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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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**ADDRESS BY DR ALINE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR
EDUCATION, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE PRIMARY
SOCIAL STUDIES SYMPOSIUM 2000 ON MONDAY, 13 MARCH 2000,
AT 9.00 AM AT YORK HOTEL, CARLTON HALL**

Professor Leo Tan, Director of National Institute of Education, Distinguished
guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning,

1 It is my pleasure to be here this morning for the opening of the Primary Social Studies Symposium 2000. I extend a very warm welcome to all participants to this symposium, and to those participants from overseas, a very warm welcome to Singapore.

2 The theme, *Making a Difference: Social Studies Education in the New Millennium* and the timing of this symposium could not have been more appropriate. This year, Social Studies as a subject in the school curriculum, has

been extended for the first time to pupils at the lower primary level in phases, beginning with Primary One. Lower primary pupils will have one period of Social Studies per week in the curriculum. This was announced at the press briefing held on 28 April 1999.

3 We have done this because we believe that it is important to prepare our pupils to participate in a changing society as knowledgeable, confident and responsible members of the community. Social Studies provides us with the means to reach this goal.

4 Singapore is a young nation. We are a nation made up of different races, each with its own culture and language. It is out of this diversity that our leaders overcame challenges and great odds, cultivated a shared sense of community and destiny, and laid the foundation for Singapore's survival and growth as a nation. Although we enjoy peace and harmony in Singapore today, we cannot take this for granted. Our pupils must have a sense of what it means to be a member of our community and a citizen of this nation.

5 In his address on the Singapore 21 (S21) debate in Parliament last year, Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, highlighted the basic fault lines in our society. He used the imagery of four overlapping circles to represent Singapore society, each representing one of the major communities. The overlapping area among the four circles represents what all Singaporeans share in common. This area can be maximised by using English as a common language for communication among the various races and creating equal opportunities for all at work and play. Where the circles do not overlap, each community will retain its own language and practise its own culture and customs. We need to understand and respect each other's heritage and traditions in order to forge unity out of our diversity.

6 To inculcate in our young the desired values and instincts for nation-building, we need to start at an early age. Social Studies has an important role to play in this respect. It helps to foster national pride in our pupils and to develop in them a deep sense of belonging to the community and nation. This has become even more important in the face of rapid globalisation.

7 Social Studies education has a similar role in the education of the young

in other countries. In the United States, for example, Social Studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and the humanities to promote civic competence. The subject integrates knowledge, skills and attitudes within and across disciplines from a wide range of subjects such as History, Geography, Psychology, Sociology and Economics. The subject is taught to pupils in kindergarten through grade 12 in schools with the primary purpose of helping young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. In 1992, the Board of Directors of the National Council for Social Studies, the primary membership organisation for Social Studies educators adopted this definition. National Council For Social Studies, *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, 1994.

8 In developing our Social Studies syllabuses, Singapore has drawn on the best practices adopted by other countries in the teaching and learning of the subject, while at the same time, taking into account the unique characteristics of our Singapore society.

9 Social Studies is taught in Singapore schools at the primary and secondary levels. It is a subject that provides another avenue for National Education through the formal curriculum. The subject integrates the disciplines of History and Geography with basic elements of Economics and Sociology. At the lower primary level, our pupils learn about the environment and the community in which they live. This helps them to develop positive attitudes that are important in nurturing citizenship roles and responsibilities early in life. At the upper primary level, Social Studies focuses on Singapore's post-war history, the road to nationhood and the nation's achievements since independence. This enables our pupils to have a better understanding of the nation's historical developments, economic progress and the importance of social bonding among the different ethnic communities.

10 A wide range of teaching and learning strategies has been adopted to cater to the different learning abilities, interests and learning styles of our pupils. MOE's initiatives such as National Education, thinking skills, and information technology are incorporated in the new syllabus to ensure that it prepares our pupils for the future. The extension of the teaching of Social Studies to the lower primary level this year represents our continuing efforts as a nation to develop well-rounded individuals and civic-minded citizens for Singapore.

11 At the lower secondary level, our pupils in the Special, Express and Normal (Academic) courses study History and Geography. Social Studies is, however, offered to pupils in the Normal (Technical) course, a course which prepares pupils for a technical-vocational oriented post-secondary education. The inclusion of Social Studies in the curriculum for this group of pupils helps to ensure that they receive a balanced and rounded education. Pupils learn about the key events, personalities and significant milestones in Singapore's history as well as distinctive features of Singapore's environment and population.

12 At the upper secondary level, our pupils in the Special, Express and Normal (Academic) courses study History, Geography and/or Literature. As from next year, they will also study Social Studies which is organised around the six National Education themes, thus providing another avenue for the teaching of NE through the formal curriculum. Upper secondary pupils in the Normal (Technical) course do not offer a humanities subject. The upper secondary N (T) curriculum prepares pupils for a technical-vocational oriented education at ITE. The pupils however will continue to build their knowledge of events and issues on Singapore and the world through NE-related activities such as International Friendship Day and Learning Journeys organised by the schools. It focuses on Singapore's road to nationhood, principles of governance, regional and international developments, and issues which may affect the survival and growth of Singapore in a competitive world. The subject integrates the disciplines of History, Geography, Economics and Political Science and is made more interesting and challenging with the use of documentary, statistical and visual source materials. Our pupils will have ample opportunity to exercise their analytical and thinking skills to make sound and informed judgement on key events and issues around them.

13 With the advent of information technology and the growth of knowledge, the pace of change has heightened considerably. For education to stay relevant, it has to respond quickly to these changes. In Singapore, we have responded to the need to equip our pupils for the future with refinements to our education system, administration and curriculum. I encourage teachers to be bold in facilitating a mindset change for themselves and their pupils in the teaching and learning of Social Studies in this new millennium. The focus of Social Studies lessons should not be a preoccupation with the acquisition of content knowledge but an emphasis on process and thinking skills in learning. Teachers should take a big step forward to be creative and innovative in their teaching strategies.

14 Another issue we should consider is how teachers can add value to the curriculum. I encourage more collaborative effort among academic resource persons and school practitioners in the sharing of research work, teaching strategies and valuable experiences in teaching Social Studies. The symposium today offers a wonderful opportunity for the sharing of professional expertise.

15 I hope today's symposium will be the start of the development of a professional community of Social Studies educators in Singapore where professionals with a commitment towards Social Studies education can come together to network, share and learn about new developments and best practices.

16 I would like to thank the organisers of this symposium from the National Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education for their efforts in making this first Primary Social Studies Symposium a reality for Social Studies

educators in Singapore. I wish all of you a fruitful and enriching symposium.

17 On this note, it is my pleasure to declare open the Primary Social Studies Symposium 2000.

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