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# *Singapore Government*

## ***PRESS RELEASE***

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**SPEECH by Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister  
for Defence at THE Anglo-Chinese School's 114th Founder's Day HELD  
on Wednesday,  
1 March 2000 AT 8.30 AM AT ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL**

**GREATER CHOICE AND FLEXIBILITY IN EDUCATION**

**Dr Lee Li Eng**  
**Chairperson of the ACS (Independent) Board of Management**

**Members of the Board of Management**

**Members of the Board of Governors**

**Dr Ong Teck Chin**  
**Principal**

**Parents, Teachers, Students**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

I am very happy to be here this morning to officiate at the 114th Founders' Day of Anglo-Chinese School.

ACS has had a long and proud history of producing leaders in business, industry, sports, and community and public service.

I am pleased to see that the school has kept up its proud record. Academically, ACS (Independent) ranks among the top schools in Singapore. The winning of the Value-Added Award by ACS in 1999 is testimony that the School does not achieve good performance by simply admitting bright students, but that the School helps students it admits to achieve more than what could be expected of them from their results at admission.

In co-curricular activities, the ACS is one of the top boys' school in Sports and Games.

On the artistic front, the school stages an annual Festival of the Arts for its students to express themselves through drama and music.

These achievements are all testimony that ACS is providing a well-rounded education for its students.

Holistic education is especially important in the new millennium, when a nation's growth depends on the intellectual capital it can marshal and the commitment of its people to channel their talents for the betterment of society.

#### The Knowledge-Based Economy: Putting a Premium on People

The recognition that knowledge will be the key factor determining economic competitiveness is a relatively recent phenomenon.

But the idea that it is human ingenuity and innovation that drive progress is not a new one.

It is the application of knowledge to existing conditions, be it the use of simple stone tools or the invention of the super computer, that gives people more choice and improves the quality of their lives.

There is greater urgency to view knowledge as a competitive factor today as

the contents of services and products are increasingly weighing more heavily on knowledge than materials.

The sheer explosion of information and the speed of diffusion of new knowledge further intensify the competition.

Barriers of distance are falling fast - knowledge can be transmitted around the globe within seconds, images of war in a remote part of South East Asia are brought into living rooms in the United States by CNN, the design, production and marketing of computers can be distributed across national borders according to who can be fastest and cheapest.

For Singapore to compete in such a knowledge intensive and global marketplace, we need creative knowledge workers who can extract, process and synthesise knowledge to come up with new and innovative ideas and products. Singaporeans must be willing to take the risks to bring these ideas into fruition to lift our economy to new heights.

#### Hallmarks of a Good Education System

Intellectual capital is developed and nurtured through education.

A good education system will enable us to prepare our students for the knowledge-based economy and to attract bright foreign students to study in Singapore.

The system needs to nurture the talents and abilities of our young to the maximum.

The system should release the creative energies of our students and nurture sound values in them so that they direct the energies towards constructive courses.

The system needs also to help students develop a broad range of skills, an entrepreneurial spirit and a passion for life-long learning, as the life-span of relevant knowledge is very short in this information age.

In my view, a good education system should have three characteristics. These are rigour, choice and flexibility.

First, rigour.

With a rigorous system, students can develop good study habits, discipline, critical faculties, skills for life-long learning and knowledge of content.

Our present education system is strong in this aspect.

This is attested to by the success of our students in national examinations and international assessments and competitions.

In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, our students came out top in both mathematics and science in the 13-year-old group, and first in mathematics and seventh in science in the 9-year-old group.

Our students have also won medals in the International Olympiads in Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and Informatics, and bagged top prizes in ThinkQuest, an international web-based design competition.

Top foreign universities welcome our students because of their preparedness in the academic area, positive work attitude and discipline.

Second, choice.

Students should be able to choose the subjects and educational programmes that best suit their abilities and interests.

MOE introduced greater choice of schools into our system 12 years ago by setting up independent schools and later autonomous schools, and your school was among the first to take up the challenge and went independent in 1988.

More recently, we are encouraging the autonomous schools to build up their own distinctive character by developing niche areas.

MOE does all this to provide a variety of schools and programmes to widen the choice for students.

In our current system, there is a variety of offerings, in terms of streams, courses, electives and subject combinations.

The different choices meet the needs of students with different abilities and interests.

Some examples are the Normal (Technical) Course, Gifted Education Programme, elective programmes in Art, Music and languages.

In the teaching and learning of Mother Tongue languages, we have been allowing students with the ability and interest to offer Higher Mother Tongue languages.

