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Policy changes, reactions abound

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EDUCATION has to evolve to keep up with the times, but what has happened in the last year can only be described as a revolution.

The new policies introduced will change the face of education as generations past have known it.

This is good, for this change is the only way the country can hope to mould a new techno-savvy generation able to compete in the global arena and carry a conversation confidently in English.

The most recent policy change is the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English at all schools.

Since the bulk of reference materials for the two subjects are in English, the Government contends that the move is necessary to enable students to have a grasp of science and technology.

To start from Standard One, Form One and Lower Six next year, and subsequently at other levels, the announcement was met with relief by parents, students and teachers who had previously been inundated with conflicting reports on the issue.

While there were the inevitable grouses - especially from parents whose children are in Standard Six and Form Five this year, as their children have to suddenly learn the two subjects in English next year - public reaction has been positive following the announcement.

The Education Ministry is scrambling to get everything ready for implementation next year. There are textbooks to prepare, teachers to train, and infrastructure to build and provide for schools.

Another significant policy change is the introduction of a merit system for intake into public universities this year.

Unlike the teaching of Science and Mathematics, this move provoked a controversy which culminated in the passing of a vote of no confidence against Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad.

Although many parties had initially supported the practice of meritocracy over a race-based quota system, what followed a Press conference on the intake exercise this year can only be described as a circus.

Almost everything about the in-take exercise was questioned, from whether it is fair to put matriculation and STPM holders in one list for comparison, to the inability of diploma holders to secure places.

Musa managed to quell the brouhaha somewhat when he said the ministry would study the feasibility of implementing a combined quota and merit system next year.

The issue was, unfortunately, reignited following a statement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that a 10 per cent quota would be allocated to non-Bumiputras for matriculation courses in public universities. The same will apply for Mara Junior Science Colleges.

Dr Mahathir said the move was aimed at fostering racial integration, and with it national unity.

The new ruling was meant to help iron out creases in the implementation of meritocracy, but as in any new, bold move in whatever direction, there were those who felt threatened.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein asked private higher education institutions to allocate a 10 per cent quota for Bumiputra students. This, he said, was necessary to balance the 10 per cent allocated to non-Bumiputra students at MRSM and matriculation programmes.

This burning issue faded into oblivion after it, rightly, drew strong criticism from quarters within Umno.

Another controversy the ministry was unwittingly drawn into also involved racial sensitivities.

Claims of racial segregation in schools surfaced after parents of students in a Klang school complained. The National Union of Teaching Profession took up the cause and the issue was blown up to the extent that it necessitated the establishment of an independent committee to investigate the veracity of the claim.

After several months, the Independent Committee on Segregation in Schools concluded that there was no deliberate attempt or hidden agenda to stream pupils according to race in national schools.

The committee, however, recommended that racial integration be made the cornerstone of the country's education policies.

Two pilot Vision School projects, where students in national and national-type schools get to share common facilities, opened in Subang Jaya and Pundut, Perak in June.

Besides forging a closer relationship between the races, the ministry is also making concerted efforts to ensure students mastered information and communication technology.

Teaching Science and Mathematics in English is only one of the ways to achieve this. Others include equipping all schools in the country with computer laboratories in a year's time, as ministry secretary-general Datuk Ambrin Buang promised recently.

Information technology may also be taught as a core subject in schools.

Interesting developments are also taking place on the private education front. A major blitz was launched against private educational institutions by the ministry's private education department recently.

Fed up with being taken for granted by private colleges and schools, the ministry, under this method, will raid errant educational institutions and then, reveal their names to the Press.

Naturally, the strategy - especially the second prong - has proven to be a huge success. The first few colleges and schools named saw the rest scurrying to the ministry to apply for course approvals.

Other significant changes which provoked a range of reactions include the implementation of compulsory primary education, and the introduction of a new, standardised pre-school curriculum. Both will take effect next year.

A procedure called the Safe School Concept was also launched in April to enable students to take charge of their own safety. The procedure tells students how to act when confronted by school thugs or when having other problems relating to their safety.

For many, the changes may be bewildering and whizzing by at a speed too fast for comfort. The onus is now on the ministry to prove that all the changes instituted will only be for the better.

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