Avoid Making Meritocracy a Dirty Word, Says Heng

Siau Ming En
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SINGAPORE — Society must avoid making meritocracy a "dirty word", said Education Minister Heng Swee Keat as he discussed the subject of social mobility at a conference yesterday.

The minister was responding to a question on how Singapore could build an open and compassionate meritocracy at the Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)

"I think it's important that in Singapore, meritocracy does not become a dirty word," said Mr Heng.

Whether in schools or in the workplace, he said maintaining a system of selection that was based on a person's performance and ability was "the right thing to do". Every effort, however, should be made to help everyone "ride the wave of globalisation" and assistance should be provided to those who needed it so no one gets left behind, said Mr Heng.

He also noted the "special place" that the national language of Malay has in society here.

"I think in many of our schools, for instance, quite a number of students now take conversational Malay in the schools. And what we need to do is find more opportunities for them to learn," he said.

During the dialogue, IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh asked if a good pre-school education or the use of education platforms would help Singapore keep a healthy rate of social mobility. Mr Heng said even a first-rate pre-school system was not the "magic bullet" to ensuring social mobility. Nevertheless, he said all areas of education could be enhanced, from pre-schools to higher institutes of learning.

"(We need) to recognise that there are broader forces of work for the economy that we need to take care of. And unless we continue to restructure the economy, unless we continue to create good jobs, a good education system by itself does not solve the problem," he said.

The education minister also said he was considering introducing computer programming in schools, not to make everyone a "programming geek", but to help Singapore harness the impact of technology. Looking forward, former Aljunied MP Zainul Abidin Rasheed also asked Mr Heng how Singapore could balance politics, contest and consensus in a way that would help it continue to be a success story in the next five to 10 years. Mr Heng said while a greater contest sharpened the ability to deliver policies, he noted that it does not necessarily lead to "better results" for the society.

"Being able to work together, being able to take the country forward should not be a matter of just contest among political parties. I think it should be a collective effort, it should not necessarily be (an) antagonistic contest, (so) that we are able to harness the creative energy of people to solve any challenges," said the minister.