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SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS, ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW SCHOOL PREMISES OF OUTRAM SECONDARY SCHOOL ON SATURDAY, 28 AUGUST 1999 AT

6.00 PM AT 3 YORK HILL

I am honoured to join you this evening to celebrate the official opening of the new premises of Outram Secondary School. I am particularly happy to see the presence of several former schoolmates of mine. I am proud of the strong Outramian spirit manifested in many ways over the years. The school has especially benefited from the large number of caring and concerned alumni.

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On this memorable occasion, I would like to share with you my own experiences against the backdrop of Singapore’s economic development.

In 1959, Singapore’s economy at that time was mainly based on entrepot trade. Commerce was a big sector. Our GDP was only $2 billion. Only 800 graduates were produced by the universities. The Singapore Polytechnic had just started. Unemployment was high, at 10%.

I was in Primary 6 at the Rangoon Road Primary School. I could not be considered a model student because I spent too much time in class reading Chinese

"kung-fu" stories, especially those by the famous author, Jin Yung. My parents reminded me that jobs were scarce. To get one, I would have to learn a marketable skill. We were poor. So, I had only two choices for my secondary school. First, Victoria School which was very near my home. I could save money by walking to school. Second, Outram School, as it was known then. Outram offered commercial courses which would equip me to get a job more easily. I decided on Outram where I studied and obtained my LCC Certificate in Commercial Education. After leaving school, I went on to work as a clerk in an advertising company. The labour market in 1964 was tight as high unemployment persisted. I could not afford to be choosy.

After a couple of months, I was recruited as a trainee teacher in commercial subjects at the then Teachers' Training College (TTC). In the same year, I decided that I should get my Cambridge School Certificate (CSC) to improve my career prospects after learning that a few of my classmates were doing their CSC as private candidates and eventually having a chance to complete their Higher School Certificate (HSC) and pursue a tertiary education. Since I was attending TTC classes during the day, I enrolled for the evening classes conducted by the Adult Education Board at Victoria School. I did well enough and went on to do my HSC at Beatty Secondary School evening classes and completed it in 1966.

In early 1967, I graduated from the TTC. Since my HSC results could allow me to go to the university, I was in a dilemma. I could remain a teacher or I could pursue my tertiary education. The choice was made easier when I was awarded a teaching bursary from the Public Service Commission (PSC) to study English Literature and History at the then University of Singapore. I took no-pay leave from my teaching job. Later, in accordance with PSC's rules, I had to resign from teaching in order to continue my university studies as I was an unconfirmed teacher not eligible for no-pay leave. In 1970, I graduated with a Bachelor's Degree. I was lucky to secure a job as an Administrative Officer in the Civil Service. The unemployment rate then was still high, at 8.2%. Although economic growth was 13%, our GDP was only $5.8 billion. By this time, the University was producing 1,800 graduates with the Polytechnic graduating 430. Tertiary education and good jobs were still not readily available.

I did not stop learning. I continue to do extra studies. In 1973, I started to pursue a Chartered Institute of Secretaries and Administrators Course but I did not complete it because I enrolled for a Diploma in Business Administration Course at the University of Singapore in 1975. Two years later, I was given a PSC scholarship to do an MBA course at the London Business School.

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I narrated my pursuit in getting a basic education and then higher qualifications not to boast about my achievements but to illustrate a point. That if a person wants to move on in life, he has to work for it. There is no such thing as a free lunch. No one owes us a living. We have to work hard to achieve our dreams. We have to make the best use of our time, and strive for the best in whatever we do. We could not afford to be complacent because Singapore is constantly changing and the economy transforming. In particular, we are no longer an entrepot economy as before.

Today's youths are luckier than those of my time. Between 1990 and 1997, the average annual economic growth was around 9%. The Asian financial crisis brought down our GDP growth for 1998. Still, the GDP last year was $141.2 billion. There were more tertiary education opportunities. In 1998, about 9,300 and 12,800

graduated from the local universities and polytechnics respectively. Unemployment rate in June 1999 was only 3.3% despite the job retrenchments in the aftermath of the crisis.

