

**SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE LAUNCH OF PROJECT BRIDGE, ON 10 JUNE 2000 AT 2.00PM AT PROJECT BRIDGE CENTRE**

Good Afternoon

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Project Bridge members

Families and Friends

**Providing Out-of-School Youths with Developmental Opportunities**

In Singapore, we value education as the key to personal advancement and society's progress. More importantly, education enables young Singaporeans to learn and grow up to be responsible adults with good values. It also imparts knowledge and equips them with skills that will make them active and contributing citizens in the future.

2 However, notwithstanding our success in developing an educational system that has received many accolades, it is unavoidable that there is a small number of youths who leave school prematurely before completing ten years of basic education. Each year, these students make up less than 1 % of our total school enrolment. There are multi-faceted reasons for their early exit from the school system, the main ones being loss of interest in their studies, juvenile delinquency,

negative peer influence, family or financial problems and the need to seek employment. Based on early contacts of Project Bridge Centre with out-of-school youths in the Sembawang-Hong Kah CDC District, the more commonly cited reasons were no interest in studies, cannot cope in schools and failed examinations. Of the 173 youths who were visited, 14% indicated that they were working and 86% indicated that they stayed at home. Out of the 14%, 35% were involved in full-time jobs, 60% were involved in part-time jobs and 5% were in National Service. In terms of aspirations, 73% of the youths wanted to find work, 9% indicated their interest to study further, 10% were waiting to enter National service and 8% were uncertain what they wanted to do.

3 Early school leaving constitutes both an individual and societal problem. Out-of-school youths will face problems in securing gainful employment in the labour market. Because of their limited training and skill-sets, as a group, they will experience higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than other workers in our economy. Hence, they will be severely disadvantaged in our knowledge-based economy.

4. Out-of-school youths as a group also impact on a broad spectrum of social issues such as juvenile delinquency, street corner gangs, drug abuse and social alienation. The total number of pupils who dropped out at the primary and secondary levels was approximately 1,400 over the last two years. As they are no longer in a formal educational system, they miss out on the safety net provided by teachers and counselors who might have spotted early warning signs and intervened

appropriately. There is a need to reach out to them as about 30% of crimes committed by youths in 1999 could be attributed to non-students. A study done by the Ministry of Home Affairs revealed that 88.5% of new drug addicts each year are out-of-school youths.

5 But, let me hasten to add that it is important that we do not label all out-of-school youths as juvenile delinquents or even youths-at-risks. Instead, they should be seen as early school leavers who need guidance on possible options to discover and maximise their potential and talents, which may not be academically-inclined. Many deserve a second chance. Therefore, as part of its preventive focus, the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime has decided to reach out and help this group of youths, setting up a multi-agency working group to do this in early 1999.

### **Keeping Potential Early School Leavers in School**

6. The Ministry of Education has existing management systems for early school leavers. For potential premature school leavers, MOE advises principals and teachers on how to help them to remain in school. This must be our most fundamental strategy in dealing with the out-of-school phenomenon. No other environment or programme can duplicate the enriching and safe school environment. Proactive actions are taken by schools with the help of local community self-help groups and voluntary welfare organisations to take remedial

and preventive actions. MOE also encourages schools to take steps to make it possible for out-of-school youths to rejoin the school system.

7 Each year, the efforts and outreach of schools and ITEs result in about 40% of the pool of early school leavers going on to enrol at the Vocational Training Centres, or VTCs in short, under the ITE HQ. These students undergo good basic vocational training courses. However, even at these VTCs, the dropout rate continues to be a concern. Hence, IMYC agencies, with the help of committed VWOs, will work with ITE HQ to initiate good life skills programmes to complement the quality vocational training at the VTCs.

8. As the out-of-school youth issue is linked to concerns arising from an unskilled work force, IMYC will also work with national agencies such as the NTUC to find ways to reach out to these potential unskilled workers. We can start them early on skill development and redevelopment programmes.

### **Community-Based Programme for Out-Of-School Youth**

9. We are also keen to work closely with schools, community groups and VWOs to tap their resources and knowledge to help these out-of-school youths. Today, I am pleased to launch the development of a LifeSkills Support Programme titled "Project Bridge". Project Bridge is a 2-year pilot non-religious youth developmental programme specially designed to provide early school leavers aged between 13 and 19, with proper guidance and direction in life.

10 The Project Bridge Centre is a joint project of the Sembawang-Hong Kah Community Development Council, National Youth Council and YMCA of Singapore. YMCA is the key co-ordinator of the programme handling the programme design, administration, recruitment and enrolment. Sembawang-Hong Kah Community Development Council and the National Youth Council provide funding and advisory support. This tripartite working relationship exemplifies the importance of a good community-based support network to help our youths, involving CDCs and voluntary welfare organisations. VWOs have nothing to fear from the enlarged role to be played by CDCs.

11 Activities at the Project Bridge Centre will nurture participating youths into whole persons and provide them with healthy ways and means to channel their energy. These activities seek to develop the social, vocational, academic, life and recreational skills of the youths so that they will lead productive lives. For example, a youth may not be interested in studies but is very interested in music. He may want to take up music lessons and become a guitar teacher one day. Likewise, a youth may be very interested in hair styling and one day become a renowned hair stylist with proper guidance and training.

12 Youths who are keen to develop vocational skills in servicing, mechanical or electronic fields will have an opportunity to do so through Institute of Technical Education's approved skills development programmes and joint partnership programmes with companies and institutions. At this juncture, I thank commercial partners and friends who have indicated their readiness to collaborate on Project

Bridge. We will recognise some of them afterwards. I take this opportunity to urge others to do so. Come on board. These collaborations will enable youths to learn practical skills to prepare them for the future.

13 For youths who are keen to resume studies, tuition in academic subjects and workshops on using the computer, effective study methods and examination skills are available. In addition, all the youths will learn important life skills such as problem-solving, time management and effective decision making. These will equip them to ride the challenges and cope with choices in life.

14 The overall approach of the Centre is to make it useful and interesting for the participating youths. Hence, games, community service projects and gatherings will also be organised. Indeed, the Centre sent 1 basketball and 2 football teams to take part in Sembawang-Hong Kah's 3rd Street Games Challenges in March this year. The youths will also be encouraged to perform community service in elderly homes and orphanages and to participate in outdoor camps. Visits to interesting places such as the Singapore Prison, Drug Rehabilitation Centres and the Polytechnics will also be arranged.

15 Currently, about 30 youths have adopted the Centre. You will hear some of their testimonies later. I am sure that as we continue to reach out, with love and understanding, more early school leavers will join Project Bridge. I encourage more early school leavers to take the step and join in. Don't be shy or fearful. Give it a shot. You will not regret it. I also encourage schools to refer their early school leavers to the Centre.

16 As the name "Project Bridge" so aptly describes, the Centre is like a bridge for our youths. A bridge to alternatives, a link to resources that will help to ensure a positive future over troubled waters and life challenges. Let me end by quoting some of the lyrics of the song "Bridge over Troubled Waters" by Simon and Garfunkel. It is a song that depicts a story of a true friend. I believe that the Project Bridge Centre is like a true friend to early school leavers who need help. At the Centre, they can find friends who listen and care and friends who run alongside them, encouraging them.

17 As the song goes:

"When you're weary, feeling small

When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all.

I'm on your side, oh when times get rough

And friends just can't be found

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.

All your dreams are on their way,

See how they shine,

Oh if you need a friend, I'm sailing right behind you.

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will ease your mind.

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will ease your mind"

18 I wish this project every success. My earnest hope is that more lives will be "bridged" and transformed.

19 Thank you.