

Excerpts of Education Minister Ng Eng Hen's remarks at press conference on sexuality education on May 21

INTRODUCTION

1. The recent AWARE saga put sexuality education in schools in the spotlight. Debate became very heated as both sides went at each other. Both groups held strong views and unflinching positions, determined for their cause to prevail over the other. Schools were dragged into this melee and could have become the proxy arena for competing ideologies. Issues became muddled, emotions ran high. This is an unhealthy, unproductive way to try to resolve issues that are inherently divisive.

2. I do not want MOE to be caught in the cross-fires. But I did want to put our sexuality education programme, which is an important component, into proper perspective. I decided to wait till things had cooled down. I hope both sides and their supporters have moved on. Now is a good opportunity to explain MOE's approach to sexuality education in its entirety and how we have implemented it. To respond to public concerns, I will also explain how we will tighten processes for the selection and monitoring of external providers and put in added measures to keep parents better informed, so that they can play their key role in the sexuality education of their children.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION – WHY WE NEED IT

3. Sexuality education is an important programme in our schools. It aims to help our young understand the physiological, social and emotional changes they experience as they mature, develop healthy relationships with the opposite sex and to teach them how to make responsible choices. Sexuality education started in 2000 in response to specific challenges and has been progressing satisfactorily.

4. There are three main challenges that we aim to address through sexuality education:

A) Problems related to teenage pregnancies, STIs/HIV among teens

5. Each year we have about 2000 teenage pregnancies (statistically age group used is between 10 to 19). Some abort their pregnancies while others go on to give birth and become teenage mothers. Both groups suffer negative consequences, either from the trauma of abortions or as a teenage, and often single, mother for which they are ill-equipped.

6. The number of teenage pregnancies has held steady, averaging about 8.4 per 1,000. This is not as high as the incidence in Western Countries, e.g. Australia's teenage pregnancy rate is 16.3 per 1000 for 2004¹ and England's rate is 41.7 per 1000 for 2007², but it is still a concern and needs to be addressed. But what is worrying is the increase in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) which has jumped from 238 cases in 2002 to 787 in 2008, a rate of increase of 2.5 times. The number of HIV cases has also been steadily increasing from 1 case in 2002 to 9 cases in 2007.

B) Sexual habits changing among young

7. Teenage pregnancies and the higher rates of STIs indicate that some youths are sexually active and are having unprotected sex. HPB-MOE did a survey in 2006 involving about 4000 students aged 14+ to 19+ on sexual attitudes and behaviour of our students in 2006, and found that the prevalence of sexual activity among our students is about 8%. This is not as high as other developed countries, e.g. in the US, 46% of the 15-19 year olds had engaged in sexual activity in 2002³. But less than a quarter of our sexually active youths used any protection against STIs including HIV or against pregnancy.

¹ Source: Better Health Channel fact sheet from <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>, downloaded 19 May 2009.

² U.K.'s rate is for the 15 – 17 age bracket. Source: Office for National Statistics and Teenage Pregnancy Unit (2009), downloaded 19 May 2009.

³ Source: http://www.gutmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html (linked to WHO website), downloaded 19 May 2009. Gutmacher Institute is a non-profit organization advancing sexual and reproductive health worldwide through research, policy analysis and public education.

8. The majority of our youth are not sexually active and believe that sexual activity should only occur after marriage. So a values-based programme and social mores of society do have a tempering effect on behaviour.

C) Greater Access to Information

9. Our young have many sources of information online, and from popular culture and friends. They are exposed to the social norms of other interest groups, including those with liberal values. We must expect the same pressures on our children as we globalise. Hence, it is important for them to be able to receive objective and reliable information in schools.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION – WHAT MOE HAS BEEN TEACHING

10. Sexuality education started in 2000 to respond to these growing challenges. When we started, the key message was abstinence, reflecting the conservative social tone of our Asian society where liberal values on sex are not espoused. This is not a negative facet of our society. It is not prudish, regressive or naive. Even some who have lived in more liberal societies tell us that they like this atmosphere for their children. But it was clear that abstinence as the only focus was not an effective strategy in reducing the number of teenage pregnancies and STIs. In 2007, messages were added – beyond knowing how to say no, students were also taught the repercussions of unwanted pregnancies and STIs/HIV and how to prevent them. This is now a key focus of sexuality education, and should continue to be moving forward. This is why we teach contraception to protect youth against sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

11. The sexuality education package, called “The Growing Years”, aims to help our children understand and manage physical changes in their growing years as they reach puberty. It emphasises the basis for building healthy boy-girl relationships. It provides healthy perspectives about some sensitive topics like petting, masturbation and pornography – information which youths may seek from the Internet if unavailable

elsewhere. The material used in "The Growing Years" is widely available. In fact it was sold to the public, and distributed in print, VCD and CD-ROM.

