, most of you would know me. You know our mantra for this sector – the AAQ mantra, which is the view that we always want this sector to be accessible, affordable and of a high quality. But in order for us to do that, today I will add three things. Yes, we want an affordable, accessible and quality pre-school sector – but this can only come about if we have committed professionals, quality operators and if they are respected by all in Singapore, especially our parents. I would even add 'trusted' – without the trust and respect of our parents, no matter how hard we try, we won't get very far. Let me just briefly recap some of the things we have done and achieved over the year, since we last met.

4 In terms of accessibility, since last year we have brought on three new anchor operators in addition to PCF and My First Skool. Our focus remains in building up centres in estates with high demand, and in estates with many young families. And our aim remains the same: in one to two years' time, we'll reach our goal of providing places for 1 in 2 children from every cohort. I'm happy to note that with the cooperation and support of the teachers and providers, we are well on our way to reaching this target.

5 Last year, we have also extended our support to the non-anchor operators. We have increased the development and rental subsidies for many non-anchor operators as well. Good non-anchor operators who provide quality education for our children deserve our support. We have introduced a new price and quality tender framework, and this has brought down the average rentals for winning bids by up to fifty per cent. So for all the operators here, I hope you will pass on the benefits of the reduced rental to the students. Of course, I trust that you will do justice to the pay of your teachers as well. We've added more than one hundred childcare centres since 2013, providing an additional 14,000 places. We are on track to reach the target of providing child care places for 1 in 2 children by 2017.

6 A couple of weeks back, I've also just announced the inauguration of the new Registration Management System (RMS). In the past we have gotten feedback from many operators that they have long queues for their centres. But, by the time they build up their centres and recruit their teachers, those queue numbers do not realise into actual placing. With the new RMS, parents will no longer need to queue for a place. They can go online and get access to a place at a centre easily. For the operators, you will be able to share and pool data with each other to know exactly the number of unique people and real demand in the

queue. You can also distinguish them from those who already have a place in some other childcare centre, but would like to make a switch. The RMS will allow operators to know who have placed themselves on multiple queues. This will help ECDA have a better sense of the demand, and we can better plan for increases in capacity by allocating sites to the operators accordingly. This requires the cooperation of each and every operator. For every individual who puts in the data and is able to share the data, we will have a more accurate picture of the actual demand – not just in totality but in specific local areas. And that will allow us to accelerate the pace at which we can construct new centres to meet the demand, and to serve Singaporeans and our children.

7 At the same time, when it comes to accessibility, we have continued our outreach to less privileged and at-risk children. This is an important part of our work because we don't want to leave any children behind. In the past year, we have worked with community partners and we have strengthened the use of the Pre-school Opportunity Fund. With your effort and together with community partners, we have reached out to more than 1,000 less privileged and at-risk children. You may not think that this is a significant number, but to me, every child counts. And 1,000 is 1 in every 20 per cohort. It is important for us to give each and every child a good start. It is even more important for us to make sure that the children who are the least privileged or at-risk get a good start so that they will be able to break away from the cycle of poverty and family trouble at home. It is incumbent upon us as educators to try our best to do more for those most at risk.

8 When it comes to affordability, we have also not done too badly. Last year, with the new subsidy framework, we have increased the number of people who have enjoyed the subsidies from 6,000 to 31,000. That is a five-fold increase and I'm sure more will benefit as we introduce the new subsidy framework for kindergartens next year. Many have asked me if we will revise the subsidy framework and provide yet even more for the children. My answer, as always, is that we will do what we can, but we must focus our resources on those most in need. It will not do justice to the sector, and to Singaporeans, if we give out the subsidies equally to all, regardless of their needs. We must continue to focus our subsidies on the areas that need them most. And this will continue to be the guiding philosophy on how we roll out new subsidies as and when they come about.

9 Regarding quality in the sector, I'm happy to note that from 260 operators who have obtained the SPARK quality framework last year, we expect 380 to be certified by end of this year. This is a significant increase, and we are gathering momentum with more centres coming on board the SPARK quality framework. At the same time, we have simplified the framework to make sure that more centres can come on board and focus on the things that are really important to our children and to our teachers. We will simplify the framework to make it less cumbersome for people to apply. We also want to make sure that the best practices from all the quality centres can be shared and disseminated to the rest of the centres, who are aspiring to reach this SPARK quality mark. Tomorrow, Ms Indranee will talk more about this.

