

## Don't be afraid of making mistakes, PM Lee urges youth

**SINGAPORE** – In a message on Youth Day yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged the youth here not to be afraid to make mistakes “because that’s the beauty of being young”.

In a Facebook post, Mr Lee wished the “young and young at heart” a happy Youth Day. “Your dreams today can become your passions tomorrow,” he said. “You can experiment, try things out and discover what you can be. The future often looks daunting, but go forth and create your own!”

He also posted a “jump shot” of himself, his wife Ho Ching, Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace

Fu, Senior Minister of State (Foreign Affairs and Transport) Josephine Teo and Minister of State (National Development and Trade and Industry) Koh Poh Koon.

Mr Lee said the photo was taken in Moscow, where he went in May for his first bilateral visit to Russia. It is the second “jump shot” he has posted on Facebook. In September, he took a similar photo with several Nanyang Technological University students.

Within seven hours of posting the photo, and urging others to share their own jump shots, it went viral with over 1,850 shares and 750 comments. Many



PM Lee's group 'jump shot' went viral, with 1,850 shares in 7 hours.  
PHOTO: PM LEE'S FACEBOOK PAGE

Facebook users contributed photos taken in Singapore or overseas.

One, Mr Philip Ng, said: “It’s true that through mistakes we become wiser, and don’t be afraid of making

mistakes being young and old too. The journey of learning (is) from young to old until our last breath. That’s the (wonder) and beauty of learning.”

Another, Mr Meng Tuck Ma, said: “Importantly, (those who) fall down must get up again and never give up. (Perseverance) is the way of life for the youth and those young at heart.”

Ms Vivian Tan, who contributed a family photo taken in Sydney, said: “As a Singaporean, I am grateful for a passport that can bring us almost everywhere in the world.”

Ms June Wang felt that local youths were fortunate: “Some (youths) in other countries cannot study and have to go out to work at a young age to feed the family. Singapore youths don’t have to do that because we put education first relentlessly.” **VALERIE KOH**

## Immersion programmes, internships in the works to boost use of mother tongue

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**SINGAPORE** – Ms Elaine Tee, who works in a digital marketing start-up, recalled her teacher using Mandopop star Jay Chou’s songs to expound on Chinese characters and their meanings during Higher Chinese lessons in school. At the same time, the 26-year-old also remembered the frustration of having to memorise scores of “chengyu” (Chinese idioms) for examinations “when there was no context or chance to use them”.

Ms Tee said that she now converses mainly in English, using Mandarin only occasionally when she speaks to her parents. There is no push factor to keep up with her Chinese language abilities because she hardly needs to use Mandarin extensively, she added.

There are many who went through

the school system here who probably identify with her experience: After leaving secondary school, the majority of them no longer have lessons in their mother tongue and later lose touch with it because of low usage.

This drop-off in the language capabilities of students will be an area of focus for Singapore’s bilingualism thrust, Parliamentary Secretary (Education) Low Yen Ling said.

Speaking to TODAY ahead of the annual Mother Tongue Language Symposium next month, she said: “We don’t want (our students) to stop learning (their mother tongue language) at Secondary 4 or 5 ... but (the approach) cannot be just instructive.”

She said the way forward is to create natural settings for young Singaporeans to use the language regularly.

Ms Low — the vice-chair of the Lee

Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism and chair of the Committee to Promote Chinese Language Learning — spoke about initiatives such as getting schools to work with clan organisations, with tertiary students acting as Mandarin-speaking guides on heritage trails. For a start, 200 secondary school students and 10 tertiary students took part in a cultural heritage walk on Saturday at Bukit Pasoh, and the activity was conducted entirely in Mandarin.

The Malay Language Learning and Promotion Committee is working out details with museums and performing arts groups to expose students to the Malay language beyond school, while the Tamil Language Learning and Promotion Committee plans to seek feedback on how to improve existing programmes.

Ms Low said that beyond partnering community organisations, future possibilities may include immersion programmes and internships for students in Asia where the mother tongue is used. She stressed the need to keep up Singapore’s bilingual policy because it would help Singaporeans to understand that bilingualism is part of the country’s national identity and their cultural heritage. She added: “This century, as some people say, is an Asian century. Being proficient in (our) mother tongue language will allow our children ... to better connect with people and communities in Asia.”

And with English becoming the most-spoken language in Singapore homes, as well as digital technologies competing for children’s attention, the Ministry of Education (MOE) is taking a “differentiated approach” to teaching such languages in schools.

