

'Smart' move for schools

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I'm a parent of four school-going children and head of the Parent-Teacher Association of a school in Kuala Lumpur.

As a product of both a mission school and a government school, I find it hard not to compare the way schools are being administered and its approach towards students in the past and now.

Over the last 30 years we have seen the school system evolving. As the world moves towards globalisation, we find that the government is relatively slow in reacting to challenges.

Projects are implemented in knee-jerk manner, with little continuity and monitoring of content development. Let me illustrate this with the Smart School Project launched in the late 1990s as part of the government initiatives under the Multimedia Super Corridor.

It started because someone saw the importance of IT. Then premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad was indeed visionary but this vision is not being translated into action at a desirable rate.

What do you expect when the country has very few people of his vision and calibre? While the building of schools, computer labs (despite many problems and delays) has been carried out, the assets that have gone into this schools have not been fully utilised.

Worse, we see that the selected Smart Schools are still stuck between old and new methods and educational objectives. As an example, let me talk about the school my children attend.

I see little use of IT in classes. Each class has computers but these are not working. The hardware and software are outdated. Use of the computer network is not maximised. Teachers have a poor grasp of use of Internet, with many seeing the negative side rather than making positive use of the facility.

I think the use of IT in this school is no different from that in a 'non-smart' school. The weaknesses stem from implementation. Someone saw the need to install computers in classrooms, and that is the beginning and the end of a 'smart' school.

A subject of current interest is the 'cluster school' programme. The education ministry talks about empowerment and giving freedom to principals. It is apparently still trying to fine-tune the concept. During the launch of the project, as recorded in media coverage, it appears that quite a number of schools selected and their principals are still quite blur about what they can or cannot do.

These are the people who had spent three days and two nights at a major 5-star hotel about two weeks earlier for a briefing. I know a headmaster who was hoping that his school would be selected because of the perks involved, including a year's fully-sponsored training stint in the UK. Again, the greatest weakness of this brilliant idea is in the implementation.

Shareholders of school

Too much power without supervision and control leads to abuse in any organisation, whether in private or public sector. Companies have a board to ensure that shareholders are not taken for a ride by the management and set expectations in maximising returns to shareholders.

In the government sector, the returns are not in the form of money. These are more about customer satisfaction and meeting government expectations. The shareholders of a school are the government and parents. The management and the employees are the people that run a programme in schools to ensure expectations and targets are met. The management is subject to regular audit processes.

Based on experience and my observations, several major government schools in Kuala Lumpur where the parents have a professional background are ready for a school board system.

The time is right for a change. To ensure that concepts are successfully implemented, the schools must have Board of Governors comprising members of the PTA and other nominated persons from the ministry and local community. Politicians should not be involved. The board will ensure that the rules are observed by the management and that the schools succeed.

Over the last 30 years, I have found that there is a dearth of school heads with good administrative skills. Management is a skill in itself and principals should stay away from this field as it is not their area of expertise. They are trained as teachers and should stick with that, growing to become 'super teachers'.

Diplomatic and Administrative Officers (or PTD in Malay) would be the appropriate authority to manage schools. The PTD core should have professional managers to manage schools and take away the responsibility of administration from teachers. They must let teachers focus on their primary duties. This is what is happening in Singapore.

For a short while I had the privilege of being part of Royal Military College. It has a commandant who manages the administrative matters, and an academic director to manage issues related to teaching and quality of education. This is a good system and should be implemented in government schools.

As with anything new, there will be resentment from many parties. It is an open secret that many school heads don't want the PTD to come in. Senior officers in the education department are also against such a system, as it would dilute the power of the school head. Sadly it is all about personal glory and power. The education department and ministry should defend the institution and its services, and not officers who have failed in their duties.

The government should mould the human resources of this country in a more systematic and effective manner. Unless constructive steps are taken and those in the education service recognise that parents can play a major role in improving the quality of education, we are heading for disaster.

In 2001, I had the opportunity of talking to Mahathir for a good 15 minutes to give my views on the use of IT in schools. I hope the prime minister of the day will grant me a similar opportunity.

I am a nobody, just a parent who wants to see this country prosper and provide space for my children and grandchildren.

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