12. Content on sensitive topics related to pre-marital sex and homosexuality were made known openly and found to be generally acceptable. Even then, these sensitive topics were not and should not be the main focus of our sexuality education. Homosexuality forms a small proportion of the entire package – less than 3%. On homosexuality, children are taught what it is, and that homosexual acts are illegal. The government has made its stand clear, that in private, homosexuals have their personal space⁴. Pre-marital sex is generally covered in secondary schools to teach the consequences of sexual activity and the key learning point is that it is not encouraged, as there are undesirable consequences.

13. The "Growing Years" package has been taught since 2000. We will keep to this core focus of our sexuality education – to impart knowledge to students about building healthy relationships and to reduce STIs and teenage pregnancies.

14. Guiding principles of this framework for sexuality education, first developed by a Steering Committee led by then SMS Dr Aline Wong in 2000, were followed and are still relevant.

- Parents bear the main responsibility for sexuality education of their children.
- Sexuality education is premised on the importance of the heterosexual married family as the basic unit of society.

⁴ On 14/5, DPM Wong commented that the government's position on the issue of homosexuality was clear, as stated by PM in Oct 2007, and had not changed, nor would it be changed by the saga. He recalled PM's parliamentary speech which noted that Singapore was basically a conservative society and the conventional heterosexual family was the norm and building block of society. However, the government recognised that homosexuals were a part of society and were entitled to their private lives. He noted that it was regrettable that the issue had emerged during the saga, saying it was "unproductive and divisive". DPM Wong also said that society would not reach a consensus on the issue of homosexuality for a very long time to come. He noted that the way for homosexuals to have space in our society was to accept the informal limits which reflected the point of balance that society could accept, and not to assert themselves stridently as gay groups did in the West. He urged every group, religious or secular, to exercise restraint and show mutual respect and tolerance.

- The teaching of facts in sexuality education is integrated with the teaching of values (which reflect that of the mainstream society).

VALUES IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

15. Sexuality education needs to be taught in a context of values which our mainstream society believes in. Let me make it clear to all what this means, so that there is no ambiguity. This means encouraging heterosexual married couples to have healthy relationships and to build stable nuclear and extended family units. The Government has been consistent in this line. Our social policies are based on this and we incentivise nuclear and extended families e.g. in HDB housing and financial aid schemes.

16. How then can it be otherwise, when we are teaching our young in schools? We do not condone promiscuity, sexual experimentation or promote homosexuality. MOE teaches the values which are held by the majority, whether they are religious or not. This is why we promote abstinence as still the best option for teens. Which parent openly encourages their children to experiment sexually? Almost all parents hope for their children to find a heterosexual life partner, get married and have kids. Grandparents wish the same too for their grandchildren. This has been the natural cycle of life since civilisation began. If their children turn out otherwise, some parents learn to accept it, and embrace and love their children for who they are, even if they are homosexual. But schools are not the place to try to push for these outcomes, which are ahead of present societal norms.

17. But neither can our sexuality education take only a moralistic approach, as I had explained earlier. If taught like a lecture, it will have little or no effect on school kids. We have to be practical, and these lessons must engage students' interest and attention to reduce the incidence of STIs/teenage pregnancies. So apart from imparting knowledge on the basis of healthy relationships, skills to say no, we also teach forms of contraception. Parents, who feel uncomfortable with this approach, can opt out. Some

may do so because they believe that only abstinence should be taught, and that teaching contraception might actually encourage teens to experiment. Experts tell us this is not true⁵, but MOE recognises that parents are ultimately responsible for their children, so they have the option to opt out.

