

3f: Education

Preamble

In the past decade, Malaysia has consistently ranked close to or in the bottom one-third of the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a triennial survey assessing students' key knowledge and essential skills in areas such as reading proficiency, mathematics and science. This trend was foreseen in a 2013 World Bank report, which noted the disparity between Malaysian students' cognitive skills and the country's aspirations to become a high-income economy. While national education systems are undoubtedly complex, and Malaysia's success or failure in PISA should not be treated as the only indicator of educational success, its results should prompt the government to look into the issues and factors contributing to our students' under-performance and falling standards that are apparent in general as well.

I: Partisan Political Influences

The root of the problem lies in the lack of a consistent vision for educational reform, especially given that education policies change every few years following changes of education ministers. Compounding the matter is the issue of how discrimination has been legitimised in our education policies. Over the years, Article 153 of the Federal Constitution, on bumiputra rights and privileges, has often been interpreted to justify Malay supremacy. This racial ideology has permeated in the public sphere, including curriculum content in schools and the composition of leaders in the public education sector and teachers. Unless it is replaced with an emphasis on professionalism, integrity and accountability, it will be hard to restore any meaningful standards in Malaysia's education.

1. Establish a comprehensive, cohesive accountability system.

The accountability system shall consist of the following independent components that are answerable to Parliament and allocated funding so that they may act impartially and fairly, and be free from political influence and intimidation:

- i. An oversight committee to provide checks and balances against the Education Ministry. It should include representatives from academia,

educationists, the corporate sector, professional councils and parent representatives. The committee must look into misappropriation of funds, including rent-seeking and fraud, as well as monitor the execution of strategies identified in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-1)

- ii. An apolitical professional education consultative council to ensure that curriculum content and implementation are aligned to current developments in education. Curriculum design, assessment and implementation must be the sole responsibility of experts, scholars and educators, and should include a mechanism for feedback from students, alumni and parent representatives. Such a council must also ensure the credibility of public assessment results by placing safeguards against manipulation. The goal of a consultative council is to ensure that education in Malaysia is on a par or if not better than the current international standards of education.

(Megat Mohamed Amin Megat Mohamed Nor, IKRAM, Proposal 3F-2)

- iii. An ombudsman system to investigate complaints about maladministration and abuse of power and trust by bureaucrats and officials bearing senior positions in the Ministry of Education (MOE).

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-3; Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-4)

- i. Comprehensive and genuine protection must be given to teachers and student whistle-blowers.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-5)

- v. An Independent (Appointment) Selection Committee (ISC) comprising qualified professionals to administer merit-based appointments of senior officers, principals, specialist teachers and District Education Office officers. Candidates should be appointed on the basis of possessing the requisite capabilities and skills, and not merely to fill up vacancies. The ISC must also address inquiries and decisions regarding non-performing officers, teachers including school principals, through an on-site investigative and interview panel.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-1)

- vi. An independent auditing body to conduct an annual audit of the financial accounts of the MOE, including economic damages (torts, breach of contract), contract fraud, money laundering and asset misappropriation, records falsification, procurement fraud and price fixing.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-6)

2. Abolish the UUCA.

(Lee Hao Jie, Proposal 3F- 7)

Reformulate higher education laws to serve changing societal needs. Reinstate the right of university students to form unions.

3. Reinstate civic and citizenship education in national schools.

The young generation must know their rights and role in society, both local and global, be able to discuss and debate rationally, and seek solutions to differences via dialogue. Such awareness and civic competency are essential to develop a co-existence and co-prosperity mindset in a multi-racial society.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-8; Fiqah Roslan, Tiada Guru, Proposal 3F-9)

II: Inclusive Education

Inclusion and equity are key elements that should be prioritised in Malaysia's education system to ensure an appreciation and respect for diversity as a pathway to sustainability, prosperity and peace, which is the endmost role of education. The overemphasis on the values of one ethnicity, language and religion has increasingly homogenous, conformist outlook and conservative mindsets in national schools, at the expense of multicultural acceptance. The tolerance for and perpetuation of patriarchal values in schools, as reflected in unaddressed gender discrimination and sexual harassment, creates an unsafe environment for learning.

4. Implement multicultural policies and laws that demonstrate respect for, and appreciation of diversity in culture, language and gender in schools and learning institutions.

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-10)

5. Safeguard and enforce the constitutional right of Malaysians to access first-language education.

As advocated by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a child's first language is the optimal medium for attaining literacy and learning in primary school. Actions to support for first-language education should include the following:

- i. Respecting parents' choice for the vernacular school system.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, 3F-11).

- ii. The Chinese national-type primary school (SJKC) system is favoured by 95% of Chinese parents and 20% of Malay, Indian, Orang Asal and Orang Asli parents, according to MOE 2019–2020 data, while professionals and parents who had attended the English-based missionary schools of the past thought that curriculum and approach to be better than the present ones. The bilingually competent alumni of such schools are more likely to embrace a multicultural ethos and practise openness and acceptance towards others, a key aspiration expressed in the MEB, and much sought after by both local and international industries.

