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SPEECH BY MR FONG SIP CHEE, MP FOR KG CHAI CHEE AND
SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE MINISTER FOR
LABOUR AT THE 9TH SPEECH AND PRIZE-GIVING DAY OF THE
KAKI BUKIT SECONDARY SCHOOL ON FRIDAY, 23RD SEPTEMBER
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May I, Madam Principal, Members of the Kaki Bukit Secondary School Advisory Committee and all teaching staff, thank you all for the honour you accorded me by your kind invitation to me to this Ninth Speech Day of your School.

My experience in the last eight months in the Chai Chee Constituency has been rather exciting. In this short period, I had a taste of almost a perfect mixture of human virtues and failures. I witnessed displays of serious community commitment, sincerity, lethargy, indifference and even some who seriously and persistently proceeded along without any idea of what is around them or where their efforts will lead them to.

By now the community leaders have been accustomed to a faster pace of work. Perhaps, the most significant thing that ever happened in the area is my insistence that the community leadership must get down to tackling problems rather than have them swept under the carpet. Regular brainstorming exercises have been held among community leaders to identify the problem areas and new directions found in trying to apply what they regard as the most practical of all the possible solutions.

Avoiding the truth may seem quite the normal thing for some, indeed even a feeling of temporary happiness, although we all know that it is deceptive. But to have the courage to lay things out as they are requires some guts. Getting down to solving them is even

more arduous a proposition.

This brings me to the theme of what I wish to discuss with you today. I do hope that it will provide some serious topics for informal brainstorming sessions amongst the enlightened.

Kaki Bukit Secondary School has done fairly well, both under the principalship of Mr Christie, to whom I wish him all the happiness in his retirement after committing his entire life to the education of the young, and the present incumbent Mrs Quah. There are, however, a number of problems which seemingly are beyond the control of the teaching staff. Indeed they are, and this is where we must apply our minds collectively to seek innovations and other unconventional methods to meet with the situation.

I refer firstly to the location of the school. It is right in the middle of a settlement and the student population comprises entirely children of the area. This is, of course, quite natural but the very nature calls for special efforts on the part of the students, the teaching staff and most important that of the parents' concern on their children. The children are exposed to an environment where the most effective communication is that of the mother tongue. But we must realise that education does not only mean the inculcation of a literary standard or the command of effective day-to-day communication among people. In the modern world, education in an institution such as a school where the system operates with a definite aim to produce children who will, and must benefit in their later years from their exposure there during their formulative period. In short, I mean their usefulness to the community and

their relevance to society.

This brings me to the next point. Given the situation, where students go to school and return home to almost the same environment, it is important that the teaching staff and the parents must co-ordinate their efforts to see to it that the child should get more exposures beyond their immediate environment. This of course is easier said than done. I do not and am not competent to propose any solution today. What I wish to achieve is that we place the problems before us and strive to work out some measures to augment normal teaching methods.

Attitude towards languages has been allowed to revolve around some intangibles rather than setting it against practicality. It is my view that, (and I am speaking as a person who is basically educated in Chinese and having to muster the command of the English language in later years, not to mention the Malay Language that I have been asked by Madam Principal to address you today) in the context of our society, for our survival and betterment, mother tongue should be regarded as the "soul". It gives us the identity, our cultural ballast, whilst the English language should be our bones and muscles. I dread to see a person with a soul but without muscles and bones to support him, or a person with muscles and bones but without a soul.

It is this spirit that we must adopt as our guiding pointer for our survival as a progress and cohesive community not only in this part of the world, but beyond the region.

Let us remember one basic function of a school. It is an institution for education of the young. It is not a welfare home

or an ECA Centre. The students are not inmates requiring charity and worse still, charity alone. They are there to study. Nor is it an ECA Centre, where activities form just one aspect of education. Studies should be the first concern of the school leadership and the students. I do not subscribe, still less condone the attitude that 'if you can't check the problems, at least make it look as an accepted feature," or since they cannot study, let them play some music or other ECA. I have heard, much to my dismay, utterances amounting to writing-off the students, and this came from a person who is charged with the responsibility to educate. It would be excusable if that was only an attitude, and I hope that it was not a confession innocently made in the midst of a zeal. Because if that was the case, it would have been unpardonable.

Less Madam Principal be anxious over my statement, I think I need to reassure her that I did not acquire the impression from the Kaki Bukit Secondary School, nor that your school stands accused of this observation.

I find it extremely difficult to seek job placements for so many of the young people seeing me at the Meet-the-People Sessions. They book for jobs which they think should befit their qualification of either a GCE 'O' Level or just PSLE certificates, but they do not realise that they passed in the wrong subjects of study.

I do not think there is any softer option. This is a situation peculiar to the two schools in this neighbourhood. It requires greater efforts from all concerned, and demands heavier devotion from the teachers and principals. This is an enormous task, and if

in the next 2 to 3 years we can see an improvement on the results, the road would have been laid for achieving even greater heights.

As a Member of Parliament, I would have opted for a more tactical approach by not bringing to light the observations I made earlier. After all, a MP cannot be held responsible for the performance of the students, and my acceptance by the people does not fluctuate with the examination results. But it is with a sense of total commitment that prompted me to involve myself in this subject. On my part, I shall ask the Scholarship Fund Committee and the Community Projects Fund to consider if they will offer prizes to students for the best performance in selected subjects of study.

On that note, I wish you all the best and may I leave this school today with a renewed confidence that our collective efforts will bear fruits in the years ahead.

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