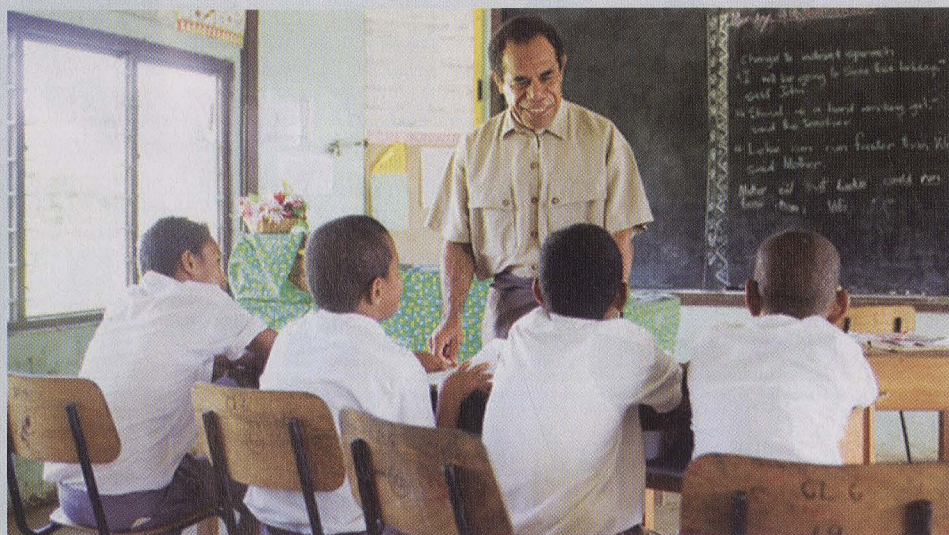


Education: Rethinking system



■ By MARRISA HILMAN

THE recently launched National Education Blueprint 2006-2010 promises remedies for all the ills plaguing the education system. The question now is whether it can deliver.

“Sekolah kebangsaan” may literally mean national school but that translation no longer accurately reflects the essence of such schools today.

The national school is now hardly a true microcosm of Malaysian society. Over the years, parental confidence in the national school system has slowly diminished, with more opting to send their children to Chinese schools, or if they can afford it, private or international schools.

The explanation for this is fairly straight-



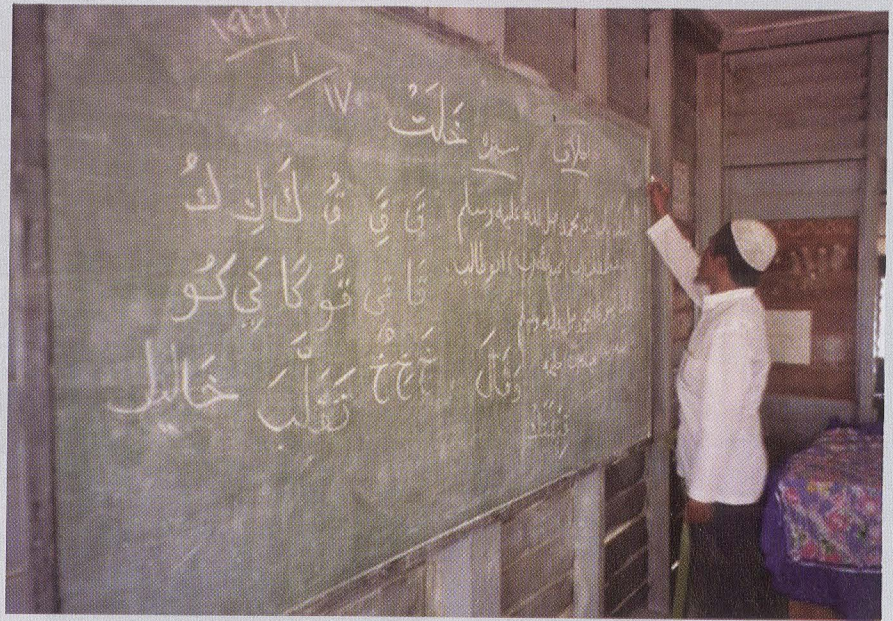
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forward - the quality of education offered in "sekolah kebangsaan" is no longer perceived as good enough. The Malay-Muslim ethos that some national schools have adopted, contrary to official policy, has also made such schools appear to be exclusive and segregated.

Consequently, there are many challenges that need to be resolved before national schools even have a fighting chance of regaining their lost lustre.

The Education Ministry is primed for this challenge. It considers the rejuvenation of national schools a top priority agenda and has recently laid bare its plans and approaches for the next four years.

It realises that national schools cannot be expected to fulfil their nation-building role and become the schools of choice



unless they become more attractive to all Malaysians.

