

PM: Govt not in denial over poor education performance
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By Lee Wei Lian

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 11 — The government is not in denial over Malaysia's bottom dwelling performance in international education benchmarks but is taking bold moves to revamp the system to foster critical thinking skills and prepare the next generation for the jobs of the future said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak today.

Najib said at the launch of the new education masterplan 2013-2025 today that there was no shame in admitting that Malaysia ranked in the bottom third of the Programme For International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 test for mathematics, reading and science as the government is brave enough to face reality and take bold steps to remedy the situation.

"We don't have to feel embarrassed that in PISA we are in the bottom third," he said. "It's better than having to cover up. We have the moral courage to admit this and it is better than being trapped in a denial syndrome."

In the new masterplan, Malaysia aims to rank in the top third of the PISA test within the next 13 years.

The prime minister (picture) said that the country needed a creative and innovative solution for education that would require sacrifices from all segments of society.

He said that the thrusts of the new economy was knowledge, innovation and technology.

"Our system needs to be adjusted to face challenges and prepare our kids to fill types of jobs that have not even been created yet," he said.

The education masterplan comprises of 11 "shifts" to inculcate six attributes in children: knowledge, thinking skills, leadership, bilingual proficiency, ethics and national identity.

The shifts include empowering state and district education departments and schools to customise solutions based on need and recruiting only the top 30 per cent of graduates for teacher training.

The Najib administration has outlined a plan to transition Malaysia to a developed high income nation by 2020 but many observers said that education remains a key weakness in Malaysia.

The recent World Competitiveness Index released by the influential World Economic Forum think tank identified an inadequately educated workforce and poor work ethics in the labour force as two of the top five biggest problems facing businesses in Malaysia, alongside inefficient government bureaucracy, corruption and restrictive labour regulations.

Najib acknowledged that Malaysia risks being left behind if it didn't institute educational reforms. "When I was in school, you learned that the traditional economic inputs were land, labour and capital but today it is replaced by technology, knowledge and innovation," he said. "When we revamp our education system, we must understand the new economy."

He added that his administration, which spends 8.7 per cent of its budget on education might have to spend more to implement the masterplan but is also looking to sweat every ringgit for maximum results. "We will look at the outcome of each child per ringgit spent," he said. "We will be looking at value for money and return on investment so that we ensure every ringgit from tax collected we use to produce as much as possible."

Malaysia has been often panned for having grand plans but falling short on execution, a shortcoming which Najib said that his administration would guard against in the implementation of the masterplan.

"The key element is execution of strategy," he said. "We must allay all doubts and cynicism. The stakes are too high and we must not fail."

Among the other shifts contained in the masterplan were: equal access to quality education of an international standard, ensure every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English, develop values-driven Malaysians, ensure high-performing school leaders in every school, leverage ICT to scale up quality learning across Malaysia, transform and streamline the Education Ministry to eliminate overlap, partner with parents, community and the private sector, maximise student outcomes for every ringgit and increase transparency for direct public accountability.

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