- iii. Reinstating English-medium schools as an alternative language stream among the public-funded schools to produce trained and competent English teachers towards equipping the next generation with a good command of the language, which will enhance Malaysian students' international competitiveness as well as the nation's trade competitiveness.

(G25 Malaysia, Proposal 3F-12)

6. Endorse gender equality policies that prohibit gender discrimination.

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-13)

- i. Provide evidence-based education on gender or sexual health matters to students, in order to prevent and end rape culture and sexual harassment in educational institutions.

(Rusni Tajari, WAO, Proposal 3F-14)

- ii. School teachers and principals should also undergo gender-sensitisation programmes, which include being taught the inappropriateness of conducting intrusive period spot checks on female students for not attending religious prayers.

7. Provide access to education for all stateless and undocumented children.

(Bina Ramanand, Family Frontiers, Proposal 3F-15; Maalini Ramalo, DHRRA, Proposal 3F-16)

The right to education for all children, including those who are stateless and undocumented, is covered in the UNCRC, which Malaysia has ratified, and it is also recognised in the Child Act 2001. These children should only have to undergo a one-time enrolment process into schools, instead of a yearly application, and once registered, they should be given full access to all forms of educational opportunities offered by the schools, including taking part in both in- and beyond-school activities.

Left unchecked, the ongoing prejudice and social discrimination faced by these students leads to not only education loss but also life-long adverse socioeconomic outcomes, such as inability to earn a livelihood, and increased risk of falling into crime and violence.

III: School Autonomy & Decentralisation of Education

Malaysia has arguably one of the largest central education administrations in the world, relative to the number of schools, according to UNESCO 2013 data. As a policy thrust, the centralisation of education at federal level was useful during the nation's formative years to ensure efficiency in delivery of services, but five decades down the road, the overconcentration of power within the MOE has led to many problems, including the creation of overly bureaucratic, hierarchical top-down structures, multiple wastages and a complex, overlap of interests among

stakeholders in the education system. The MEB specifically provides that, as part of the third stage (2021–2025) of education transformation, the MOE should demonstrate transparency and accountability by restructuring and decentralising its powers.

8. Restore autonomy in the various levels—state, district, school.

To address geographical gaps in education, decision-makers at the state, district and school levels should be given the authority and flexibility to implement educational policies through local-data-based solutions to meet the needs of the students and local community.

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-17)

At school level, principals should also be given the flexibility to make changes in their schools to address specific education loss issues, based on localised needs and students' socioeconomic status. Such measures could include incorporating special English or Malay proficiency programmes to the existing curriculum or providing custom parental education programmes to help parents be more effective in supporting their children.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-18)

9. Run a pilot decentralised education initiative to restore school autonomy.

The academy schools of the United Kingdom can serve as a reference for this progressive initiative, in particular to empower both high-achieving and under-performing schools and teachers.

(Dr. Tan Ai Mei, Proposal 3F-19)

10. Establish an annual school curriculum, integrity and safety report card devised by schools.

The MOE should not set academic key performance indicators (KPI) for schools, nor should school performances be compared at either district or state levels. Schools should be able to set their own KPI on students' well-being with respect to safety, integrity, education delivery and human resources.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-20)

11. Make public online statistical data about school profiles and research reports about education in the country.

Transparency is needed to ensure that all decisions related to education policy and subsequent actions taken are done in accordance with policy formulation and review.

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-21)

This should include the validity and representativeness of consultations with stakeholders on a geo-granular basis.

12. Make accessible across all agencies the data collected from teachers.

The lack of a cohesive data collection and housing system has resulted in countless duplication of requests for identical data by different education divisions across the federal, state and district levels. It is a waste of teachers' time and a distraction from teaching, affecting the performance of schools, teachers and students alike.

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-21)

13. Maximise public participation in policy formulation.

This includes establishing a geographical gradient consultation with the school community and diverse stakeholders in education. Set a clear, effective participation process that will incur minimum cost.

(Kong Wee Cheng, Dong Jiao Zong, Proposal 3F-22)

14. Empower parent-teacher associations to perform their role in safeguarding student well-being and checking irregular practices in school.

Amend the Education (Parent-Teacher Associations) Regulations 1998 and Education Act to pave the way for schools to develop partnerships with parents, community, NGOs, and lead the school transformation as identified in the MEB.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-23)

15. Overhaul and reform the MOE payment system.

Decentralise financial disbursements for school building maintenance, repair and procurement, with standard accountability requirements instituted locally to eliminate corrupt, rent-seeking practices that are currently embedded in the system; as observed in school projects awarded to contractors listed in the Public Works Department pipeline.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F- 24)

16. Review the executive power and professional competency of the District Education Office to spearhead change at the school level.