18. The sexuality education package was developed carefully by professionals and in consultation with many groups, taking into account the sensitivities of our multi-religious and multiracial country. Even then, there may be some who still disagree with the approach or contents. We respect their rights to decide as parents and to opt-out. But what we must avoid is different groups with competing ideologies using our schools and young as proxy arenas to push their own set of beliefs. We all witnessed what happened in the recent AWARE saga. Parents, of any religion, of course have every right to express concerns if they perceive that advocacy groups like AWARE are teaching liberal values which go ahead of the social mainstream. But we must not go down the way as has happened in the US, where schools become the proxy battleground for the Christian right and gay interest groups to settle arguments. Issues will not be resolved that way.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS – SHARED SPACE

19. The conscious need to keep our schools and educational institutions away from contending groups applies both to external agencies, and also teachers and principals. If we do not adhere to this rule strictly, our students and educational system will end up the losers. Our students grow and learn best in an environment where they can develop their own beliefs in an objective manner, with adequate time to reflect on difficult issues, free from the rhetoric and emotional upheavals of contending parties. The AWARE saga showed clearly how easily contentious issues can inflame supporters and spin out of control. This applies to religion, politics, and controversial topics in sexuality education alike. All should recognise that access to students is a privilege which MOE accords,

⁵ UNAIDS (1997) Impact of HIV and sexual health education on the sexual behavior of young people: a review update

and carries with it responsibilities and accountability. We do have religion-based schools, and they openly teach their beliefs but parents who enrol their children in these schools do so knowingly. Even then, students can opt-out of religious programs. We need to preserve and protect the shared space in our schools and educational institutions.

ENHANCEMENTS

20. Sexuality education should continue as it is an important programme. Recently, parents have provided feedback and expressed concerns about how MOE ensures that external providers conform to MOE's framework for sexuality education. MOE has conducted a thorough investigation on the teaching of sexuality education in our schools. Generally, schools have adhered to guidelines outlined earlier. But to address public concerns, MOE will take this opportunity to enhance the sexuality education framework to give parents added assurance and with the following key strategies to achieve our goals.

A) Maintain Core Focus on Building Healthy Relationships and Preventing STIs/HIV/Teen Pregnancies

21. The "Growing Years" series will continue to be taught from upper primary to post-secondary levels, to teach students the importance of building healthy boy-girl relationships and making responsible choices.

22. Given the rising incidence of STIs/HIV among adolescents, schools should continue to ensure that all Sec 3 and JC/C11 students receive accurate information on STIs/HIV and contraception from a health perspective.

- a) Apart from the mass lecture developed by HPB/MOE, all students will continue to be put through the structured class-based component facilitated by teachers to

help them understand the consequences of STIs/HIV/teenage pregnancy on themselves and their families, and acquire the necessary skills to say no to sex.

- b) There will be some students who require more help. For these, parents will be notified and provided with options to attend additional workshops to reinforce awareness of the consequences of unsafe sex and role-play responsible decision-making with regard to sex. If parents choose to, their children will be presented with more detailed information on contraceptive options, using their school counsellors (AED Counselling) or external agencies/trainers selected from a panel of MOE approved vendors. MOE will work with HPB to develop a structured workshop which parents can have access to.

B) Panel of Professionals for Sexuality Education Curriculum Package

23. Health-related issues of teenage pregnancies and STIs require experts to advise on the proper methods to reduce the incidence. In addition there are contentious issues such as abortion and contraception. It is best to enlist professionals who specialise in this area. This is indeed how the Growing Years package was developed. Moving forward, MOE together with HPB will form a Steering Committee which comprises well trained professionals to advise and review the curriculum of sexuality education periodically. The Steering Committee will include psychologists, counsellors, educationists and medical practitioners, and will be chaired by DGE, Ms Ho Peng.

24. Appointing a professional Committee to review the curriculum is appropriate but to ensure that concerns of the wider public and parents are also addressed, COMPASS (COMMunity and PARENTS in Support of Schools), with representatives from the community and parents, will periodically review materials taught and provide feedback. SMS Fu and SPS Masagos, who are Chairperson and Deputy Chairman of COMPASS, will oversee this process of consultation.

C) Build Up a Core Team of Teachers to teach Sexuality Education and External Agencies to Supplement

25. MOE will continue to work with schools to train a core team of teachers to teach and deliver the main components of our sexuality education programme, through the Growing Years series. This means that over time as more teachers are trained, MOE will itself teach more of the sexuality education package. Nevertheless, external agencies will still be used to supplement some lessons.

D) Tighten Controls and Accountabilities in Engagement of External Agencies

26. External agencies are useful resource partners, because many have the expertise to help achieve our goals more effectively. Hence, schools should continue to be allowed to engage external personnel and agencies to complement the teachers.

