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Singapore Government PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY MR PETER CHEN, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR
EDUCATION ON THE OCCASION OF KHENG CHENG SCHOOL'S 70TH
FOUNDER'S DAY DINNER TO BE HELD ON 20 JULY 1997 AT 7.30 PM**

Mrs Chen Li Jen
Chairperson of the School Management Committee

Mr Clarence Lim
Chairman of the Organising Committee

Principal and Staff, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am happy to be here tonight to share your joy in the celebration of a long tradition of service to Singapore education.

2. Before I begin, let me first make a confession. When my friend *Wu Yuan Hua* approached me many months ago to be the Guest-of-Honour at the 70th Founder's Day Dinner of Kheng Cheng

School, I had never heard of the school before. I did not want to be rude by immediately asking him too many questions. We spoke on the phone, but *Wu Yuan Hua* was a very perceptive man. Even on the phone, he could somehow sense that I did not know much about the school. He immediately offered to arrange for some background material to be sent.

3. After reading all the material I could get about the school, I now realise how ignorant I have been. At that time, I happened to be also reading the English translation of the book "Force 136" by Tan Chong Tee. Many of you here tonight may know that Tan Chong Tee was a heroic resistance fighter with Force 136 in the jungles of Malaya during World War II. In the opening pages of the book, Mr Tan made reference to his mother Madam Lim Peng Tuan who started a school in Singapore. The connection between Force 136 and your school was the first remarkable discovery for me. I have also just learned that your Chairperson of the School Management Committee, Mrs Chen Li Jen is the daughter of Mr Tan Chong Tee and therefore a grand-daughter of your Founder. This is the second discovery. It is truly remarkable that after 70 years, the link between Madam Lim's family and Kheng Cheng School has now continued into the third generation.

4. The story of Madam Lim and Kheng Cheng School is a remarkable and inspiring story. Tonight's celebration is a fitting tribute to the founder of one of the oldest schools in Singapore. Moreover, this is also a gathering to reflect on the contributions of the Founder and all who have gone before us. To quote a favourite Chinese saying: *yinshui siyuan*. The saying reminds us that when we drink of the water we have,

we should always remember its source. This is a virtue which should be promoted not only in schools, but also at home and throughout our community. It is the very foundation on which are built the virtues of loyalty, filial piety and patriotism.

5. When our forefathers migrated from China to Singapore in search of a better future, they placed great emphasis on their children's education. Many of them were themselves unable to read or write, but they had wisdom and foresight. They believed that that only education would enable their children, the next generation, to lead a better life. Many of the more successful contributed generously towards education.

7. It is not surprising that the early benefactors of schools were virtually all men. In the feudal society of 19th and early 20th century China, boys were more valued than girls, as expressed in the Chinese phrase *zhongnan qingnu*. In old China, women were not even encouraged to go to school, much less to found schools. Madam Lim Peng Tuan, who herself was deprived of a formal education, therefore stands out like a beacon. In the field of education, we can truly describe Madam Lim as a heroine, even above many men. The Chinese expression *jinguo buran xumei* describes just such a woman as Madam Lim, who would not be any less worthy than a man.

8. Madam Lim was not an ordinary housewife. She was an extraordinary housewife. She was a housewife, mother, proprietress of a floral nursery and an educator all rolled into one. Seventy years ago, she turned her home into a school for the poor children in her

neighbourhood. She waived the school fees for those who could not pay and even supplied free text books.

9. What is even more interesting: her school offered afternoon classes for pupils who went to English schools in the morning so that they could learn Chinese. Little did she know, she was in fact pioneering bilingual education that has become a hallmark of Singapore's education system. This reminds me of my own school days when the English and Chinese school holidays were at different times of the year. I went to an English medium school. To be sure that I knew some Chinese my father insisted that I attend a Chinese school during the English school holidays. My father gave my role in the class a high sounding name "observer status", or *pangting* in Chinese. But I called it very simply "No holidays".

10. Madam Lim's enthusiasm, vision and perseverance in education are most worthy of our praise. I hope that her fine example will inspire more women and parents to be closely involved in our children's education. Parents and teachers have to be partners in the education of our children. Whatever is taught in school will easily be "untaught" at home, if the school and home environment are not "in sync". In our present effort to transform our education system to meet future challenges, effective parent-teacher communication is a vital key in the achievements of our children.

11. Parents and families all want to know more about what happens in

classrooms, so that the home can play a more constructive role in their children's learning. This is the conclusion of a 1994 survey reported by the Australian and New Zealand Council for Education Research on school-home links. Homes and schools need to ensure that what they do together generate a dynamic, healthy and forward looking culture.

12. As you know, an important thrust of our education system is in the use of Information Technology as spelt out in the IT Masterplan for Education. Very few countries are able or willing to spend some \$2 billion over 6 years on providing IT infrastructure for schools. The provision of adequate IT infrastructure is only the beginning. The challenge for schools is to make the best use of it, both in teaching and learning.

13. Another important thrust of our education system is to promote an environment where our students are encouraged to think for themselves. Although a threshold of core knowledge and basic skills will continue to be needed and will be taught in schools, we must increasingly teach students how to seek additional knowledge. We must encourage the urge to know more. Overtime, we must also teach students that there are often no single right answer and choices and trade-offs sometimes have to be made. You cannot be very creative if you always accept that there is only one way of doing anything and no other alternatives exist.

14. Such an environment as I have described can cause great stress to schools, principals and teachers. It can cause stress only if we are not prepared for it. This is not an invitation to anarchy. It is a call for us to

change our mindset and to rise up to the challenge by preparing ourselves for this change.

15. It is easier to give someone a single answer. But it calls for a good grasp of the subject, a clear and balanced mind, and a great deal of self confidence to be able than to tell someone that there could be more than one right answer.

16. If we teach our students that there are choices that have to be made, then it is just as important that they are equipped to make a wise choice. This brings me to National Education which is the third thrust in our education policy. Hence we must also teach them the right values and the right perspectives of life and history, so they can make an informed and well balanced choice in full confidence.

17. These are awesome responsibilities. But the responsibility for education is not something which your Founder Madam Lim Peng Tuan shied away from. Let all the current stakeholders, both parents and teachers join hands to lay the foundation for our next generation.

18 With that call, I would like to congratulate the school and all of you every success in all your endeavours. May your next 70 years be equally successful.

Thank you.