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SPEECH BY DR ALINE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION AND MP FOR TAMPINES GRC (CHANGKAT) PCF EDUCATION CENTRES GRADUATION CEREMONY ON SATURDAY,

13 NOVEMBER 1999, AT 10.00 AM & 2.00 PM AT THE

TEMASEK POLYTECHNIC AUDITORIUM, 21 TAMPINES AVENUE 1.

Distinguished guests,

Parents and pupils,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again we are here to celebrate the graduation of K2 pupils from our education centres in Changkat. While we say goodbye and good luck to all of them, wishing them a successful transition to Primary One next year, we also would like to continue our links to them through other programmes and activities, as, after all, they are children residing in our constituency. Many of them have gone through not only our K1 and K2 classes, but also our nursery classes when they were even younger.

2 Under the auspices of the PAP Community Foundation (PCF), our community leaders in Changkat and I work constantly to provide our residents with an expanding range of social and educational facilities. Just in the last two to three years, we have newly established three childcare centres at Blocks 112, 273 and 341; a student care centre at Block 285; a community children's library at Blk 316; and an education centre at Blk 318 which is in addition to two other existing centres at Blks 106 and 284. In case some of you do not know, the PAP Community Foundation is a non-profit organisation. The Management Committee of each branch of the PCF in individual constituencies comprises community leaders and volunteers, and each branch is solely responsible for the financial viability of its centres. Our charges are moderate and are aimed at the average income families. Where there are

cases of financial difficulties, we waive fees and give out bursaries.

3 Apart from setting up these centres to cater to the needs of families with young children, we have over the years upgraded many physical facilities in our constituency. For example, our community centre at Tampines St. 11 was opened in 1988; since then, it has undergone an extension, and we are embarking on yet another extension so that there will be more rooms and facilities available for residents' activities. Right now, Neighbourhood 1 is also undergoing the IUP, which will add new features to the local environment for the enjoyment of the residents. These are only some examples of what we have been doing to raise the quality of life in Changkat.

4 The quality of life and, in fact, the future of our people depends on how well we can utilize our talents to make a better living and live a more meaningful life. Education is the key to our future. Our government invests heavily in the education of our young. To prepare our population for the challenges of the new millennium, the Ministry of Education has implemented several major initiatives in the past two to three years in order to realize our vision for Thinking Schools and Learning Nation. Among these initiatives are the use of IT in education, nurturing creativity, infusion of national education, emphasis on students' all-round education, more opportunities for students to develop their talents and potential within an ability-driven education system, and greater school autonomy.

5 In Singapore, as in most other countries, formal schooling begins at around age 6. However, as in many other countries, there is a trend for parents and educators to place increasing attention to pre-school education, defined as early years education for children aged 4+ to 6. Today, 99% of children attend kindergartens run by either the community or the private sector. MOE plays a role by registering kindergartens, as well as accredits teacher training and sets curriculum guidelines.

6 Recent research findings in neuroscience point to the importance of early childhood education, and to its likely short-term and long-term benefits. They also speak of so-called windows of opportunity that young children have before the age of six for cognitive and non-cognitive development. MOE is studying these findings carefully and looking into whether and how the quality of pre-school education in Singapore can be improved further through the application of research findings, use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, better pedagogy, better teacher training, stricter regulation of the services and so on. I have disclosed on two separate occasions (on 31 July 99 at the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education or OMEP Conference; and on 24 August 99, at the RTRC Asia Graduation Ceremony) MOE's intention to encourage the providers of pre-school education to move away from the current, predominantly academic emphasis to the more desirable outcomes of an all-round development of the child and nurturing of his creativity. I have also said that we need to conduct further studies and research into some of the above issues in pre-school education, with a view that such research results can guide policy planning later.

7 By now, we have done the necessary preliminary work such as literature review, visits to a range of pre-school education centres, consultation with local and foreign experts on what are the necessary areas to conduct a study into, and how we can try out and adapt the best practices in other countries to our local setting.

8 MOE's intention is not to take over the provision of pre-school education in Singapore. Today, different pre-school providers coming from different philosophies and approaches of child development and early years education offer a wide range of pre-school education models in Singapore. This is good. But within this framework of private/community provision, MOE will see how it can further raise the quality of the entire pre-school sector in Singapore through greater involvement in a few crucial areas.

9 To bring our work to a second stage, we have formed a Steering Committee comprising representatives from MOE, MCD, NIE, principals and persons with expertise in early childhood education. Issues to be looked at include the desired outcomes of pre-school education, curriculum design and development, research, teacher-training and regulation of kindergartens. I will be chairing this committee, and Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Community Development, will be with me on this Committee. The Committee will be ready to announce some preliminary recommendations in 4 – 6 months' time.

10 May I once again congratulate our little ones today on their first graduation from an education institution. I trust that this will not be your last, but that there will be many more proud moments to come in your lives, given this strong foundation that your kindergarten has laid in you for lifelong learning.

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