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**SPEECH BY DPM LEE HSIEN LOONG  
AT THE VICTORIA SCHOOL'S 120TH ANNIVERSARY  
AT KALLANG THEATRE  
ON 26 JULY 1996 AT 4.00 PM**

## **VICTORIA SCHOOL**

In 1876, Kampong Glam Malay Branch School was established with 12 Malay boys. It was the beginning of Victoria School. Over the years the school has undergone many vicissitudes and changes. Today it celebrates its 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary, as a successful autonomous government school with a pupil enrolment of 1,450.

Victoria has consistently maintained its position as one of the best secondary schools. What distinguishes Victoria from other schools is an exceptionally strong sense of belonging and identity among the school community, the teachers, pupils and old boys. Victoria is not just a place where individual students get good examination results, although many do. Victoria is an institution where students receive an all-round education, and graduate with an unmistakable stamp on their personalities and character.

I asked the Ministry of Education how their inspectors assessed Victoria. They reported that Victoria was an outstanding school, both academically as well as in ECA. They cited several of Victoria's strengths :

- Victorians are proud of their motto, **Nil Sine Labore**, which means "Nothing Without Labour". Many Victorians say that the motto has guided them through life.
- Since its founding, VS was always in the working class areas of Jalan Besar and Kallang Bahru. Now it gets students from 166 primary schools nationwide. Victorians are proud that their school has always catered to pupils from working class families and provided them with an education that allowed them to do well in life.
- VS has produced many national leaders, including Mr S Dhanabalan, Dr Ong Chit Chung and Mr Peter Sung.
- VS has shown excellence in a range of sports, Symphonic Band, Choir, and in uniformed groups like the Boys' Brigade and NCC.
- VS has a very effective pupil leadership programme. Their student leaders are often used by other schools, and by MOE HQ, for their leadership training programmes.
- The Old Victorians' Association (OVA) is actively involved in fund raising. Many old boys serve as members of the School Executive Committee and School Advisory Committee.
- This is a report card all Victorians can be proud of. Victorians are conscious that what counts is the sum of their efforts to do their school proud. Victorians gain from school life a sense that they belong to a long and illustrious

tradition, which they must uphold and develop. This is what makes school history, builds a school identity and binds generations of students together.

### **Inculcating A National Identity**

As with Victoria School, so too with Singapore. Our striving for excellence and our highly competitive spirit have got us here. But at the same time we must strengthen our bonds as a community. These bonds will give us the resilience, perseverance and self-confidence to see through difficult times. Singapore is not an ordinary country. So our people must possess exceptional spirit and cohesiveness, to prevail against the odds and endure.

To feel this shared destiny, we need to know our history as a nation. We must understand the struggles that earlier generations went through, and how we came to be what we are today. Singaporeans may be better educated today than they were 30 or 40 years ago. But if we do not know what happened 30 or 40 years ago which made us an independent country, or worse if we believe that the past is irrelevant to the present, and we should just focus on making as much money as possible, then Singapore cannot hold together.

The future will not be a replay of the past. Technology is advancing faster than ever before. The global economy is more tightly integrated. Changes which used to take years now happen in months. Jobs and capital move from country to country, always chasing the lowest production cost and highest return. You cannot leave school thinking that your education is already completed. You must leave fully prepared to continue your education throughout life, training and retraining every few years. Otherwise you risk becoming obsolete.

A nation without a history is like a tree without deep roots. It will be easily uprooted in a storm or crisis. We must reinforce our roots and our sense of identity. This is not to try to live in the past, which is futile, but to prepare ourselves to cope better with a bracing future, which is vital. We will have to make many changes to our lives and our society, in order to adapt and thrive in an ever changing environment. We need deep roots to anchor us amidst these changes, to hold us together despite the wind and the tide, and to provide a firm base from which to grow and mature.

One key task of our education system must therefore be to inculcate this sense of history and national identity in young Singaporeans. You must graduate from schools, ITEs, polytechnics and universities not only prepared to earn a living for yourselves, but also ready to assume your responsibilities as committed citizens, who will stay and fight to defend our country and way of life.

Some have suggested that we should make these topics examinable, say by including them in the 'O' and 'A' level history syllabi. This will encourage pupils and teachers to take them more seriously. We will consider this proposal. But we must go beyond this. The story of Singapore is not just an academic subject, to be studied, examined on, and forgotten. It needs to be a key part of the psyche of every citizen, which motivates him to excel, and bonds him to Singapore. Only if we realise this can we place national education properly in the school's range of responsibilities.

National education is a continuous process, extending well beyond the school. Our grassroots organisations, the media, writers and dramatists, museums and libraries, all play important, mutually supportive roles. But schools are vital, because Singaporeans must understand how we came about as a nation, and acquire a sense of our shared destiny, beginning when they are young. Students

must learn about Singapore not just through subjects like history and moral education, but through school life itself. If our young fail to learn this in school, during their impressionable, formative years, it will be too late to inculcate these instincts and passions in them later in life.

### **Teachers - Guardians And Gatekeepers**

We need an outstanding education system to do this. We place heavier demands on our education system, and our pupils, than other countries. We use English as a medium of instruction, which is not the mother tongue of most pupils. We teach pupils their mother tongue in addition to English. We want students to imbibe key national values. Yet we cannot afford to compromise on the academic content of the curriculum.

