Distinguished Guests, Principals, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

1 This afternoon’s 7th Appointment Ceremony for Principals, is once again an important occasion for the Education Service and our schools. Let me first extend my warmest congratulations to the 70 principals who are being appointed today.

2 41 new principals are being entrusted with the stewardship and leadership of our schools. I commend you on this significant step up in your professional career, and your keenness to take on major new responsibilities in education. For our experienced principals who are assuming new appointments today, and those who continue to lead their schools, this ceremony is an affirmation of our trust in your ability to guide the staff and students in your school and take us forward in our educational mission. And for all our retiring Principals, some of whom have served for as much as four decades in the Service, I thank and commend you for your contributions as teachers and leaders in the immense transformation in Singapore education that we have seen over the past years. You have laid solid foundations for the improvements that we are embarking on.

Responding to the Earthquake Disaster

3 Our schools are reopening in a few days, amidst the devastation caused by the megathrust earthquake and resulting tsunamis that hit countries around the Indian Ocean on Sunday, 26 December. The loss of human lives is immense and, tragically, the count is growing by the hour. Singapore is actively engaged in the relief effort, through the SAF, the SCDF search and rescue contingents and various other missions, as well as through the contributions of numerous individuals who feel the grief of the Singapore families and the communities across the region who have experienced loss. Our heartfelt sympathies go to those who have lost their loved ones. Our hopes are also with all the families whose members are missing or still unaccounted for.

4 Our schools and students will, I am sure, be keen to help the families and countries affected by the disaster. Already, students and staff in our tertiary institutions are organizing themselves spontaneously and engaging in the relief effort. Several student associations and groups in the tertiary institutions are raising funds and mobilising volunteers. Students from NTU and the ITE are already performing shift duties and manning hotlines at the Singapore Red Cross Society’s Operation Centre.

5 I encourage all schools to rally around our national effort to help all those affected, when school reopens. There is a wellspring of compassion among Singaporeans that comes up each time we experience a calamity, in Singapore or in the region. As leaders in education, you can bring out this spirit in your students. You can give students the opportunity to contribute in the coming weeks, whether by raising funds or using their energies to collect or pack items required in the relief effort. You can help our young pick up valuable life lessons through this real life experience, and appreciate that while Singapore’s own shores are fortunately spared natural disasters of this magnitude, it is all the more important that as Singaporeans we contribute to those affected by such calamities.

6 Schools will take ownership over their efforts. It will be an opportunity for students to take the initiative, and respond in the most meaningful way to the relief effort. MOE will assist schools by facilitating link ups with our national agencies, to help schools focus their efforts on activities with the greatest benefit as the relief exercise progresses.
Beyond the immediate relief exercise, there will be immense needs in the months and years to come in the reconstruction of devastated human communities. It will be a long term effort, involving the international community. Many of our schools can engage their students in the effort to recover and rebuild communities, as part of the school’s Community Involvement Programmes. Some can do so through the Youth Expedition Projects of the National Youth Council.

Many of our students, from primary schools to our tertiary institutions, have already been involved in overseas community involvement programmes. Geylang Methodist Primary School took students to Indonesia. They distributed items such as milk powder, clothes and story books that were requested by the villages in remote areas. Students from Nan Hua Secondary have been involved in setting up an eco-tourism site in Cambodia. They were involved in building and maintaining forest trails, using techniques to prevent soil erosion, and teaching conversational English to the local rangers. Students from National Junior College went to Maldives to help refurbish a community hall and teach in a school.

They are among the many schools and JCs whose students have, in their own ways, contributed to communities in need. It is also a profound learning experience for our students. Those who have been on these expeditions talk about how it has opened their eyes to a world very different from what they have experienced in Singapore. And how it has allowed them to discover in themselves abilities that they did not know of, and has motivated them to continue volunteering their time and energy to help others, in Singapore or abroad.

These efforts are not incidental to education. What our students do in responding to tragedies or to the needs of those less fortunate than them, whether in Singapore or abroad, is intrinsic to their education. It goes to the core of education. Through our schools, we seek to nurture our young to go beyond themselves. We want to develop young Singaporeans who feel inspired to use their knowledge and energies in one way or another to make a difference to the lives of those around them, to serve their country and to better the world they live in.

Preparing our Young for an Interconnected World

It is part and parcel of everything we are doing in education, as we prepare for a new future. The generation of students in our schools today will face a world more inter-connected than ever before, whether in times of difficulty or times of promise. We have to prepare them to face the uncertainties, the occasional shocks and the inevitable setbacks that they will experience in their lives. And we must prepare them to make the most of the opportunities of an interconnected world.

It calls for certain shifts in education, to prepare for this new and more complex future. We know we start from a strong position. We will build on our achievements, and retain the reputation for educational rigour that we have earned around the world. The latest Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (or TIMMS) results, in mathematics and science, confirm Singapore’s reputation for excellence and rigour in education.

We also know that there is no single way, no simple formula, for preparing our young for this increasingly complex and challenging world they will face. We have to allow for diverse approaches, and be willing to let some schools experiment with new curricula and teaching methods.

And we know, most importantly, that we have to provide our young with a holistic education - to expose them regularly to a range of learning experiences from young, in and out of the classroom, and indeed within and outside Singapore.

That is why we have embarked on the I&E (Innovation and Enterprise) journey in our schools. At the heart of it all, we aim to develop the spirit of inquiry and the ruggedness of
character that will prepare our children to face the challenges of the future with confidence, seize
the opportunities that come, and contribute to a better society.