Right now, schools are rolling out the Mother Tongue Language Review Committee’s recommendations made in 2010 that include using infocomm technology resources and varied learning materials to liven up lessons.

Apart from this, Ms Low believes that there is a place for the “B” syllabus for those who struggle with their mother tongue, and to help them stay in touch with the language. MOE statistics show that over the past three years, 4 per cent of each cohort are taking the Chinese Language “B” syllabus, while the figure is about 1 per

cent and 2 per cent for those taking Malay Language “B” and Tamil Language “B”, respectively. The option to pursue a Higher Mother Tongue Language in secondary schools is largely dependent on the student’s Primary School Leaving Examination scores.

Against a shrinking student cohort, the MOE reported that the proportion taking Higher O-level Chinese rose from 29.2 per cent in 2013 to 31.6 per cent last year. For Higher Malay, the figure went from 11.8 to 12.4 per cent, and for Higher Tamil, it rose from 24.8 to 27.3 per cent.

While bilingualism remains a cornerstone of Singapore’s education policy, experts say that it is difficult to sustain a culture where the mother tongue is not widely used in the working world. They suggest that there be deliberate efforts to promote its use, with more activities to remind Singaporeans of the importance of maintaining this set of language skills.

Dr Susan Xu, head of SIM University’s translation and interpretation programme, noted that the younger generation’s greater proficiency in English is an inevitable trade-off of having a bilingual policy alongside English as the main working language. But she added that because language is connected to culture, being bilingual can “open up Singaporeans’ minds to both the East and West”. She suggested refresher courses in the community to help people stay in touch with the language.

Tertiary institutes, too, can go beyond hosting English-speaking guest speakers to include those who are conversant in mother tongue languages, such as e-commerce platform Alibaba’s founder Jack Ma. “Students will be exposed to the language and can also subconsciously be reminded to keep up with their mother tongue language abilities,” Dr Xu said.

National Institute of Education’s Associate Professor Aw Guat Poh, who researches second-language teaching, proposed that besides harnessing the media or organising community activities to promote the languages, more work must be done to change perceptions. People must see mother tongue as a communication tool, and not a subject to be learnt just to pass examinations, she said.



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**Ms Low Yen Ling**  
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (EDUCATION)

# TOTO

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# comment & analysis

“As long as questions about Britain’s (and possibly Europe’s) political structures and their legitimacy are not resolved, Britain will find it difficult to emerge from its second Phoney War.”

JOEL NG • 10

EVERYONE DESERVES A FAIR CHANCE OF LEADING A HEALTHY LIFE

## Time to measure equity in health, too

JEREMY LIM



Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has made incredible strides in improving the health of its citizens. Life expectancy has jumped an impressive 18.2 years, propelling Singapore to having the world’s third-highest life expectancy, while infant mortality has improved more than tenfold.

The averages, unfortunately, may not convey a complete picture when one considers equity in health. It is timely to ask whether all Singaporeans have benefited health-wise from the remarkable improvements.

Health equity has been defined as the “attainment of the highest level of health for all people” and has long been a global concern. This is more so in today’s world where, as the charity Oxfam reports, “62 people own the same as half the world”.

Marked economic inequalities should not lead to stark differences in health outcomes. Most of us would believe that everyone deserves a fair chance to lead a healthy life and no one should be denied this because of socio-economic status.

Health equity is especially pertinent in Singapore, as our health system is by design a two-tiered one: Those who opt for private medical care and non-subsidised care in government hospitals and those who rely on what the health

ministry describes as “quality and affordable basic medical services” that are subsidised. Does this lead to different health outcomes? We don’t know.

Two tiers are inevitable in countries with market approaches to healthcare and what matters is recognising this reality and tracking for any inequities.

Three decades ago, the United States openly recognised disparities among its people and set ambitious targets via the Healthy People initiative in a bid to improve health equity. In Healthy People 2000, the ambition was to reduce health disparities among Americans. In Healthy People 2010, it was even loftier: To eliminate, not just reduce, health disparities. In Healthy People 2020, that goal was expanded further: To achieve health equity, eliminate disparities and improve the health of all groups. To this end, the US has systematically sought to measure disparities and intervened to close these gaps.

In the United Kingdom, the famous Whitehall studies that began in 1967 have highlighted the concept of a “social gradient”. Studying British civil servants, Professor Michael Marmot, one of the giants of social medicine, concluded that “the lower you were in the hierarchy, the higher the risk”.