I learned two lessons from my early experiences. First, I have to plan ahead, set realistic goals and do my best to achieve them. When I started work, I thought being a clerk was good enough but then I realised I could do more. I went into teaching, a job which had given me much satisfaction. When I met my former students, they would come up to greet me and express their appreciation. As events turned out, I did not remain a teacher. I was glad that I could pursue part-time academic studies and gain more knowledge to do different jobs and to aim higher. Second, I have to continue learning to keep up with the changing environment around me. If I had been reluctant in upgrading myself, I would be outdated and be left behind as our society progressed. Life-long learning is no longer an option. It is a necessity.

Economic development and technological advances are pushing us to continuously learn new skills and upgrade ourselves. No one could afford to stop learning after his formal education in the school or tertiary institution. The workplace is a school for life-long learning. This is of particular importance nowadays as our economic priorities shift quickly with globalisation.

In our daily life, we see the changes brought about by technological advances and rapid globalisation. These change the way businesses are conducted and new industries created. Even skilled jobs may be made redundant when companies restructure or relocate. The recent announcement by Western Digital retrenching 2,500 workers and moving its main manufacturing operations to Malaysia and concentrating its engineering support work in Singapore and reports of more retrenchments in the electronic industry due to companies restructuring are good examples of how jobs could be lost to our competitors.

Information technology is also becoming more pervasive in all kinds of activities now. Computer hardwares are getting more powerful and softwares more sophisticated. The computer chip technology and the Internet are leading us into an unprecedented Information Age. A new knowledge-based economy is emerging. Unless we are plugged into it, we would not be able to sustain our economic growth. But such an economy is not just about IT and computers alone. There is more to it. It is about people who with their creativity and capabilities, keep on improving their skills and knowledge in order to find new and better ways of doing a good job and to remain relevant to the job market. Those who failed to adjust would become unemployable even though jobs are available because there would be a mismatch between what they could do, and the new jobs that are created. They would suffer structural unemployment.

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A recent survey on adult learning conducted by the Ministry of Manpower indicated that over 40% of the workforce saw no necessity in any learning given “the sort of work that they want to do”. Clearly, a new mindset is required of them lest they become unemployable. We have a better educated population than many of our neighbours, probably the most driven in terms of getting more academic and professional qualifications. Let us expand this and keep learning and upgrading ourselves to ensure continuous employability. This would also help Singapore progress faster to a knowledge-based economy and increase our economic competitiveness.

Another effect of rapid globalisation is increased mobility of talented people. There are several magnetic destinations around the world which attract those with the relevant professional and technical skills. The Silicon Valley in California, the Harvard-MIT district in Boston, the IT parks around the Irish capital of Dublin and Hsin Chu Science Park of Taiwan are some examples. As Singapore becomes a knowledge-based economy, it has to compete with such

hubs for the talented professionals. Talented Singaporeans are also leaving for the niche sectors in other countries which they could not find in Singapore.

Singapore has a small population of three million people excluding foreign workers and permanent residents. This is not much of a reservoir to draw talents from. Singaporeans are not even producing enough children to replace themselves! For Singapore, where can we attract talented people from? Our immediate neighbours have become economically better developed and they also require their own skilled manpower. Therefore, we have to look beyond our immediate region. We are different from Hong Kong which has the huge hinterland of southern China to draw talents from. If we could attract more foreign talents to Singapore, we would be able to sustain our economic growth. Foreign investors would remain interested in Singapore, particularly in the value-added sectors of our economy. This would mean more jobs would be created for Singaporeans.

How does Outram Secondary School fit into this scenario of globalisation and talent mobility? Schools are where values are inculcated and knowledge acquired. The former is more important as the latter could become outdated. I remembered less now of the shorthand and bookkeeping which I learned than the lessons of life and the values of hard work, thrift, humility and honesty that my teachers had taught me. Schools must therefore inculcate values and promote the change of attitude needed for Singapore to stay economically competitive. Academic pursuits to get a diploma or a degree are no longer enough to secure a job for life. An ever-learning mentality and the innovative and creative use of technology would be the key factors to move forward. Working with private sector companies, as Outram has done with IBM, is important to help schools keep abreast with developments in commerce, in industry and in technology. If all students leaving Outram Secondary School are imbibed with these values and attitude, then they could be better equipped to meet the challenges of the new millennium.

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Over the years, Outram Secondary School has shown that it is capable of responding to the changing needs of students and society. I am, therefore, confident that the School is ready to meet the challenging future and live up to the expectation of the School’s motto: “Labor Omnia Vincit”.

It gives me great pleasure now to officially declare open the new school premises.

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