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SPEECH BY MR TANG GUAN SENG, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY  
(EDUCATION), AT THE ANNUAL DINNER OF THE SINGAPORE  
SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION AT THE  
CRYSTAL GARDEN BALLROOM, HOLIDAY INN PARK VIEW,  
ON SATURDAY, 20 SEPTEMBER 1986 AT 7.30 PM

When I was asked to deliver a speech at your Association's annual dinner, I was in fact given a very difficult task. Why? It is because I will be speaking to a group of knowledgeable professionals who are committed to their career.

As principals of junior colleges and secondary schools, you have attended many seminars and courses, and have dealt with all sorts of problems relating to education. To most of you, it would not be an exaggeration if I say that there is hardly any topic in education that is totally new to you. After some thought, I decided to speak on "Competitiveness As a Driving Force in Our Schools" - the theme which emerges from time to time during my recent school visits. I hope those, who may consider it uninteresting, can bear with me for about 15 minutes before we enjoy the dinner.

Let me first start with a basic question. What is our objective in education? Our education has been undergoing changes over the years in response to the changing situation. However, the objective remains basically the same, that is, to develop one's potential and ability to the fullest so as to bring about a useful and loyal citizen.

While I am sure that all of you would not challenge the objective, some of you may disagree to the means which we use to achieve the objective. This is acceptable. One cannot expect a hundred per cent agreement in any situation. Otherwise, the world would become too monotonous and uninteresting.

Some people do not agree with the idea of examination although it is generally accepted by most of us. In their eyes, examination is a social evil as it creates an unhealthy environment where students are pressurised so badly that undesirable emotional, mental and physical consequences occur. Examination results in competition, as one has to achieve certain set standards applicable across the board. In fact, they are of the view that the undesirability of competition is not confined only to examination, but has a spill over effect in other activities in schools, especially extra-curricular activities.

This perception is not peculiar to Singapore, it also exists in other countries.

According to a recent press report published in the Straits Times on 29 Aug 86, the leftwingers in Britain had decided that competition and sports in schools were unacceptable as they were facets of a capitalist and free market economy.

Let me quote from the report:

"In areas where the left controls local government, this has often meant the selling-off of school sports fields for housing or commercial development.

"But new depths of absurdity have been plumbed by the decision of some primary schools to ban the humble egg-and-spoon race in the interests of eliminating the competitive spirit."

Although circumstances leading to Britain's decline as an economic and trading power are complicated, personally I feel the de-emphasis of competitive spirit is one of the main factors.

Let us take a look at Singapore. We have still not got out of the economic recession. As pointed out by the Economic Committee earlier this year, the declining trends of our export and manufacturing performance indicate that there has been a broader trend of weakening international competitiveness in the last five years. Everyone is affected financially in a recession. There is a lesson that we must not forget: Singapore, with no natural resources apart from manpower, must strengthen its competitiveness by cutting cost and increasing productivity. The key word here is **competitiveness**. We must be able to compete internationally to ensure our survival and prosperity.

When we talk about competition, we must guard against certain unhealthy trends prevailing in some western societies. The norm for competition in these societies is to allow one to resort to even unscrupulous means to achieve one's goals.

In our situation, there is a need to inject a co-operative spirit or team spirit into competition. To a foreigner, it seems highly unlikely that we are able to integrate these two antagonistic elements. However, we have done it. It is embodied in the theme of this year's National Day celebrations: Together ... Excellence for Singapore.

Therefore, when we talk about competition, we are referring to competition not only as an individual but also as a team, as a school, as an association and as a nation.

To strengthen our competitiveness, we must take full advantage of our manpower potential through education. Schools are the training ground to prepare our children for the challenges in life. Our children must be taught to face the reality squarely, that is, competition is a way of life in Singapore.

As a principal, you may have at least three different approaches to this reality.

Firstly, the passive approach. You have no choice but to accept it and so do the necessary, like having remedial classes, monthly tests, etc. You consider yourself not more than a nut and bolt in the whole examination machinery. When you see your students failing to complete a task which is not within their capability, you become frustrated.

Secondly, the extremist approach. You see competition and examination as an end in itself instead of a means for progress. You set high standards for students who are pressurised into achieving for the glory of the school. This happens not only in the academic field but also in extra-curricular activities. The lesser achievers are ignored and made to feel small and useless.

Thirdly, the realistic and positive approach. Different schools have different backgrounds, different student input and therefore different standards and expectations must be realistically set. It is, therefore, unfair to compare achievements among schools without taking into consideration their differences. In fact, with the different streams in schools nowadays, it is also unfair to compare the performances of the different streams. Once realistic standards are set, students

should be encouraged to compete not only with his classmates but more importantly with himself. In this way, competition will become a driving force in him, that is, to achieve the best he can according to his own potential and ability. The competition spirit should be encouraged in all fields, and not just in the examination halls. When students are able to enjoy the thrill of winning and to learn a lesson from losing, the tone of the school will improve. For the slower learners, encouragement and care from principals and teachers are of vital importance. There must be hope for every student.

However, it is also important that we should not hamper a student's ability to progress by having low expectations of him and therefore not stretching him enough. We should encourage and assist high fliers to scale greater heights. For these students, all possible facilities should be made available to them so as to enable them to realise their fullest potential. This would have a positive bearing over other students and eventually help uplift the general performance of the whole school. It is like in a swimming championship where the best swimmer is always given the middle lane so as to have the least interference from the waves created by the other competitors.

In conclusion, I hope that you, the principals, would adopt a right approach towards competition and help to achieve our objective in education set out in the beginning of my speech.