10 With your cooperation and support, we intend to roll out a harmonised regulatory framework for both childcare centres and kindergartens in the year ahead. We have heard your feedback – currently, you have two sets of regulations and sometimes it can be confusing. At the same time, many of your services straddle between education and care, so it is right and important for us to have one harmonised framework. With your feedback, we intend to pass the legislation next year so that everybody will be able to enjoy the benefits. It

will be simpler for the operators and hassle-free for the teachers, and it will allow our teachers to focus the bulk of their time on teaching rather than meeting regulatory requirements.

### **Manpower Development for Early Childhood Sector**

11 Now I come to the focus for this year. Last year, I spoke about three areas of focus – Manpower, manpower and manpower. This year I'm also going to tell you the three areas of focus – Manpower, manpower and still manpower. Last year, we talked about how we intend to strengthen our pipeline for manpower. It's not easy – we have about 14,000 people in the sector now. The last two years we added 1,500, which is more than 10 per cent. In the next two to three years, we have to add yet another 1,500. It is not an easy task to grow at this rate and to maintain the standard of quality. But I have every confidence that with your support and commitment, we can get there. In order for us to get the manpower piece right, we must get three things correct. First, remuneration; second, development; and the third, respect.

12 In this area, I'm happy to note that the two old anchor operators, PCF and My First Skool, have taken the lead, with support from the government. They have increased the salaries of some of their teachers and principals by up to 16 per cent. More importantly, both of them have initiated major HR reviews to better plan for the career development of their teachers. This will set the stage for us to remunerate our teachers fairly. I expect the rest of the new anchor operators and non-anchor operators who are receiving government funding to similarly follow suit, and do justice to the work of our teachers. The government will continue to support the work of our anchor operators and non-anchor operators to do better and we hope that operators will translate this to proper remuneration for our teachers.

### **Structured Competency-Based Career Pathways**

13 Like what we said last year, our teachers didn't join this sector because of money, but I'm also not going to let them leave this sector because of money. Apart from money, many of you have given feedback to me about wanting a proper career development path. You joined this sector because you're passionate about our children, and we want you to stay in this sector to contribute and to keep your passion burning. So it is incumbent upon me and my staff and everybody at HQ to draw up proper career paths and structured pathways to do justice to your passion and hard work. This year, we will build on the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Masterplan that we announced last year to develop a more structured pathway for your career development. Last year, after the announcement of the CPD Masterplan, we had more than 5,000 of our teachers taking up various courses to strengthen their professional knowledge and to deepen their competencies. We are deeply encouraged by this sense of duty and professionalism.

14 This year, ECDA and operators will draw out career roadmaps and identify the competencies required at every level for each teacher, senior teacher, principal and centre or cluster leader. There will be systematic progression and competencies mapped out for each level. This will help guide us in ascertaining the standards and competencies required. This will be a basis for us to assess and help teachers to progress, and for us to remunerate our teachers fairly according to their level of experience and their depth of expertise. It will also guide the training and development roadmap for all teachers in the sector. We will work with the sector and the operators to bring this about in the coming year.

15 For some of the smaller operators, you may be wondering how you can come on board. Have no fear, we have never forgotten about you. This framework is not just for the big operators with many teachers. For the small operators, we will help you and encourage you to combine your resources to provide similar development pathways for the teachers who are with you. You can form alliances and you can group together to strengthen the sharing of best practices to provide structured development opportunities for your teachers. We will announce more details in due course, but at every step of the way we will work with you to make sure that everybody in the sector gets the best chance to develop their professionalism.

### **More Development Opportunities for Professionals**

16 Some of you have asked me if a degree is necessary for one to become a principal. At this juncture, let me tell you that if you want to do a degree and if it is relevant to your professionalism, we will do our best to support you. But that doesn't mean that without a degree, you cannot progress in the sector. We have never said that (that you cannot progress without a degree). On the other hand, it does not mean if you get a degree, you will automatically be promoted. That is not the philosophy. The philosophy for us in this sector is that we draw up the competencies required at each and every level, and we help our teachers to achieve those competencies. If a diploma or a degree in the relevant sector helps you to achieve those competencies, we will help you to upgrade yourself. We need people with real skills and deep passion. If you have the skills, the competencies and the passion, then I can say that is more important than just having paper qualifications.

17 For new entrants coming into the sector, we will be having a new ECDA ITE Training Award. The courses in ITE and the Polytechnics will be much more focused on applied learning. We do not just want a piece of qualification; we want our new trainees who graduate from the ITE and the Polytechnic courses to have deep competencies grounded on applied learning. So there will be more opportunities for ITE and Polytechnic students to do their studies in an applied context, to let them pick up required skills from necessary networks before they even join the sector.

18 There will also be more discretionary admissions to the early childhood polytechnic courses. I understand that some of you are deeply passionate about joining the sector, but you might just have missed out on one or two of the necessary academic qualifications. Don't worry – if you show us the sense of passion that you have for the sector, we will see what we can do to help you get into the course you want to do. But the passion must be there.

