

Students must also counter extremist views: Education Minister

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SINGAPORE — The responsibility lies not only with teachers and parents; students must also counter extremist views, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen said yesterday.

As it is “neither desirable nor possible” to block access to the many websites that youth can visit, said Dr Ng, “what we have to do is teach our students to examine carefully what they’re exposed to”.

When they see signs of people being subject to extremist views, “as a community, both teachers, parents and community groups, and students themselves will have to counter these extremist views”, he told reporters. “That’s the only way we can stop these radicalisation efforts.”

Dr Ng cited the example of the three youths who were arrested for posting disparaging racial remarks online and of the recent detention of a young self-radicalised Singaporean in his speech at the Racial Harmony Day celebrations at New Town Secondary School.

He pointed to cyber-wellness programmes in schools, which teach students to discern online content and to turn to parents and teachers if they come across extremist views.

Yesterday, a resource package was also launched to help teachers include community engagement messages in their lessons.

However, there is only so much scope for students, or even ordinary citizens, to counter extremist views, some felt.

Institute of Policy Studies adjunct research associate Azhar Ghani said that, while it is important “to flag potential radical elements”, it would be “unrealistic” to expect the ordinary person to effectively counter such views”.

Especially if they are not equipped with the right knowledge and are “up against” those who can bend scriptures or belief systems to their arguments, said the risk consultant. “To encourage them to do so could expose them to being turned around by persuasive counter-arguments.”

He added: “The logical thing to do is to leverage on the knowledge of those who know.”

For instance, the Religious Rehabilitation Group, which counsels detained Jemaah Islamiyah members.

St Andrew’s Secondary principal Belinda Charles said it “goes against students’ culture” to report on a classmate. What would help is to encourage students to dialogue. If students suspect that a classmate has been subjected to extremist views, they can talk to each other and with a trusted teacher, she said.

However, a junior college teacher, who has taught in a secondary school, felt a JC student exposed to extremist views may likely keep it under wraps. And for secondary students, it is “hard to tell when they’re joking or not”, he said, declining to be named.

While there are students who know right from wrong, there are also those who “feed off each other” and find it “cool to be alternative”, he said.

Student Timothy Lim, 16, said if a friend of his might have been subjected to extremist views, he would first talk to him before deciding whether to approach a school counsellor.

“Generally, secondary school students aren’t patient enough to hold rational arguments or may not understand the severity of the situation,” he said.