

'Make students focus of smart schools'

NST-17/4/2007

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KUALA LUMPUR: They are called smart schools. But, apart from computers, there is little that is smart about them.

Which is why the deputy prime minister wants an overhaul of the way they are managed.

Calling for a massive change in the "processes and procedures" entrenched in the school system, Datuk Seri Najib Razak said students should become the focus of the system again.

"We cannot simply purchase ICT equipment and build computer laboratories in schools and leave it at that, having paid lip service to being ICT-compliant.

"Our readiness must be 'open-ended', so to speak, to enable quick adoption of new improvements and modifications in technology to remain current."

He said if the examination-based national curriculum needed to be revamped, it should be done.

Najib said students must be taught to master the English language because it was the primary language in use in diplomacy, business or education.

"Our schools must not ignore this reality. While emphasis on the national language must not be diminished, we must make sure our children attain a respectable level of fluency in English to make sure that they are no less qualified when competing globally."

He said schools should produce students who could "think in Bahasa Malaysia and speak in Bahasa Malay-

sia, think in English and speak in English".

"We don't want them to think in Bahasa Malaysia and speak in English. This is our challenge."

The curriculum, Najib said, should challenge students to think, to create and become inquisitive.

Opening the Smart School International Conference Malaysia 2007 at a hotel here, he said it was necessary to give all school staff and administrators ICT training and exposure.

From the school head to the office executive or clerk, he said, it should be mandatory for each of them to have a working knowledge of at least the most basic office applications such as email, word processors and Internet browsers.

"As much as possible, school management should move towards a paperless environment.

"ICT must be used to increase efficiency, reduce operational expenditure and to improve internal and external communication."

He said schools should arrange for technical support to be available at all times. "If all these are in place, then smart schools can focus on their primary client and *raison d'etre*: The students of the school."

Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, at a news conference later, said the public was confused about smart schools, perhaps due to a weakness in explaining the concept.

To improve the situation, he said, a monitoring system would be introduced soon.

The *New Straits Times* reported yesterday that there was confusion over smart schools and how they were faring. The conference this week is meant to discuss these issues.

"If we talk only about the 88 flagship smart schools in the country, I am sure people would get confused because in the education system we have so many categories and types of schools.

"Right now, we are trying to make it easier for them. We are trying to benchmark the 88 as the best that we have, as a catalyst for other schools, a role model for other schools to aspire to," Hishammuddin said.

The monitoring system, which will be called the Smart School Qualification Standard, or SSQS, will have a star ranking as a guide, where smart schools will be ranked according to how integrated they are with ICT culture.

"But how many schools fall in the five-star bracket is something we need to look at. As far as equipment is concerned, I think a lot of the schools are three, four or five stars, but we are talking about much more than that."

He said when the smart schools were ranked and benchmarked, they would then have to compete with other streams or categories of schools, even the recently announced cluster schools, which have been given autonomy to implement improvements outside the centralised education system.

The idea is to allow all of them to compete and, hopefully by 2010, he said, there would just be one category benchmarked on excellence and based on international levels.