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No room for error in education

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WHETHER goes the education system? Many Malaysians will not have a straight answer to this question.

They either do not know or are past caring.

And they are not to be blamed either, given the complexity of the situation and the variables at play.

Their response probably stems from the varied understanding of the system among their ranks, no thanks to the changes that have taken place since the 1980s.

Today, only educationalists and even that is stretching the point, have a clear understanding of the local education system and its implications for children and society in general.

How did this sad state of affairs come about? To be sure, it was a gradual process charted by a profusion of education ministers, each with his own blueprint for education.

It was as though each wanted to leave his personal stamp on education for posterity.

But in the process they have unfortunately left the public thoroughly confused, and pupils even more.

Of course, there are altruistic reasons aimed at ensuring the best for the young of Malaysia.

And there is no denying that education has benefited, in whatever measure, from their contributions.

And in a critical field like education, there is just no room for error.

It's as simple as that in the light of the extreme effect of bad policy-making on pupils.

Today, the public is faced with a proposed blueprint for education that will ostensibly smooth the path for the next 10 years.

They are being told that the crux of the policy is a reduction in the years of schooling from 13 to 12 with attendant changes in the timing of public examinations.

The Penilaian Menengah Rendah Examination may be abolished and the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination brought forward from Form Five to Four.

Streaming into arts and science may will also be at Form Two instead of Form Four.

Observers feel all this is aimed at bringing undergraduates earlier to the job market besides keeping Malaysians on a competitive edge and at par with others abroad.

How important is the number of years of schooling on eventual success among pupils?

Will a reduction in schooling years lead to a tangible improvement in performance?

These are questions being asked by parents and educationalists alike.

After all, they are the ones divinely charged with raising children to maturity and, in the process, giving them as sound an education as possible.

What parents want today is a clear and immediate policy that will take their children through to working life, equipped with the necessary skills to acquit themselves well in any arena of endeavour.

The parents of today are the students of the 1960s and 1970s who were used to a stable education system that left no one in doubt.

They did not come from an era of having promotions from Standard Three

to Standard Five, only to have it removed a couple of years later.

Nor are they from the time when Bahasa Baku with its Indonesian intonation was introduced to the opposition from many, only to be dropped like a hot potato a few short years later.

And they are not from the period when entry into varsity was suddenly dependent upon extra-curricular activities while straight A students were denied entry.

No one is saying that there should not be change in the education system with time.

The issue rather is whether changes are well-thought of prior to implementation.

Did anyone consider the implications of these actions besides merely justifying them as being necessary for that particular time? Who gave a thought to the children who were virtual guinea pigs at the mercy of policy-makers?

It is the pupils, the subject of these experiments, who will suffer the negative effects of such ill-timed policies for a lifetime.

Needless to say, the policy makers responsible will move on to other things unscathed, paving way for others to devise their own plans.

It is the hope of parents and educationalists alike that the Education Ministry sticks to the current blueprint.

In the process, policy-makers should also look into issues like class size, the ensuing lack of a proper teacher-student relationship and the grossly inappropriate teacher-student ratio - all of which have yet to be sorted out.

All these have led to increasing indiscipline in schools, another issue that the Education Ministry should be tackling post haste.

The perennial complaint that the education system is too examination-oriented and indifferent to the creation of a well-rounded student should also be studied.

Most would be gratified to hear that the plan would be studied by various parties before implementation in 2005.

There is little that can go wrong from such an exercise, bearing in mind, of course, that all views should be taken into account. There is a wealth of experience out there to be culled for the common benefit.

Many will remember the late 1970s when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as deputy Prime Minister, chaired a Cabinet Committee to review the implementation of the education policy.

The committee, which made 173 recommendations, is believed to be the last of its sort.

Changes since then have been largely ad hoc and not done at such a level.

The recommendations went on to be implemented with great success.

The Education Ministry's brief from the Government is to ensure a new generation of capable Malaysians able to match the demands of a constantly changing world in the new millennium.

One thing, however, is sure. The public will not be very forgiving if the education authorities meander midway in the implementation of the blueprint.

Malaysians are no longer prepared to accept errors in the implementation of the education policy.