

Educational reforms key to S'pore: PM

It brings about system that helps produce competent, creative citizens. -BT

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SINGAPORE'S educational reforms have led to a system that's helping to produce competent and creative citizens who are literate, well-socialised and have the makings of leaders of tomorrow, according to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Sharing Singapore's experience in improving its educational system at an international conference of principals yesterday, he said that the overhaul of the school system here in the 1990s - focusing on school leaders and teachers - has achieved its main goal.

The revamp has produced schools that develop their own identities and expertise; a high standard across all schools; a good number of outstanding schools; many models of success; and students who are well-educated, employable and socially responsible.

Mr Lee said that the key move Singapore made was in devolving promotions in schools to personnel boards made up of senior management in the education system. This was in tandem with developments in the entire public service.

'The move may seem like an operational matter, but it was in fact critical to all the changes,' Mr Lee said. Some of these changes include putting more resources in education, building new schools and deploying technology in teaching.

They also include strengthening the education ministry headquarters, beefing up pay and career prospects of teachers and principals, creating more training opportunities for them and more advancement possibilities.

Much of the focus was on what could really make a difference - encouraging enthusiastic and dedicated teachers led by resourceful and passionate principals, who are backed by high quality staff at the HQ.

'We advanced young and promising officers to become heads of departments and principals,' Mr Lee said.

He said that school leaders, especially principals, are critical to school performance. 'With a good principal, the whole school blossoms. With a bad one, keen, idealistic young teachers quickly lose their enthusiasm and 'switch off'.'

Mr Lee noted that up to 1980, only 60 per cent of each cohort completed secondary school. Today, the figure is 99 per cent and, eventually, nearly half of the cohort obtain degrees.

He said that education is the only sustainable basis for prosperity and progress - and the key priority for all nations must be to improve their educational systems.

To improve, Mr Lee said that Singapore is putting more stress now on soft skills and less attention on exams without giving up attention to results.

Teachers must be more competent - and thus there will be a stronger body to champion

professional development among teachers, he said.

'Given our limited natural resources, our human capital is of paramount importance,' Mr Lee said.

'We have to ensure that we teach our people the best we can. Wherever they graduate from, (our) students receive a solid grounding and education, and gain valuable skills for life.'

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