19 For in-service teachers, there will be new modular polytechnic Continuing Education Training (CET) courses that will add up to your diploma. We know from your feedback that many of you are busy with your work. It's not easy for you to take time off from your work to go for a course continuously. Your centres will miss you, and your students will miss you. So what we're going to do is to reorganise some of the modules for the CET diploma, to give you more opportunities to do these courses in bite-sized modules. This will give you a longer time to progressively pick up the necessary pieces that will add up to your diploma or advanced diploma in time to come. This will also better allow you to balance your work and upgrading aspirations. We will do this from 2015 onwards.

20 For the principals and those who aspire to become principals, there will be a new Advanced Diploma for Early Childhood Leadership. The polytechnics will aim to pioneer this course from 2016 onwards, and we will announce more details in due course after we

discuss this with the various operators.

### **Recognising Exemplary Leaders as ECDA Fellows**

21 Last but not least, we're going to put in much more effort to develop the leadership of this sector. ECDA will launch a new ECDA Fellows Scheme this year. Many of you will be selected to join the ECDA Fellow Scheme.

22 What is an ECDA Fellow? An ECDA Fellow in this sector is someone who has reached the pinnacle of their career and is prepared to contribute to the sector beyond their current role in their immediate centre. This will be someone who is deep in knowledge and experience, someone who's prepared to mentor younger principals and emerging early childhood educators. This is also someone who is prepared to share their years of experience to guide the sector along. And through your effort, we hope to drive up the quality of the sector.

23 There will be an annual service recognition allowance given to ECDA Fellows. I encourage all of you who have many years of experience in the sector to apply for this. Share your knowledge with the rest of the early childhood educators who are coming up through the ranks, because your experience and knowledge will improve the quality of the entire sector and help our aspiring teachers to reach even greater heights, for the sake of our children and their foundation.

24 In time, we should see a more structured way to develop our early childhood educators. You can enter the sector as an ITE student receiving an ECDA ITE Training Award. Go for the courses, immerse yourself in applied learning, join the centres early, be mentored by people who are already in the sector, work in the sector for some time, acquire the necessary experience and decide for yourself whether you will like to go further. If you have the passion and the desire to go further, let us help you and you can take up some of these modular CET courses and work your way towards a diploma. After that, you can decide for yourself whether you want to specialise in the teaching track, or if you want to go further on the leadership track.

25 For those who want to go further on the leadership track, you can look forward to an Advanced Diploma in Early Childhood Leadership. For those of you who do not aspire to go on the leadership track, there will be a variety of continuing professional development (CPD) courses for you to upgrade yourself throughout your career. Gradually, even if you are an ITE graduate, you can work your way up to become a principal or cluster leader in a systematic fashion.

### **Conclusion**

26 So let me conclude. We have never deviated from our mission and we intend to stick to our philosophy – to develop an accessible, affordable and quality sector. All these will only come about if it is founded on the premise that we develop our manpower and give the strongest support to all professionals in this sector. My promise to you is this: I will take care of your career development and remuneration, and you help me to take care of our Singaporean children. My commitment is to grow you, as you grow our children. For the operators, regardless of whether you are an anchor operator or non-anchor operator, my promise to you is that I will support you, as you support my teachers in the sector. I will do

what I can to help you improve your professional quality and decreasing your average rentals, but I hope that you will translate some of these savings into lower fees for our children and better pay for our teachers.

27 Finally, I want to end off with a story that I just learnt yesterday. And that is from none other than our distinguished speaker, Professor Lasse Lipponen from Finland. I was very intrigued as to how Finland was able to continuously recruit top quality people into the sector. Professor Lipponen even shared with me that while the pay for early childhood teachers in Finland may not be the highest, the early childhood education sector was the most popular profession in Finland. I was very intrigued as to how they achieved this, and it boils down to one word – respect. The respect from society for the teaching profession; the respect from society for the people who spend the most time and effort, and who have committed themselves to take care of the youngest children in all the cohorts, and the people who established the foundation for future Finns.

28 This is what we strive to achieve for our sector as well. We will get there – we are not there yet – where the early childhood profession is one that is worthy of respect. We will do our part in the sector to make sure that we improve the quality and engender that respect. Respect cannot come overnight and will not emerge overnight. But I am sure that when parents and the rest of society see your education and commitment, respect will come. And in time to come, I too look forward to the sector whereby many of my school leaving students look towards the early childhood sector as a sector that they aspire to join because it is a profession that commands respect.

29 Thank you very much and I wish you all the best!

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