

**Hishammuddin all for mother-tongue education**  
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Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein has declared that the existence of 1,000 Chinese primary schools does not stand in the way of national unity being achieved.

In a four-page interview with top-selling Chinese newspaper Sin Chew Daily last Friday, he said: "If we close Chinese schools today, do you think society will be stable? If we the medium of instruction from Mandarin to Bahasa Melayu, do you think we would achieve national unity? It would be impossible."

He pointed out that the "ultimate objective" - as stated in the Abdul Razak Education Report 1956 - of converting all vernacular schools into national schools and using the national language as the main medium of instruction is obsolete.

The report was released on May 6 that year, slightly more than a year before independence, and became the basis of the national education policy.

In the interview, Hishammuddin gave several assurances on Chinese schools. For instance, he declared that deliberating Chinese education issues is no more a zero-sum game because Mandarin is now a lingua franca.

He also said the 'Vision School' project, which locates national, Chinese and Tamil schools within the same compound, has been halted due to protests.

Instead, the government is focusing on a Student Integration Plan for Unity which sees students from different streams of education involved in joint sports, co-curricular and gotong-royong activities.

On new Chinese schools, Hishammuddin said this is no longer a sensitive issue but that the government would prefer to relocate students from low-enrolment schools rather than build additional facilities to resolve congestion in urban Chinese schools.

Low-enrolment schools are those with less than 150 students - 50 percent of the 1,280 Chinese primary schools fall into this category.

According to the national education blueprint, the number of national primary schools increased from 4,844 in 1990 to 5,761 in 2005, or by 19 percent. However, the number of national-type Chinese primary schools dropped from 1,288 to 1,287, while national-type Tamil primary schools dropped from 538 to 525.

Hishammuddin defended the blueprint against the charge that it neglects mother-tongue education. He explained that, although the blueprint does not specifically spell out the development of Chinese schools, the government has spend millions in maintaining such schools.

**'Give me time'**

Hishammuddin appealed to the Chinese community to be open-minded in interpreting the national education policy and to give him more time to prove his sincerity in dealing with

education issues.

"I need time to clear the doubts and suspicion. Only time can prove my sincerity and I will walk the talk," he was quoted as saying.

At the same time, he expressed hope that the standard of Chinese primary schools would be lifted on par with those in China and compete with the best. (Hishammuddin will visit China for the first time in May and aims to bring back fresh ideas on improving the education system.)

The minister played down the role of Chinese education movement Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ) as the "sole champion" and credited Barisan Nasional component parties MCA and Gerakan and even the media for preserving the vernacular school model.

Hishammuddin rapped DJZ for alleging that the government is not interested in meeting with it, and told the movement to show sincerity and re-evaluate its methods of crusading for Chinese mother-tongue education.

In contrast, he had high praise for Dong Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia) former chairperson Quek Seng Chan, describing him as a moderate leader with much wisdom.

As Umno Youth chief, Hishammuddin has crossed swords with Quek, especially over the submission of a 17-point Election Appeal by Suqiu (Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeal Committee) in 2001. The document was then retracted.

(Quek has suggested that the DJZ leadership meets with Umno leaders to clear the air over education rights. DJZ claimed it has written several times requesting a meeting with the prime minister since he took office in November 2003, but has yet to receive a reply.)

### **Mixed reactions**

Hishammuddin also touched on why he had brandished the keris during the Umno general assembly, reiterating that this was not meant to intimidate other ethnic groups and that he believes the people understand his intention. He had earlier said he was prepared to carry an axe or kungfu sword.

During the 2005 Umno general assembly, Hishammuddin had waved the keris while calling for restoration of the National Economic Policy as part of the National Development Policy.

Reaction to his statements has been mixed.

MCA president Ong Ka Ting lauded the assurances as 'positive' in addressing issues involving Chinese primary education. He said that, if DJZ wants to meet Hishammuddin, MCA would be willing to help arrange this.

Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall President Bong Hon Liong suggested that the minister's remarks be translated and published by the rest of the print and electronic media, and formulated as an executive order for all officials to follow.

He said this is necessary as frequent changes of minister often bring in different policies. On occasion, a minister's statements may have been distorted or contradict government policy.

DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng remained sceptical, challenging Hishammuddin to present his assurances as an education report in Parliament before the next election.

This, Lim added, would prove that such statements are not political gimmicks designed to fool voters.

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