He further identified that it was not simply that the most senior civil servants were better off than the lowest in the hierarchy, but that it was graded. And, thirdly, this social gradient applied to all the major causes of death.

Globally, the World Health Organ-



Life expectancy has improved, and economic inequalities should not lead to stark differences in health outcomes. TODAY FILE PHOTO

● Dr Jeremy Lim is head of the health and life sciences consulting practice, Asia in Oliver Wyman, the global consultancy. He is the only Singaporean appointed as an inaugural fellow of the Equity Initiative, a global programme focused on health equity. This is the first of a two-part series. Look out for Part 2 this week on how Singapore can measure health equity.

ization has stressed the importance of health equity and raised the alarm over growing inequities. The report by the Commission on Social Determinants of Health in 2008, aptly titled *Closing the Gap*, is filled with research on health disparities the world over. The analysis of under-5 mortality rates by household wealth particularly struck a chord: There were profound inequities not just across countries by wealth but also within countries. Just as in the UK, social gradients are evident and even more pronounced.

The social gradient does exist in Singapore, as it does in every other country in the world. One small example comes from the latest National Health Survey. In it, the Ministry of Health reported that households earn-

ing less than S\$2,000 per month had the highest prevalence of obese individuals (14.3 per cent). Those households earning more than S\$6,000 a month? A much smaller 8.8 per cent.

Unfortunately, other examples are sparse and the near-absence of data is perhaps telling of our lack of appreciation or unawareness of the social gradient and its impact on health outcomes.

Singapore is nonetheless not barren when it comes to equity evaluation. In many other fields, equity and equality are carefully studied, and the government intervenes to minimise inequalities and inequities. In last year’s Budget debates, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam reported that “Singapore saw 14 per cent of those from parents in the bottom 20 per cent (by income), move up to the top 20 per cent among their peers”. He further highlighted that the Government was making “significant moves to temper inequality” and even described social mobility as the “defining challenge of every advanced country”.

In recent years, some of the most experienced and highly-regarded principals have been deployed to heartland schools, a move described by then Education Minister Heng Swee Keat as “yet another tangible way for us to make every school a good school”.

US President Franklin Roosevelt famously said: “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

Health has been said to be the ultimate wealth. We care about income inequalities, we care about social mobility and we care about education equity. Let us care too about health equity.

WHAT WILL MATTER IS WHO INVESTS MOST WISELY IN BASIC RESEARCH

## Ignore the supercomputer race

ADAM MINTER



A new list of the world’s 500 fastest supercomputers suggests that China might be speeding past the United States in the race for technological supremacy. China now holds the two top spots, and placed a total of 167 machines on the list. The US had only 165 on the list, with its fastest placing a very distant third.

That is leading some American commentators to wring their hands. Wired went so far as to declare a “blow out” in the race for supercomputer supremacy. But as impressive as China’s accomplishment is, there is no reason to panic. The race for technological dominance will not be won by measuring who can build faster

computers. Instead, what will matter is who invests most wisely in basic research — the kind of methodical, unglamorous science that might yield results only years in the future.

The immediate goal of such research is not necessarily a product. But long-term, it might turn into many. Government-funded work on three-dimensional seismic imaging, for instance, helped lay the groundwork for the fracking revolution of recent years. The Human Genome Project, started in 1990, will provide scientists with raw material to cure diseases for decades to come.

“People cannot foresee the future well enough to predict what’s going to develop from basic research,” is how Dr George Smoot, a Nobel Prize win-

ner in physics, once explained it. “If we only did applied research, we would still be making better spears.”

In this, the history of supercomputers is instructive. Bell Labs was doing fundamental research on semiconductors back in the 1940s. Eventually, what they developed was licensed to other companies, including Texas Instruments, which then developed transistors, integrated circuits and other components. It was not until the early 1960s that such technology coalesced into an early version of the supercomputer.

The US dominated supercomputing for two decades, but it was only a matter of time before others piggy-backed on established technology to catch up. In 1981, Japan started a gov-

ernment-backed initiative to develop its own machines. China did the same (with World Bank backing) in 1989. Russia, the EU and several European countries have joined the game as well.

Amid such competition, the title of world’s fastest supercomputer tends to be a fleeting honorific. And the wisdom of engaging in the race has always been questionable. In 2010, US President Barack Obama’s council of science and technology advisors argued that a “single-minded focus” on increasing speed diverts resources from more creative approaches to computing.

In most fields of science and engineering, for instance, performance improvements from more sophisticated algorithms — the mathematical rules used to solve a problem — have topped those from faster processors in recent years.

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