

REMARKS BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AT THE SEAMEO MINISTERIAL POLICY E-FORUM

Dr Mohd Radzi bin Md Jidin, President of the SEAMEO Council

Dr Ethel Valenzuela, Director SEAMEO Secretariat

Colleagues, Friends,

1 It is my pleasure to be with you this morning. We are in exceptional circumstances. Education Ministers around the world are confronted by a few serious questions: 1) Do we keep schools open? 2) If the answer is yes, how to do it safely. And 3) whatever we do, whatever the decision of the first two questions are, how do we make sure the most vulnerable children are taken care of.

2 Because of these common challenges we face, this is a valuable and timely virtual gathering of ASEAN Education Ministers, to share our experiences, to learn from one another, and to take a common stand.

3 This morning, let me share Singapore's answers to the three questions that I posed. They boil down to making difficult trade-offs and choices, mobilising government and community resources, and harnessing human ingenuity and our spirit of co-operation.

4 First, do we keep schools open?

5 I think the basic choice before us is this – COVID-19 will be with us for some time, a year, and likely longer, until a vaccine is found. In the meantime, can we afford to keep schools closed for such a long time?

6 Most of us will conclude that we cannot, not for such a long time. School closure has a significant long term impact on our children. It inflicts a tremendous social and human cost. Studies have shown that it can set students back for many years, even into adulthood. So we must try our best to save the school year, this and the next one, by keeping schools open but safe.

7 If we decide we have to keep schools open, how to do so safely. This means implementing various safe management measures in schools, and getting everyone to observe them, whether it is wearing of masks, keeping a distance from one another, staggering arrival and dismissal times, finding ways to reduce the density of the student population - in Singapore, we rotate them based on the levels that they are studying in.

8 All these measures, if we are honest, compromises the quality of education. A holistic education requires discussions, socialisation, children playing together, sports, competition, outdoor education, outdoor learning, learning journeys. All these will be comprised. But we have to continue to learn about the virus, how it transmits, where it transmits, what kind of weak link it seeks out and then we make adjustments so that as many normal activities can take place as possible, while keeping schools safe. So at the centre of it all is our understanding of this virus, how it attacks human society, how it attacks communities. And that we take the right precautions to prevent those attacks.

9 As of now, maybe playing rugby may not be possible, but badminton, table-tennis and sepak takraw may be possible. Visiting the nature reserves as a class with safe distancing may become possible, but a school overnight camp may not be possible. And we have to make these choices. And if very unfortunately a student gets infected in school, we quarantine their contacts quickly, so that the rest of the school can continue their lessons and we stub out the transmission. But if even more unfortunately a cluster of infections emerges in a school, we may have to suspend the school, so that other schools can continue their lessons.

10 I think we know all these solutions and methods if we know the virus and analyse the events and the methods of tackling transmissions logically. But the challenge really is to bring parents and the public along with our decisions. Parents and the public, they must have the confidence that the measures taken are effective, and that the alternative of leaving their children at home for prolonged periods or letting them wander outside the home but not in school, can be more damaging in the long term.

11 So the third decision before us is – regardless of our decisions, how do we ensure the most vulnerable students are taken care of. We know that homes and families are not created equal. Some have the resources to deliver a high quality private education to their children. Others struggle even to feed them. Schools as public institutions can provide a good common experience for all our children. But when it gets interrupted, the poorest students amongst us suffer the most.

12 That is why in Singapore, we adopted the policy that even during a lockdown – we call it ‘Circuit-Breaker’ in Singapore – schools do not close for this group of students. We brought as many of them back to school as

possible. Teachers came back to school, watched over them, gave them meals, and continued to guide them in their work.

13 It has been a tough period for every school system in the world. But there is a silver lining in every dark cloud, and I think good things have come out from the education front during this crisis too.

14 Let me list down a few of these silver linings. First, school systems in many countries have had to adjust to blended forms of learning in response to the pandemic, using the Internet, TV and even radio, as alternate platforms for students to gain access to education resources.

15 In that process, many teachers got up to speed with digital competencies and tools. So the pandemic has accelerated our students and teachers' familiarity with online learning as an additional tool.

16 Second, through online and home-based learning, we discovered new things about our students that we never knew before. Students who were shy in class found the courage to participate more in discussions and ask questions during home-based learning.

17 Online learning gave them the privacy, the time and the space to learn at their own pace, and nurtured in them a certain sense of curiosity, to go beyond the curriculum, to find out things themselves - independent learning. This I believe is actually an essential part of education.

18 Home-based and online learning cannot possibly replace classroom lessons, but there are clear advantages, which can help us improve education for the future.

19 Third silver lining, the crisis has given our students the opportunity to strengthen their character, their sense of duty to their larger community. Students are confronted with what it meant to be socially responsible to stop the spread of the virus, by limiting interactions with others, practising social distancing and good personal hygiene habits. They learned to show care and concern to those around them, especially to our frontline workers. They learned compassion, as they rallied their friends and the community to support the less privileged. Students are now better able to absorb all these lessons, not through just studying books and talking about it in class, but now there is a real life context, and I think they absorb those lessons much better because they are living it.

20 The final silver lining is the appreciation parents have for our teachers. I think weeks of parents at home, having to juggle between working from home, taking care of the home and watching over their children, they realise how valuable the teacher is.

21 Parents saw how our teachers adjusted quickly to implement contingency plans to keep schools open in the initial stages of the pandemic. They also juggled between taking care of students who were physically present in school, as well as those quarantined at home.

22 We should build on this positive momentum to better partner with parents in our children's education journey.

23 We are still in the early stages of our fight against COVID-19. In the months to come, we will hopefully settle into a new normal, acquire new capabilities and uncover new opportunities. Be able to get schools to open, maybe in stages, carefully, but they will have to open for the sake of our children. Otherwise, we are undoing many decades of human society

progress where we enabled many children to have access to good education. That is a major, significant achievement of many of our societies. Do not let COVID-19 undo many years of progress.

24 I am also heartened to know of the efforts SEAMEO Secretariat has undertaken to share best practices through webinars and offer free online modules for educators. And maybe this is also a silver lining, and in future, we don't have to wait for major meetings for SEAMEO ministers to meet. But from time to time, we get together virtually to share our views to learn from one another. I am confident that this close network and partnership will only grow from strength to strength.

25 Thank you.