I&E is a continuing journey, not a once-off task for a year or two. It is a culture that we are
developing in education, not a single set of activities.

We are making progress. We are providing greater flexibility and choice in our schools. We
are seeking to help every student to find his own talents, encourage him to take greater
ownership over his learning, and to follow his passions. We are recognizing broader measures of
achievement and merit in education, by introducing more flexible admission systems to
secondary schools, JCs and universities. And we have reinforced this emphasis on a holistic
education with our revised school ranking system.

We have introduced new pathways in education, with integrated programmes in secondary
schools and JCs, and specialist independent schools to develop special talents. Next week, the
NUS Maths and Science School and two privately funded schools will open their doors.

Across the board, our schools are distinguishing themselves further from each other, both in
their academic and CCA programmes, and in how they are developing character and leadership
among their students. Primary Schools will be given greater support, to develop their own niches
of excellence, from next year.

And we are giving our students a greater say in their education. For instance, we giving our
Normal Course students with more choice in their education, to help them explore their interests
and develop their talents to the fullest. We also want to give students more choice in the subjects
they study, in secondary schools and JCs, within the constraints of the school’s resources.

The move towards flexibility and choice in their education is also seen in our approaches to
the learning of the Mother Tongue languages. We are embarking on developing a Chinese
Language (CL) curriculum that is customised to the different needs, abilities and backgrounds of
our CL students. We have to be willing to experiment, and find practical approaches to enthuse
students in their learning of CL so that they are motivated to continue learning and using the
language well after they leave school. We are undertaking similar reviews of Malay and Tamil
Language learning, which will be completed by August next year.

We are seeing evidence of changing attitudes on the part of parents and students, and a
broader perspective of the education they want. More parents and students are selecting schools
not just on the basis of what they can qualify for based on their academic scores, but what a
school can offer to develop their broader talents and capabilities. There were numerous examples
amongst Primary 6 students this year. Like Rebekah Broughton, our top Eurasian pupil in this
year’s PSLE exams with a PSLE aggregate score of 272. Rebekah chose to go to CHIJ Toa
Payoh because of its rhythmic gymnastics program. Or Lim Zi Kun, a student from Qifa Primary
School who had a PSLE aggregate score of 261, who chose Jurong Secondary School because
of the school’s Special Talents and Achievements Recognition or STAR programme. The
programme trains students in areas such as leadership, and has a component which allows Zi
Kun to develop her special interest in Art. I am sure Rebecca and Zi Kun, like many others like
them, will find their secondary school years both meaningful and challenging.

**Challenge of School Leadership**

School leadership is a challenging and complex task, perhaps more so than before. But
these are exciting times to be a school leader.
You are the catalysts for change. Visionary and decisive leadership will make all the difference between a sluggish or static school system, and a system that keeps looking forward and spares nothing to prepare its children for a world of change and opportunity.

As school leaders, your sense of conviction in our goals in education will matter. You will need to hold to your convictions, and have the moral courage to do what is right in education, not just meet the targets that are most visible or most easily measured. The signals you send on the ground will shape whether our teachers feel supported in venturing beyond the tried and familiar, and in motivating their students to look beyond their examinations. Develop your teachers, encourage them to innovate in teaching and assessment, and give them ownership in the school’s goals.

**Advanced Leadership Programme**

We will continue to support our Principals in their own development. The 6-month long Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), now in its 4th year, is a major investment in future leaders. All the Principals newly appointed today would have gone through the LEP at some point in the last few years.

It is also useful for Principals to take a step back and re-look at their role as school leaders after each tour in a school. Principals today are allowed to take a sabbatical after their first tour as Principal. To complement this, MOE will be introducing a new milestone programme, called the Advanced Leadership Programme (ALP) for Principals who are moving on to their third tour. A key component of the ALP will involve engaging Principals in the fundamental principles of governance. They will be exposed to the challenges of policy formulation and implementation in the context of the larger Public Service. Principals will also discuss and examine the concept of leadership. They will have a chance to learn about leadership challenges outside of education, through informal dialogues with business and public sector leaders.

The ALP will be a 2-week long programme. The first programme involving 30 principals will begin in June next year. The ALP programme will be a valuable addition to our current schemes for developing leadership in education. Together, they will help Principals play their roles with confidence as we proceed with changes in education, and seek to evolve the way we teach and learn in our schools.

**Inheriting a Tradition**

I have full confidence that our Principals are up to the task of managing this period of change in education. They inherit a rich tradition of school leadership in Singapore, an accumulation of best practices that are shared across our clusters and in the system as a whole. They also have many role models to follow, including many of the more experienced Principals who are here today, some of whom are retiring.

I would like to make special mention of Mr Tan Thiam Hock, who is retiring after serving for over 24 years as a Principal. Thiam Hock is an inspiring leader, who is widely respected by his peers and colleagues. He has brought about lasting changes to the schools he led and distinguished them for their strong focus on staff well-being and students’ all-round development. Thiam Hock epitomises the qualities of leadership that have transformed our school system, and taken it to ever higher levels of excellence.

They are qualities that have been shown by many of our Principals, who have made similar impact on their schools and students. They are dedicated men and women with the competencies, and more importantly the vision and conviction, to lead and motivate teams to create schools of excellence.

I am confident that all of you will make our schools excellent, and make Singapore proud.