

SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW AND HOME AFFAIRS AND CHAIRMAN OF THE INTER-MINISTRY COMMITTEE ON YOUTH CRIME AT THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK SEMINAR SATURDAY, 17 FEBRUARY 2001, 9.00 AM AT NCSS AUDITORIUM

Dr Robert Loh

President of the National Council of Social Service

Guests from the Ministry of Education

Ladies and Gentlemen

Education is much more than just about studies and examinations. It is about nurturing students, not just academically, but also socially and emotionally.

2 Today, our schools play an important role by providing a conducive and secure environment to nurture and develop students holistically, foster appropriate learning experiences and address emotional problems. Schools are key social institutions that provide a structure through which youths develop their character.

3 This fact is recognised by the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime, or IMYC. The IMYC was formed in 1995 to counter the problem of juvenile delinquency. Since then, IMYC member agencies have developed a wide range of

preventive measures to combat the problem. Some of these preventive and remedial initiatives include the Guidance Programme, the Peer Support Programme, the Streetwise Programme, Honorary Voluntary Police Constabulary Scheme in schools, and Project Bridge. The IMYC has also played an instrumental role in steering and monitoring the implementation of many new rehabilitative programmes for juvenile delinquents.

4 School social work has been identified by the Committee as one key measure to help reduce the incidence of juvenile delinquency and youth crime through early identification and intervention. Since 1996, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been playing a more active role in promoting school social work, by providing schools with funds to engage school social work services. Schools can now either engage services provided by voluntary welfare organisations, or employ full-time school counsellors.

5 Schools can also appoint teacher-counsellors to help minister to high-risk students, and refer difficult cases to professional social service agencies, using funds provided by the MOE. Through such referrals, a case management approach may be adopted to assist these youths to resolve their problems. This will help minimise the likelihood of them committing offences or dropping out of school prematurely.

6 I believe that school social work complements the current initiatives by MOE such as the peer support programme, the peer mediation programme, teacher counsellors and life skills programmes to help at-risk youths in schools.

7 Statistics show that about 2,000 youths drop out of school every year. These out-of-school youths are at a higher risk of becoming juvenile delinquents and being involved in unlawful acts. It is thus vital to nip the problem in the bud.

8 Although remedial programmes such as Project Bridge and the PAL programme by the Singapore Anti Narcotics Association (SANA) exist to help out-of-school youths return to school, early identification and intervention remains the best approach. The school is undoubtedly the prime nurturing environment to identify potential early school leavers who require help early before their problems escalate.

9 In this connection, I am glad to note that NCSS has produced a very useful Guide to School Social Work. This Guide will certainly be of great help, not only to social workers, but also to schools which have, or are planning to engage school social work services.

10 I hope that more schools will engage the professional services offered by social workers and counsellors, so that together as a community, we can help our youths, particularly high-risk ones, to develop positively and become active citizens who contribute significantly to our society.

11 Let me end by quoting a poem that sums up my points. The poem is written by J.J McWhirter, the author of the book "At-risk Youth – A Comprehensive Response"

If families do not...

The schools must

Provide roots for children...

So they stand firm and grow

Provide wings for children...

So they can fly

Broken roots and crippled wings

Destroy hope

And hope sees the invisible

feels the intangible

and achieves the impossible...

12 This poem illustrates that schools play a complementary role to families in the upbringing of young Singaporeans. However, important the role of schools, it should not, and must not, replace the role of families in nurturing and developing youth potential and averting youth delinquency. Nevertheless, prepared and equipped parents and schools can form a formidable pair.

13 Let us together - families, schools and the community - provide that hope, roots and wings for our youths to grow and fly. And as they fly, I am sure this

Guide to School Social Work will be a stabilizer, helping to ensure a smooth flight. Nevertheless, there will still be turbulence and bumps along the way. That is why we should always be there for them.

14 Thank you.