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Support for English move (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - The Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) and seven major Federations of Clans and Associations today expressed their support for the Government's plans to improve the standard of English.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who met a 20-member delegation representing the two influential Chinese groups at his office, said they also urged the Government to make English a compulsory subject at all school levels.

"Both groups fully support the Government's efforts to improve English from primary-school level and for more time to be allocated for the teaching of English in schools, but they have differences in opinion on the level at which the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English should start.

"They are of the view that it should start at the secondary-school level because they think that it would be easier for primary school children to learn in their mother tongue," Dr Mahathir said after the meeting.

The other question, Dr Mahathir said, was whether the necessary infrastructure to begin the teaching of the two subjects in English could be ready by next year.

"I explained that the teaching would be with the aid of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) whereby teachers would merely play the role of facilitators," he said.

The Prime Minister said the Education Ministry was working on the ICT courseware and had received various proposals from the IT industry.

"I'm also looking at some of the British institutions, which prepare curricula and textbooks, to see how they could prepare the courseware in accordance with our requirements.

"However, the problem is that time is getting short and I don't know if we can prepare the courseware in time ...we have only four months left (before next year)," Dr Mahathir said, adding that the Government was currently working out the financing for the infrastructure, which would include supplying computers and other ICT-related materials to all primary schools.

"It is going to cost the Government a lot of money but it is our intention to spend more money on primary education now than on tertiary education ...more than RM10 billion is allocated to the Education Ministry from our annual budget."

Meanwhile, ACCCIM president Tan Sri Lim Guan Teik said they submitted a memorandum to Dr Mahathir last Monday in which they stated their support for the learning and importance of English.

He said there were also several proposals in the memorandum, including making English a compulsory subject in schools and increasing the time allocated for its teaching.

"We also proposed that Science and Mathematics be initially taught in the students' mother tongue in primary schools with the use of dual-language (English and mother tongue) textbooks and audio-visual aids to assist the students," he said.

He said while the ACCCIM had no problems with the teaching of the two subjects in English in secondary schools, it felt it was better that Science and Mathematics be taught in the students' mother tongue at primary schools to help students better understand the two subjects.

The Federations of Clans and Associations spokesman Dr Lim Chong Keang, who is also deputy president of the Federation of Hokkien Associations of Malaysia, said they came up with a three-point proposal for today's meeting, including one supporting the Government's plan to improve the proficiency of English.

"The Prime Minister's determination to improve the standard of English is indeed far-sighted and we fully support him," he said.

Another proposal urged the Government to reconsider the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in primary schools and the last proposal was that the teaching of the two subjects in English be only introduced in secondary schools.

The seven clans and associations are the Federations of Hokkien, Kwang Tunk, Hakka, Hainan, Teochew, Kwangsi and San Kiang Associations of Malaysia.

Also present at the meeting were MCA vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng and MCA Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat.

Dr Mahathir said he would give serious consideration to the groups' views and proposals.

"I have asked them for their agreement that they should allow the Government to think about this seriously, we will not just dismiss their views and we will hopefully reach a decision that will not be damaging to anyone.

"We have not made a final decision and would also like to listen to other views...there are many other people who are equally strong in their views and we will speak to them too," he concluded.