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CHANGES NEEDED IN EDUCATION BLUEPRINT FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The Preliminary Report on Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013-2025 is a well written, admirable and challenging document. It identifies and recognizes key weaknesses in our education system; lays out guidelines for action to be undertaken as 11 shifts in 3 waves; and provides interesting examples of effective changes achieved in other countries. We share the Blueprint's conviction that transformation is indeed possible if we face our weaknesses bravely, study how other countries have succeeded, and, take wise, decisive and effective actions.

However, for Students with Special Needs (SSN), the Blueprint is a disappointment. Not only has very little attention been given to this group, the attention is superficial in comparison to the meticulous analysis and documentation in other parts of the Blueprint. Worse, the actions suggested for this group go against the principles of Best Practice and Inclusive Education.

The Blueprint acknowledges that SSN make up an estimated 10% of every cohort. But, in fact, it is generally accepted that if a broad spectrum of learning difficulties is included, the proportion of students needing specialized teaching and attention may be as high as 15 - 20%. For a 268-page document with 91,800 words, outlining the nation's educational direction over the next two decades, only a mere 1070 words (spanning 3 pages) is devoted to SSN. One wonders how a national Blueprint could fail to provide due attention to such a significant proportion of Malaysian students.

Even more unfortunate, the first Wave of action for improvements in education for SSN does not place priority on the shortage of qualified teachers and professionals, correctly identified in the Blueprint as the first of three key weaknesses in provisions for SSN. Instead, the first line of action is to develop screening instruments to separate SSN by different levels of "competency" to determine where and how SSN will be placed in the school system. Leaving aside issues surrounding such screening instruments, this suggestion goes completely against the principles of Inclusive Education, ironically cited on the very same page of the Blueprint, as the philosophy accepted by Malaysia for education of SSN! An Inclusive Education seeks to bring SSN, except for the severely disabled, into mainstream education through Individual Education Plans implemented by well-trained teachers and professionals, not segregate them by different levels of "competency". Inclusive Education calls for teachers to be creative and classroom practice to be flexible so that SSN can learn together with their peers. Accepting students of diverse abilities in the same classroom has been proven to bring benefits to all students. It is the mark of a progressive, humane and high quality education system.

We support the Blueprint's statement on Best Practice in Education which calls for immediate action in three areas - improvements in skills, training and quality of teachers; working closely with families; and building partnerships with relevant local organizations. Citing a study that has shown that teachers alone, as the "frontline" in delivery of good education, can improve student performances by as much as 50% within a span of 3 years, the Blueprint outlines directions for immediate improvements in quality of teachers and school principals. In Wave 1, Full-time Literacy and Numeracy Coaches (FasiLINUS), who have helped ensure success in implementation of the LINUS program will be expanded, and full time School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISC) and School Improvement Partners (SIP) will start work to uplift quality of teaching and school leadership.

Sadly, for the SSN, improvements in training of their teachers and exploring partnerships with local organizations to support them will only be undertaken in Wave 2 (2016 to 2020). Shouldn't the needs of SSN be addressed with at least equal urgency?

We urge the Ministry of Education, in preparing the final version of the Blueprint, to give priority to teacher training in the First Wave of action for SSN. Firstly, there must be immediate and appropriate changes in teacher training curriculum to equip ALL teachers with knowledge and skills

about SSN. Secondly, training programs must be geared towards improving the skills of the existing core of teachers assigned to Special Classes that currently cater for 89% of SSN within the Malaysian system. Thirdly, MOE must establish a support system of coaches for SSN, similar to and in line with FasiLINUS, SISC and SIP, to effect immediate improvements in quality of teaching for SSN.

Along with Wave 1, we would like to suggest two lines of action which can be undertaken immediately and with minimal costs. Firstly working with families and secondly collaboration with NGOs already familiar with education of SSN.

For further long-term actions towards improving the education of SSN, we refer the Ministry to the Memorandum on Inclusive Education as National Policy for Children with Special Needs, written by the NECI and supported by 60 over NGOs nation-wide. This was in fact submitted to MOE on 20th April 2012 but we have not received any response from the Ministry so far. The National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) is a registered coalition of parents, therapists and professionals from a large variety of NGOs and government agencies advocating for children with special needs. We take this opportunity to re-iterate our willingness to engage in discussions and to provide whatever support we can in the move to transform education for SSN in Malaysia to meet the highest international standards in the coming two decades.

No child must be left behind, but just saying this does not make it happen. We say again that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. The NECIC would like to advocate for our best teachers (and the education system) to support our weakest children so that as a nation, we can all move forward without leaving any behind.

Thank You.

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(Note: This statement was prepared collectively by NGOs represented in the NECIC)