The introduction of the 'B' Syllabuses for the Mother Tongue languages takes this idea a step further, by allowing students who face exceptional difficulties in coping with standard Mother Tongue languages to learn at a more suitable pace

and level.

ACS has done well in terms of your efforts in widening choice for the students.

The school has integrated into its lower secondary curriculum as many as 28 elective enrichment programmes.

These programmes range from academic areas like aquatic biology, to sports like rock-wall climbing, to cultural and national education like appreciation of Chinese culture.

Your school also offers many of the educational programmes, including the Gifted Education Programme, Music Elective Programme and all the Foreign and Higher Mother Tongue Language Elective Programmes.

The third characteristic of a good education system is flexibility.

With flexibility, students will have room to choose courses of study that best meet their needs, even as their interests change or as they become more aware of where their talents lie.

This flexibility is important because students are still young and many are still in the process of finding out about themselves.

A flexible system would also allow students to develop their interests and talents as the world around them changes.

An education system with these three characteristics of rigour, choice and flexibility can help students develop their abilities to the fullest.

While our system is strong in rigour, choice and flexibility are, however, more limited.

The challenge for MOE, our schools and junior colleges is how to introduce more choice and flexibility into our education system without compromising rigour.

### Towards an Ability-Driven Education System

To meet this challenge, MOE is constantly working on possible ways to refine and improve the education system.

It is re-orienting the entire education system towards an ability-driven paradigm.

The objective is to develop and harness the talents and abilities of our students and teachers to the maximum.

Towards this end, MOE is adopting a “mass customisation” approach in planning and delivering educational programmes. Increasingly, MOE will introduce more customised programmes for different groups of students to provide them with alternatives that better suit their abilities and needs.

In this connection, Minister for Education RAdm Teo Chee Hean, last year raised the idea of improving the design of the upper secondary and pre-university segment of the education system. For students of clear-cut university calibre, the current system is inefficient in requiring them to spend a disproportionate amount of time preparing for the ‘O’ and ‘A’ level examinations within three years.

‘O’ levels are important in giving students some breath in their education and preparing them for the more rigorous studies required for university admission.

‘O’ levels also allow students who can benefit more from a more practice-oriented education in the polytechnics to receive 10 to 11 years of general education before they choose to specialise.

In other countries which do not have the ‘O’ level examinations, students in the 16-18 age group are forced to go through an academic education which does not suit their interests or are channelled into “technical high schools” which are seen as poor cousins to academic high schools.

In Singapore, we have chosen to provide advanced technical education in the polytechnics, so that our 16 to 18 year olds can enjoy a different type of education.

Polytechnic students enjoy facilities equal to those in some of the good universities in other countries and learn in a more project-based manner.

While the structure of ‘O’ levels followed subsequently by ‘A’ levels has undoubtedly been beneficial for many students to prepare themselves for university education, there are other possibilities for upper secondary and pre-university education which can be considered.

The International Baccalaureate is gaining wider recognition as a good preparation for university studies for students during the last four years of their

secondary school.

A number of the leading schools in England have announced their decisions to switch from 'A' levels to the International Baccalaureate.

On the other side of the Atlantic, American schools have long used SAT 1 and 2 to prepare their students for university education.

Options like the International Baccalaureate and SAT 1 and 2 have to be considered carefully by MOE, schools and junior colleges before any changes to our upper secondary school system are implemented.

The changes should lead to more choice and flexibility in our education without compromising in any way, the hard-earned rigour in our education system.

The changes are in the right direction.

They will further improve our education system and better prepare our students to live and work effectively in the knowledge-based economy which will be the distinguishing feature of Singapore society in the 21st century.

### Conclusion

Over the past 12 years, ACS (Independent) has made good use of the autonomy given to it to make several innovations in education.

In 1988, the school was one of the first to set up a Pastoral Care and Career Guidance programme.

The school also leads the way in incorporating enrichment programmes into the formal curriculum and participating in Odyssey of the Mind, a creative problem-solving programme from the United States.

To enable students to have an appreciation of regional cultures, ACS is pioneering an ambitious overseas educational programme this year to

Chiangmai, Thailand, for its entire Secondary Three cohort.

I hope to see the students imbibe this culture of innovation and become the next generation of young entrepreneurs and innovators.

As MOE introduces greater choice and flexibility in the education system, I am confident that ACS will take advantage of the changes to further improve the excellent education which the Schools is providing for its students.

As your School motto states, no matter how much has been achieved "The best is yet to be".

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