We already have a good education system. It maintains high standards in all our primary and secondary schools. We fare well in international comparisons of standards in reading, science and mathematics. Our 'O' and 'A' level examination results are good, and have been steadily improving.

But we cannot be satisfied with what we have achieved so far. We must build upon our present system, both to ensure that we maintain standards year after year, and also to make another quantum jump in the quality of the education Singaporeans receive.

Teachers are a key factor determining the quality of education in schools. Teachers must nurture and inculcate in young Singaporeans a strong sense of identification, with the school, with the community, and beyond that, with Singapore. Whatever grand schemes we may have, unless we can get the message

through to teachers, persuade them that it is worth doing, and give them the tools to do it with, we will not get any results in the classroom.

Traditional Asian societies have always held teachers in high regard. They respect teachers not only as transmitters of knowledge, but also as guardians of values which form the moral and social glue of the community. In the past, this respect was reinforced because the teacher was an educated person, while most others in society were not. This is no longer the case. Teachers are now only one profession among many. Parents are often professionals themselves, with their own ideas of how their children should be educated. But we must not allow this change in our society to erode the social standing of teachers.

We recently made major changes to the Education Service to raise the standing of the teaching profession. We improved service conditions, gave teachers and principals proper opportunities for career advancement, and made teaching an attractive profession which more young people would take up. These reforms shattered the mould which had constrained the proper development of our education system for too long. As a result of the reforms, thousands of teachers have been promoted. NIE has doubled its intake of trainee teachers. In time, this will mean that better recruits will join the service, schools will have more teachers, and the present heavy workload of teachers will be somewhat lightened.

The direct result of these changes is to improve working conditions for teachers. But the ultimate aim is to improve the quality of the education which pupils receive. This depends on teachers playing their part to the full. Teachers must go beyond keeping up with developments in their subjects, and basic management of students' learning. They also have to understand the broader context of Singapore society, of which their schools form a part. They must get

the best out of their students, teaching not just through textbooks but by personal example. Teaching must be not just as a profession, but a vocation. Only then can they prepare their pupils to cope with the challenges and uncertainties which they will face as adult citizens.

### **Schools - Autonomy And Responsibility**

Besides having good teachers and principals, we must structure our school system to give them both the flexibility and the resources to do a good job, and also the clear guidance and overall sense of priorities to work towards the right objectives. Principals need flexibility and autonomy to manage their schools, so that each school can come up with solutions best suited to their circumstances and needs. Teachers need backup support to help them do their best in classrooms. We must strike a good balance between centralisation and autonomy, between guaranteeing adequate minimum standards across the board, and encouraging innovation and initiative.

As the quality of teachers and principals improves, we will progressively give schools more autonomy. The Ministry recently implemented some measures to give principals more authority, particularly in personnel matters and in administering their programmes. It will take awhile for principals and the ministry staff gain confidence in the new arrangements. But we will go further, step by step.

We will do this in all schools. We have already laid the framework for greater autonomy in independent and autonomous schools. These schools must make full use of the additional resources they have to innovate and try out new ideas. When these ideas are successful, we will extend them to the whole school

system. They must achieve new peaks of excellence, and set high standards for other schools to follow.

Victoria is an autonomous school. It has used its autonomy to good effect, to start many programmes:

- To enrich learning opportunities for pupils, e.g. computer courses and public speaking programmes for all pupils, and overseas field trips;
- To upgrade working conditions for teachers, e.g. better staff room facilities, laptops for HODs and teachers; and
- To support teacher development and free them to focus on professional duties, e.g. more part time support staff, and workshops and seminars for staff development.

These are practical, sensible measures which have yielded results for Victoria. There is no reason why other schools cannot pick up ideas from what Victoria has done, just as I am sure Victoria follows closely what the other schools are trying out. MOE has set up centres for professional development, sharing and exchange. The Principals' Centre and Teacher Centre will open up avenues for professional networking, sharing and exchange, and help Education Officers to establish high standards of professional excellence.

### **Students - Citizens Of Today And Tomorrow**

Finally, whether the teachers, principals and schools succeed in their mission depends on the pupils – whether you are willing to learn, whether you do your best, whether you make the most of your school years to prepare yourself for life ahead, not just in class, but in your ECA, community service, and civics

and moral education. By participating in school life, you will develop habits of thinking and learning, and a sense of camaraderie with your schoolmates, which are not just the stuff of good memories, but formative experiences which mould you for life. The more wholeheartedly you involve yourself in school activities, the more you will discover and develop your interests and talents, and the more you will get out of your years in school.

Do not take the education you are getting for granted. You are lucky that we have a school system where every child with the ability to benefit from an education gets one, where you are judged and assessed purely on your merit, where schools are well equipped with computers, laboratories, music rooms, gymnasiums, and everything else you need for your education. You are not likely to do better in most other parts of Asia today, or even in many developed countries. Even 15 or 20 years ago in Singapore, our school facilities were much poorer. Fewer students made it to secondary school, or from there on to junior colleges, polytechnics or universities.

Make the most of the opportunities you have, realise how much you have benefited from the society which has given you this chance, and made you what you are. After you graduate, be sure to contribute something back to society, and do for the next generation what the previous generation has done for you.

This is the way to secure your future, and your children's future. This will ensure many more successful years for Victoria School, and for Singapore.

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