27. However, unlike before where schools were provided the autonomy to engage these providers, the vetting process will now be centralised at MOE. The vetting process will be tightened to raise the level of accountability of providers. More stringent checklists will apply. A Committee, headed by Director/Education Programmes will be formed to approve agencies/trainers on the panel. It will institute periodic audits on the fidelity of sexuality education programmes in schools as well as their compliance with guidelines on the engagement of external agencies.

E) Empower Parents with More Information

28. The "Growing Years" series has been made available to the public as mentioned earlier. In addition, we will put out more information, such as that used by external agencies or other materials to parents through MOE's website so that as far as possible, they would know what is being taught in schools, to enable them to play their primary

role in sexuality education⁶. More information will be provided on the key messages, guiding principles, the role of parents, school and the community, the scope of topics covered under sexuality education, the position on contentious issues and the approach to delivery, including guidelines for the engagement of external vendors. We will update our websites within the next two months.

29. Schools will also provide sufficient information to parents on their sexuality education programme. Apart from providing an overview of their programme and topics covered at different age levels, schools should inform parents of any talks or workshops run by external providers and post such information on their websites. Schools will be required to do so by August 2009.

F) Streamline processes for parents to opt out

30. MOE currently allows opt out at two levels. First, independent and faith-based aided schools can opt out and implement their own programmes. Second, parents are allowed to opt their children out of the school programme. This should continue. To ensure that parents can exercise their prerogative,

- MOE and schools' websites should make it clear to parents that they can opt their children out of the entire school programme or just for individual topics, talks or workshops.
- Schools will provide opt-out forms on their websites and write to parents at the start of each year when they provide information on their overall programme and when they hold separate talks or workshops by external providers.

⁶ Parents have been involved from the beginning during the development of the GY series, and the framework is available on the MOE internet site.

EXTERNAL VENDORS

31. These changes reflect MOE's commitment to improve the framework of sexuality education in our schools. This must continue and be given due importance as teenage pregnancies and rising incidence of STIs are health problems that can mar the lives of our youth. Let me now touch specifically on the role of external agencies, going forward. There is a role for external agencies, as they possess expertise that can complement and make our teaching of sexuality education more effective. All external agencies will be subject to the new vetting process but beyond these procedural aspects, is the more important issue of trust. For the programmes to be delivered effectively, parents and MOE must be able to trust that external agencies teach according to the framework and values of MOE's sexuality education. External agencies must subscribe to these values if they choose to participate in sexuality education. If they believe otherwise, or think that MOE's approach on sexuality education is wrong, it is better not to participate in MOE's programmes but instead make their views known to the Steering Committee, who as professionals will decide the merits of their arguments and if the programme needs updating.

32. This is a better and more transparent approach for external vendors to take. External vendors must recognise that access to students in our schools is a qualified privilege based on trust. This applies to teachers as well. If parents are suspicious and distrustful of providers as having a negative influence on their children, then our programmes will be ineffective. Under the new framework, all external vendors will be assessed anew. For these reasons stated, we will not be able to use AWARE until they have gained the public's trust for their sexuality programmes.

CONCLUSION

33. MOE's sexuality education programme respects the primary role of parents, reflects social norms and reinforces family values which uphold the conventional family as the basic building block of our society. We must reflect and not move ahead of the values and attitudes of mainstream society, particularly when it comes to contentious issues such as homosexuality.

34. The aim of sexuality education is to help students develop healthy relationships and family values, but we must also be pragmatic in preventing the rising incidence of STIs/HIV and teen pregnancies. As sexuality education involves both the teaching of facts and values, both schools and parents must play their part. On our part, MOE will seek to ensure parents and the public have information on what is taught in sexuality education, how it is taught and who delivers the programmes. While schools can provide information and help teens acquire the skills to say no to sex and on forms of contraception to protect themselves against STIs and unwanted pregnancies, parents must do their part in fostering the values they believe in and in providing the close guidance that each child needs in the course of growing up. Parents must ultimately be responsible for their own child's values and well-being.

35. We must guard against schools and educational institutions becoming arenas for advocacy by either side for issues on religion, race, politics and sensitive areas like sexuality education. If this happens, our students and educational system will end up the losers. We welcome the participation of community groups, VWOs, parents and other agencies to help MOE provide holistic education. But just as teachers must not abuse their privileged access to advocate their own points of view, external partners who are allowed to speak in schools must respect this privilege as well.