The ministry, on Jan 16 this year, launched the National Education Blueprint 2006-2010, an A-to-Z of the education system and plans for the future of Malaysian students.

It includes time-lines on its delivery goals and how the RM23 billion allocation budgeted for education development will be distributed under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. It details the strategies and performance index for all the stated goals.

The six strategic thrusts of the blueprint are building a united country, developing human capital, strengthening national schools, narrowing the education gap, uplifting the teaching profession, and boosting the excellence of education institutions. The ultimate aim is to provide quality education for all.

Starting from February, the ministry concentrated on one particular thrust in the blueprint. The focus was first on reducing the urban-rural education gap.

Rural schools were included in the Smart School programme, and the ministry's TV Pendidikan programme were being enhanced, together with the utilisation of video teleconferencing.

This month, the focus is on improving the excellence of education institutions. The ministry will then make public the criteria for a school to be included in its "clusters of excellence".

Next month, it will concentrate on strengthening national schools. It will strive to set aside political, racial and

religious polemics and perceptions, fears and phobias, and eliminate divisive and alienating school culture.

While parents, educationists and other stakeholders have lauded the blueprint, what they feel will be the most efficacious is the establishment of "clusters of excellence".

This will see 300 selected schools being given the autonomy to help them boost their standards. These schools will be given everything, said Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, "except 14-carat gold-plated taps".

The schools would be allowed to select their own principals and school management, teachers, and 10% of student enrolment for niche areas.

Those in the clusters will also be allowed to offer curriculum and teaching and learning methods niche which are in line with their targeted niche areas, such as offering subjects out of the national education system like the O-level or General Certificate of Secondary Education and A-level.

Teaching and learning times will be more flexible, and they have the freedom to obtain additional funding to further their capacities.

Another step warmly embraced by parents is the teaching of Mandarin and Tamil in national schools. For a start, the two languages will be taught in 220 schools in a pilot project this year.

This step is indeed a start in the right direction because it offers parents the best of both worlds - a mother-tongue education in a national-school setting. As in▶▶▶▶

the case of cluster schools, this should develop into a strong pull factor.

Information and communications technology (ICT) is also set to take on a more crucial role under the blueprint.

The ministry will broaden the Smart School Programme that will see, among others, the establishment of 3,000 Internet access centres as well as the provision of adequate hardware and infrastructure.

The percentage of software and digital resources will be increased incrementally according to levels and subjects. All school administration, support staff and teachers will be trained to use and maintain ICT related equipment by 2010.

Some 300 more schools will be able to offer ICT as an elective subject by 2010. There will also be a Computer Literacy Programme for secondary schools.

In order to make teaching a prestigious profession, teacher education institutes will have campus-wide networks that will strengthen teacher training processes.

The Education Services Commission will tighten the appointment process and ensure each teacher obtains a minimum standard before they are posted anywhere.

Also in the works are the establishment of teaching schools, and more effective teacher training.

The promised increase in the number of non-Bumiputera teachers would inject fresh perspectives and give national schools a more multicultural make-up.

To create a "model well-rounded student", lessons will be more interactive. For example, students will be encouraged to use PowerPoint presentations in class.

Additional vocational subjects will be



made available, an alternative assessments system which encourages skills and character development introduced, and co-curricular activities emphasised.

The national curriculum for primary and secondary schools, in place since the 1980s, is up for review. And by 2010, a new model for public examinations, with fewer subjects and more schools-based tests will be in place.

The people are hopeful that the blueprint will achieve all it has set out to. But there is concern over how the blueprint will be executed.

Many remember past documents and blueprints, and proposals which have

remained nothing more than words on paper.

Hishammuddin is aware that the main question about his ambitious education plan is "Will it deliver?". Implementation is, therefore, the key. The Minister has given school heads around the country a motivating push:

"I told them what I expected of them and that they had to deliver what we had promised. The important thing is that all our officers have to truly read and understand the blueprint as well, and we have to monitor how it is implemented."

Hishammuddin concedes that there were many intangible objectives in the blueprint such as racial unity or the inculcation of values that may be harder to judge the success but the ministry would nonetheless be doing its utmost to carry out its plans.

With over 400,000 employees under the ministry and 64 divisions and departments, the Minister says it was a major challenge to ensure everyone was singing the same tune.

But he is confident the blueprint will be a success.

"We are keeping in mind that we are responsible for the education of the nation's children."

The blueprint is open to adaptation, revisions and enhancements based on feedback from the people. Malaysians can do their part by scrutinising the blueprint on the ministry's website.

They can help keep proposals and issues alive and prod the ministry into delivering what it has pledged. **F**

