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SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND MINISTER IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS AT THE LAUNCHING OF MENDAKI'S S1 PROJECT ON SUNDAY, 19 APR 92 AT 1430 HRS AT BEDOK TOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Since its inception, Yayasan MENDAKI has been committed to the upliftment of Singapore's Malay/Muslim community through education.

2 It is still our first priority, and over ten years of service our concerns for the people have been best expressed through our education programmes.

3 They reach Malay/Muslim students at the most sensitive points of their schooling, help people in the workplace upgrade their skills, and involve families more closely in the education of their children.

4 In identifying those who need our help, we do not make any personal judgements. Everyone is valuable, and worthy of MENDAKI's best efforts, no matter what level of achievement he or she has obtained.

5 We try to help all students, from those who produce sparkling examination results, year after year, to those whose problems hold them back.

6 This is MENDAKI's total approach to education, which acknowledges that different people have different needs, and that no single programme can suit everybody.

7 One proof of this understanding is the committee which MENDAKI formed, in May 1991, to design programmes for Malay/Muslim students whose performance in school falls short of their potential.

8 After many discussions, and much analysis of the causes, the committee identified two groups that should be supported, pupils in the lower primary levels and those in their first two years of secondary education.

9 Today, MENDAKI is officially launching a pilot scheme for the secondary students. It is known as the MENDAKI Enhancement Strategy for Lower Secondary, or the S1 Project for short.

10 The programme deals with a long-term irritation in our community - the over-representation of Malay/Muslims in the Normal Stream of Secondary schooling. For years, it has far exceeded the number of Malay/Muslims in the Express Stream.

11 We believe that, with the right support, many of them can

transfer from the Normal Stream to the Express Stream. And those who do not transfer can be encouraged to stay on at school and finish their 'O' Levels, instead of dropping out.

12 Through this strategy we address two questions. One is the need to improve the educational levels of our community. The other is the need to stop the frustrations that normally intelligent young people feel when they do not do well at school.

13 Many factors are involved in learning difficulties, and so MENDAKI's S1 Project approaches the question from several angles. It provides remedial education - especially in key subjects - and emotional support, shoring up the individual and building caring teacher-student relationships that continue beyond the classroom and into the students' homes.

14 This is the first time that such a project has been undertaken and it requires careful monitoring. That is why we have been running it as a pilot project since January with the cooperation of Bedok Town Secondary School. However, we expect it to be introduced at other schools next year.

15 Allow me to explain in some detail what the S1 Project entails.

16 S1 provides special tuition to strengthen the students' grasp of Mathematics and English. In some cases, the teacher-student ratio is one to ten. In others, where special care is needed, it is one-to-one.

17 The second approach reaches direct to the core of the students, to the mix of emotions that youngsters feel as they face the challenges of secondary school. A facilitator - a trusted adult - is the key figure here. He or she must be both teacher and counsellor, in tune with the dynamics of the classroom and the perplexities of adolescence. The facilitator is the catalyst in group interactions where young people learn with, and from, each other. He or she directs the discussions on learning strategies, demonstrates the value of self-awareness and personal control, and organises excursions and educational visits.

18 The third approach is through the home. A supportive relationship in the classroom, with its mix of dependencies and anxieties, cannot be cut off at the school gate. If it is to mean anything to the child it must be characterised by consistency and commitment. That is why a proper understanding between parents and the teacher-counsellor is so vital.

19 Parents are invited to play a full part at fortnightly informal discussions on subjects directly related to the programme: parent-teenage relationships, for example, and how to solve personal problems. Already, I am glad to say, we have a small core of dedicated parents who understand the value of this programme and who are benefitting from it themselves.

20 There will be other subsidiary programmes to underline the lessons taught in the school, to stress the importance of good personal relationships and to teach the students how to draw strength from group activities.

21 The flexibility that MENDAKI insists upon, in all its programmes, is also a characteristic of our S1 pilot project, so that we can correct our course as and when needed. I am pleased to be able to tell you that Bedok Town Secondary School has appointed a liaison officer to help monitor and fine-tune the programme, and I understand that this has already produced some innovative improvements.

22 So, to sum up, MENDAKI continues with its total approach to its services to the Malay/Muslim community, above all through its education programmes.

23 In the case of the S1 Project, we hope and trust that we have found ways to help our young people overcome their learning difficulties.

24 I wish success to everyone concerned in this initiative. There is nothing more worthwhile, in my view, than investing our resources in our young people. Whatever future we wish for ourselves also belongs to them.

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