

Support for students with special needs

Letter from Lim Thian Loke
*Deputy Director, Psychological Services,
Education Programmes Division,
Ministry of Education*

William Lim
*Deputy Director, Higher Education
Division, Ministry of Education*

WE REFER to Mrs Chang Siew Ngoh's letter "Do more to help the disabled" (Nov 26) and Mr Danial Bohan's letter "Three ways to do more for less able pupils" (Dec 2) and thank the writers for their feedback.

While more can always be done, there have been several initiatives in recent years.

A good partnership exists between government agencies, voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) and the community to support students with special needs. This is essential, as their needs go beyond educational provisions.

Today, a multi-pronged approach is in place to support students with physical impairments and sensory disabilities in mainstream schools and post-secondary education institutions (PSEIs).

The Ministry of Education (MOE) partners VWOs to provide specialised educational services for these children.

For example, the MOE provides grants to the Asian Women's Welfare Association and Singapore Association for the Deaf for school-based itinerant support for pupils with physical and sensory disabilities in mainstream schools.

The support provided through these VWOs include training for teachers and school staff, awareness talks for peers and advice on accessibility in schools.

In consultation with schools and MOE psychologists, VWOs also assess learning needs and recommend appropriate provisions for the pupil.

The PSEIs have various teaching and learning provisions for students with special needs, including formal assignment of seats, bigger computer monitors, student buddy and personal mentor systems.

Academic staff are informed of their special needs beforehand so they can provide additional teaching support such as extra notes, remedial lessons and extra time for assignments.

Provisions are also made during examinations, including larger prints and extra candidature time. Learning technologies are also

deployed at the PSEIs where viable.

In terms of access facilities, the PSEIs have embarked on such efforts. All Institute of Technical Education colleges are wheelchair-user friendly, with easy access to facilities via ramps and handicapped-friendly lifts.

In line with Mrs Chang's suggestion, ITE will develop mobility maps by this month. Newer PSEIs such as Republic Polytechnic and Singapore Management University are barrier-free, while older ones are improving such access with refurbishments and directional signs. All primary and secondary schools are also equipped with basic handicapped facilities, including toilets and ramps for the wheelchair-bound at the first level.

There are 38 primary and 34 secondary schools with full handicapped facilities, spread out across the island so that pupils with physical disabilities are able to access them easily.

We agree that teachers play an important role in providing appropriate support to pupils with special needs.

Since 2005, the MOE requires all beginning teachers in main-

stream schools to undergo a pre-service special needs module at the National Institute of Education enabling them to develop a basic understanding of these pupils.

The NIE also offers a programme to train teachers in more advanced skills to support these pupils. All primary and secondary schools have teachers who have undergone this programme.

Eight secondary schools have been provided with specially-trained teachers to support pupils with visual or hearing impairment.

In addition, all primary schools and 51 secondary schools are supported by allied educators trained in learning and behavioural support. They work closely with teachers to provide learning support to pupils with mild special needs.

At PSEIs, students with special needs may approach the student care or service centres, which provide additional interventions and counselling services, for assistance.

The MOE will continue to work with our educational institutions and partners to provide a conducive learning environment and educational support to students with special needs.