Good morning.

1. I would like to extend a warm welcome to everyone here today. The Teachers’ Conference was started in 2001 as a biennial conference. It underscored MOE’s commitment to provide platforms for teachers and leaders in education to enhance their professional development. I am cheered that there are so many here today. It reflects the strong motivation of our teachers to improve themselves. This is heart-warming and augurs well for the teaching profession in Singapore.
2. This year’s theme, ‘Teaching with Purpose: Living out Possibilities’, aims to develop, nourish and re-invigorate your creative juices and commitment, as you reflect upon your purpose in teaching. Hopefully, it will help some of you achieve breakthroughs in your quest to create new possibilities for yourselves and your students.

“ABOVE ALL – GOOD TEACHERS”

3. In my previous stint in MOE, I had the privilege of studying school systems in many countries – in the US, Nordic countries, Ireland, Holland among others. Just recently, within two weeks, I again had the opportunity to visit a wide spectrum of schools and meet top education officials in Germany, UK, Jordan and Israel. I also visited schools and JCs here and spoke to teachers at various grades – from those in-training with wide-eyed aspirations, to others more seasoned and circumspect in perspectives shaped by their experiences. Let me first thank those who found time and spoke frankly with me. I hope that this sincerity and openness will continue as we journey together to improve our education system. Already these limited encounters have been fruitful and re-acquainted me with
the challenges and possibilities of education. But when I see failed schools or indeed systems elsewhere, they have also served as stark reminders and cautionary tales that we do well to hold tenaciously to the fundamentals that have produced the high quality education system in Singapore. Everywhere we travel, we receive compliments. That Singapore has a good education system and excellent teachers has become renowned internationally. We should ask: how did we arrive at this virtuous state? As we seek to improve even further, what fundamentals must we be careful not to weaken?

4. These are obviously important questions which occupy many minds globally, as all countries seek to educate their people well. But why is it, despite the best of intentions and sizeable resources, standards of education vary widely? Even in developed countries with thriving economies, where resources have not been the limitation, some school systems have disappointed. What explains these mixed outcomes? What ails failing school systems? Is it a case of unrealistic expectations, inadequate resources, wrong systems, emphases, poor teaching, or all of the above? Why do some education systems perform better than others? Indeed, even
within the same country, why do some schools outperform others, given similar student characteristics and social circumstances?

5. These were issues that a recent McKinsey report addressed. I commend the report for your reading – it will be worth your while. It is entitled: “How the world’s best performing school systems come out on top“ and was published in Sept 2007, after an extensive investigation of school systems world-wide. Singapore was cited repeatedly as one of world’s best performing school systems but what was more important was what the McKinsey report explained as the reasons for our achievements, as well as the reasons which were deemed less important. Class size is less important – both South Korea and Singapore have higher student: teacher ratios (30:1 for South Korea) but we do better than the OECD countries. Even though almost every school system has pursued reduction in class sizes to improve quality, the McKinsey report noted that of 112 studies, only 9 found any positive effect. The remaining 103 studies showed no effect, and some even a negative relationship. Neither is success dependent on how big your budget is. Countries with top school systems – Finland, Netherlands, South Korea, Singapore –
spend less but get better results overall. You must pay teachers well, on par with other graduates. But without key essentials, high pay alone will not produce a high quality education system as Germany, Spain and Switzerland exemplify.

6. What then produces top performing schools systems? The conclusions are crucial. First, instruction counts. In practical terms, it means that: “when a teacher enters the classroom, he or she has the materials available, along with the knowledge, capability and the ambition to take one more child up to the standard today than she did yesterday. And again tomorrow.” Second, good school systems set clear and high expectations for what the students achieve. Here the report does not seek to be politically correct – it is quite frank: “Examinations have a powerful effect in driving the performance of any school system.” In the words of one Australian educationist: “What gets tested is what gets learnt, and how it is tested determines how it is learnt.” School reviews or inspections are also useful, especially to drive complex outcomes which are difficult or impossible to measure in examinations.
7. But finally, and here is the clincher: The most important determinant, McKinsey concluded: “Above all, the top performing systems demonstrate that the quality of an education system depends ultimately on the quality of its teachers. School systems, from Seoul to Chicago, from London to New Zealand, and from Helsinki to Singapore, show that making teaching the preferred career choice depends less on high salaries or “culture’ than it does on a small set of simple but critical policy choices: developing strong processes for selecting and training teachers, paying good starting compensation, and carefully managing the status of the teaching profession. “

8. In short, it depends on teachers, you. No education system can rise above the quality of its teachers. These findings are profound and a little frightening both for me, and I suspect for you as teachers. I as Minister for Education and Singaporean parents are quite dependent on you to teach and educate our children well. But it is also comforting because over the years, we have invested in the good systems to provide our teachers with the environment, opportunities and support for personal and professional growth and
fulfilment. This has maintained the quality of our teachers. MOE is reviewing how we can enhance and add to existing measures.

