

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Govt kindergartens can expand, if widely supported: Heng

Calls for kids from lower-income homes to get admission priority

By **SANDRA DAVIE**
SENIOR EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

THE diverse range of kindergartens here has served parents well and the new government-run kindergartens will share best practices and help raise standards across the sector, said Education Minister Heng Swee Keat yesterday.

This was his response to calls from MPs that the pre-school sector be nationalised, as he laid out the massive undertaking before his ministry in venturing into the pre-school sector.

“As it is, the ministry has heavy responsibilities, and an expansion into providing affordable, quality kindergartens in the heartlands is a significant undertaking,” he said.

He added that the Ministry of Education will go beyond the 15 centres planned only if there is strong public support, and they are shown to create “significant value” for parents and children.

While he spelt out in broad strokes the set-up of the kindergartens – that they will be in the HDB heartland which are the “catchment areas” for children from disadvantaged homes – the exact location of the first five centres and the admission procedures will be known in two weeks.

But even as the announcement was welcomed, welfare organisations and childhood education experts concerned about the widening educational gap between children from different

socio-economic backgrounds called on the MOE to give priority to children from lower-income families. Several of them already predict a scramble for places by parents, as these kindergartens will be seen to be of high quality.

Pre-school operator Denise Lai, 42, who is enrolled in the National Institute of Education’s doctorate in education programme, said there is likely to be a “rush for places”.

FY2013 BUDGET
\$11.64 billion
(up 10.5%)

“Even if priority is given to those living nearby, the slightly more well-off parents, even if they can afford private kindergartens, will want to place their kids at these centres as they may think that these centres will be of high quality, have more resources and better prepare them for Primary 1.

“Where does that leave your kids from the poor families? Their parents, who are too busy making ends meet, are unlikely to have even heard of these centres.”

But she stressed that only a certain percentage of places should be reserved for children from poorer homes.

“At the end of the day it is good to have a healthy mix.”

Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of local philanthropic group the Lien Foundation, agreed that there is a need to reserve places for children who come from disadvantaged homes. He suggested that up to 20 per cent of the places be given to children from the lower socio-economic background.

“If we really want an education system that fosters social mobility, I think there should be a concerted effort to search and place children from low-income families in these centres as they will be the ones who will benefit most from a quality programme.”

Lien Foundation recently launched a project to provide high-quality pre-schooling to children from disadvantaged families attending two childcare centres run by welfare organisation Care Corner.

Early childhood expert Khoo Kim Choo suggested that these centres go big on parental education.

“Parental involvement is key. They can support their children’s learning at home through simple ways such as reading a book aloud to them or playing simple number games.

“Teachers can show them how this can be done.”

Singapore Children’s Society executive director Alfred Tan liked the idea of siting some of the kindergartens at the primary schools, as there will be better integration.

He suggested that the primary school teachers work closely with the pre-school teachers.

“And by the end of it, when the pupils are in K2, the primary school teachers can have a sense of how well-prepared these kids are for Primary 1,” he said.

✉ sandra@sph.com.sg