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Exploring ways to keep teachers in school

The NUS Political Association conducted The Millennium Project: Comparing Singapore's progress from 2000 to 2010. Among the areas the association looked at was the education system. We carry today their findings on the recruitment, retention and welfare of teachers.

IT HAS been close to 10 years since the Ministry of Education introduced a scheme to give teachers a comprehensive pay and career system. Thanks to the Education Service Professional Development and Career Plan, a new entrant to the teaching profession can look forward to three possible routes of advancement: the teaching track; the leadership track, which offers opportunities to take up leadership positions in schools and at MOE headquarters; and the senior specialist track for those inclined to acquire deep knowledge and skills in particular subjects.

The ministry also improved its Performance Management system in 2003 so as to better assess teachers according to their career tracks, rather than using a 'one size fits all' approach.

To widen teachers' experience, the Teacher Work Attachment was introduced in 2003. Under this programme, teachers are attached to public and private sector organisations for a period lasting from one week to one year. The experience they gain is intended to enrich their teaching.

Teachers' workload has also been lightened since 2005 with the recruitment of co-curricular programme executives to help with administrative duties related to co-curricular activities and community involvement programmes. With teacher recruitments set to increase, the student-to-teacher ratio should be lowered, thus reducing further teachers' workload.

In addition, the Grow 2.0 package was introduced in 2007 to give teachers more attractive remuneration, more career and development opportunities and greater flexibility in balancing the demands of work and family.

With all these changes, how does a newcomer view the teaching profession in Singapore? The NUS Political Association spoke to three teacher-trainees in their early 20s to find out.

When asked what made them choose the teaching profession, the interviewees, all of whom have tutoring and relief teaching experience, said that they liked children and wanted to make a difference in their lives.

But having been on school attachments a number of times during their course, what did they think of the profession? And how attractive did they find the pay package offered by the MOE?

The trainees interviewed thought that the starting pay of about \$3,000 should be higher considering the work teachers do. They said a salary of \$4,000 to \$5,000 would put them on par with their peers in the private sector.

When asked if there was a type of school they would prefer to work in, they noted that teachers in both neighbourhood and elite schools faced problems, albeit of a different kind.

They saw teaching difficult students in neighbourhood schools as a challenge, especially when the students had parents who could not or would not do anything about their children's attitude to learning.

But parents could also be a source of stress in elite schools. One trainee who had taught in such a school said that parents who held high-profile jobs often treated teachers like their subordinates at work.

We also asked the trainees if they would continue in the profession after serving their mandatory five-year teaching bond. All said this would depend on the work environment and their rate of promotion. They considered the following fields as alternatives should they quit teaching: events management, public relations, banking and food services.

If these responses are representative, they indicate a generation of teachers on the lookout for interesting jobs that may put them in the spotlight. The Teacher Work Attachment programme may cater to this inclination.

The other reasons cited for quitting teaching included depression and stress. At a networking session organised by the MOE this year for potential teaching award holders, a young teacher said she would prefer it if her school reduced her workload by allocating fewer classes to her instead of focusing on material rewards such as performance bonus and a stable income.

At the same session, a teacher with about a year's experience said that over-protective parents made it difficult for teachers to do their jobs. She gave the example of a student who was given a penalty mark because he submitted his assignment late. His parents complained, arguing that their son was only trying to do a better job, hence the late submission. The principal then advised the teacher not to be too harsh on the boy.

Teachers have a vital role to play in raising children, especially in a society where it is common for both parents to work. But teachers are ordinary people too with their own needs and worries. They should be given more support to ensure that they stick with the profession. The image of the profession needs to be improved so it does not suffer in comparison with the commercial world.

Most important of all, the profession should be renewed periodically to meet the aspirations of the new generation. This will help newcomers make teaching a long-term career and not just one phase in their working life.

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