9. We must continue to select good teachers carefully, and pay them competitive market rates. We must expand the capabilities of our teacher training institutions. We should explore how NIE can play a greater role or even if other agencies are needed to better prepare teachers for the classrooms. But even after they have started teaching in schools, teachers must continue to receive support. We will enhance initiatives like the school-based Structured Mentoring Programme (SMP) which provides new teachers with the essential skills and knowledge to perform their roles well.

10. We also need to do more to enhance the career development of teachers and principals. The GROW 2.0 package will help. Under the Professional Development Continuum Model (PDCM), about 1300 teachers have embarked on their Masters degrees and benefited from the support provided since the scheme started in 2005. Furthermore, to make it easier for schools to release more teachers to pursue full-time postgraduate studies, MOE will provide
up to 5 more teacher posts to each of the 28 school clusters. We will examine if we can do more in this area.

11. MOE has also recently introduced the School Staff Developer (SSD) scheme. Currently, we have 71 officially appointed SSDs to oversee the professional and personal development of every teacher in their schools. They have been doing good work in their schools. For example, Mr Syed Alwi Alatta, the SSD at Bedok View Secondary School, works closely with the Middle Managers to identify programmes to meet the learning needs of the teachers and has translated the school’s learning focus into a comprehensive staff development plan. We should have more like him – in fact for every school. So, by 2010, we aim to have 350 SSDs, so that each school can enjoy the benefits an SSD brings to a school and its staff.

12. We must also remember that teachers and principals from time to time need to recharge their batteries, or even get a new coat of paint! Sometimes, this requires a different environment than that in schools. This was the idea behind the Teacher Work Attachment programme (TWA) started in 2003. Over the last 5 years, nearly 5000
teachers have embarked on various local and overseas work attachments. These teachers have returned to their classrooms with fresh perspectives and a glimpse of business innovation, global competitiveness and service standards, among other learning points, and are better equipped to prepare their students for the future. Mrs Cynthia Seto from Geylang Methodist Primary School is one such teacher. She went on a 2-week attachment to Heulab in 2007 and was able to observe closely how Heulab designed and developed educational software. The experience was so positive that she decided to apply for extended Professional Development Leave (PDL) to continue her collaboration with Heulab for 10 weeks this year.

13. Currently, we have 53 teachers who have made use of the PDL scheme to go on work attachments in various organisations. These range from local companies such as Raffles Hospital to international organisations like South African National Parks. Teachers can also use their PDL to attend short courses or pursue a degree. I am also aware that we need to create time and space for teachers and principals to achieve work-life balance, which the OLive
(Opportunities for Lives to be Ignited with Vitality and Exuberance) aims to achieve.

**TEACHING WITH PURPOSE**

14. While we have many programs, these efforts will not succeed as top down initiatives. Ultimately, this is your profession and you as teachers, both individually and collectively must steer the course to enhance your professional standing. I encourage you to take the initiative to suggest and craft programs that best serve your needs. I would like to see greater personal and professional ownership of current and future programs for professional and career development. Put up good ideas, and I assure you that, MOE will fund meritorious ground-up initiatives.

15. Teachers must believe in the worth of their own professional development. Purpose and fulfilment must be internally driven. One good example of ownership is the Teacher Renewal program introduced by the Teachers Network. It invites teachers to come on board a reflection journey to explore their inner purpose and
rediscover their passion for teaching. The feedback on this Teacher Renewal programme has been promising. A group of teachers from Teck Whye Primary School gave positive feedback about their experience. One participant commented that she felt like a new person after going through the journey and was inspired to excel in all aspects of her life. Another who was initially sceptical wrote that he was now “convinced of the importance and effectiveness of the programme” and was glad to have been given the opportunity to re-discover himself. Let’s have more of these ground-up, school and cluster based initiatives.

16. Ultimately, teachers themselves must believe in what they are doing. Let me read you a reflection taken off the Purpose of Teaching website from Mrs Tan Cheh Hia, a Senior Teacher from CHIJ Our Lady of Nativity. She says, “To me, teaching is more than passing on book knowledge to pupils. It is sharing my values, which are life-long, with them and nurturing them to be responsible citizens. It is also about developing people.” These are simple statements of purpose but represent deep convictions that can have powerful effects on the lives of the students.
LIVING OUT POSSIBILITIES

17. The better the teachers and principals, the greater the possibilities. The greater your conviction and commitment, the higher our achievements. We have many examples of these truisms in our schools. One such recent shining example of “living out possibilities” is the NorthLight School, led by Principal, Mrs Chua Yen Ching and her teachers. Mdm Samsiah Khamis and Mr Abdul Nasir, two teachers from the school, will be sharing the NorthLight Experience on how they brought learning beyond the classroom with experiential and outdoor learning. They exemplify how our teachers are constantly providing students with a holistic and customised set of learning experiences that stimulate, engage and nurture students.

CONCLUSION

18. Teaching with Purpose: Living out Possibilities can never take form or flight without good teachers, who believe in what they are doing. As a society, we must support our teachers with attractive career prospects and a wholesome school-work environment that is
both productive and enjoyable. Because, as the McKinsey report correctly emphasised, we are dependent on caring and committed teachers with a strong inner core purpose for our children and nation to live out possibilities.

19. I wish you a fruitful conference.