The leadership of the District Education Office needs to adhere to the 3Cs—commitment, coordination and communication—to see through reforms from start to completion. The Office should not be regarded as a stepping stone for quick promotion to senior positions in the MOE, a practice which appears to have transpired in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur Education Department.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-25)

IV: Holistic Education

Education and curricular delivery must be administered as an integrated humanising learning process, underpinned by professionalism.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-9)

Political and orthodox influences to reinforce the status quo and political control, as observed in the teaching of subjects such as history, moral studies and religious studies, must stop.

Assessments are needed to provide students with feedback on their attainment of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as knowledge of daily life, which entails a holistic approach to education. Yet the MOE has been overly focused on grades and examinations at the expense of instilling an authentic learning culture in schools. While the Primary School Achievement Test, also known as the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) has been abolished—not by design but due to the learning obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic—and the Form Three

Assessment, or Pentaksiran Tingkatan Tiga (PT3), similarly cancelled, the MOE still has to radically change its approach.

17. Implement standardised competency assessment to replace the UPSR.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F- 25)

The abolition of UPSR in 2021 provided teachers and schools an opportunity to focus on restoring autonomy and ownership of learning to students, and teaching to teachers. In lieu of the UPSR, we propose that the MOE introduce a national-level assessment conducted by a professional examination board during the Year 5 and 6 primary schooling years as a means of ensuring that teachers and schools are discharging their duties accordingly. Students should be permitted to decide for themselves when to take the test within the timeframe, with no limits placed on the number of resits. The main objective of the assessment is not to quantify school rankings or student gradings, but to ensure that students attain a minimum basic competency in language, mathematics and science to conduct their daily activities and pave the way to life-long learning.

18. Liberate teachers from the grade-obsessed mentality and encourage them to play the role of learning facilitators instead.

Rather than pressuring students to achieve good grades and excel in exams, teachers should strive to make education a more balanced, nurturing process that builds character and good values, while igniting passion and curiosity in students.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F- 9)

Use the holistic and integrated approach in the development of students' personality (tarbiah). This is essential to promote interest, develop talents and realise the potential of students. Various theories can be utilised such as the 3H (head, heart, hands) approach, involving critical reflection, relational knowing and physical engagement, or the concept of *insan rabbani* (a noble and pious individual).

(Megat Mohamed Amin Megat Mohamed Nor, IKRAM, Proposal 3F- 26)

19. On language teaching, focus on proficiency and competency instead of passing exams.

The majority of SJKC students are unable to understand basic conversational Malay; 60% of secondary school students' English proficiency is of primary school level; and 30% of public school English teachers only managed to obtain a minimum C3 in the 2012-13 English teacher qualifying exam. These dismal figures highlight an urgent need to re-align the way language is taught in mainstream education. Effective language education should be premised on the philosophy of language being taught as a life-long living skill, rather than a subject for which an exam must be passed.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F- 27)

20. Restore the history curriculum, with an emphasis on facts and an appreciation of diversity.

This is important for nation healing, growth and unity, as well as to lay the foundations for a holistic perspective of the world and appreciation of human civilisation. Curricular manipulation creates mistrust, impedes social integration, and affects the competitiveness of the country. For example, the narrative on East Malaysian history laid out in the current curriculum is not reflective of the people's struggle since the Federation of Malaysia was formed; likewise, the contributions of the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups to the development of the country are increasingly being erased from the history curriculum.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-27)

21. Conduct human rights education through workshops and project work in primary school right up to university.

This can be incorporated into the civics and citizenship curriculum. Besides improving humanity in general, it is essential to stem police brutality in society...

(Ng Yap Hwa, Teoh Beng Hock Trust for Democracy, Proposal 3F-28)

...and sexual harassment and rape in schools.

(Rusni Tajari, WAO, Proposal 3F-29)

22. Investigate learning loss and dropouts due to school closures.

(Chan Yit Fei, Agora Society Malaysia, Proposal 3F-30)

- i. The priorities of the MOE during and post-pandemic should be to:
 - a) Reduce the impact of school closures on the foreseeable rise in dropout and truancy rates.
 - b) Reduce the learning gap due to the digital divide.
 - c) Ensure lesson plans designed for online learning involves methodology such as teaching by sharing videos and allowing children engagement with their classmates online. Teachers need to be better supported in online teaching methodology.

(Srividhya Ganapathy, CRIB (Child Rights Innovation & Betterment) Foundation, Proposal 2E-7)

- d) Reduce the harm to students' mental well-being due to learning loss and social isolation.
- e) Empower schools to run school-based curriculum towards effectively fulfilling students' learning needs and the community's aspirations.
- ii. Set up a task force to assess the impact of learning loss nationwide, in particular the impact on students' literacy and numeracy skills. The MOE could adopt the following curricular strategies:
 - a) Reduce subject matter content by emphasising core ideas and content that is deemed essential for future learning.
 - b) Introduce a new curriculum to build better skills to cope with uncertainty and encourage life-long learning to build resilience.
 - c) Administer school programmes to curb dropouts.
 - d) Tailor remedial classes according to the adjusted curriculum and students' personal needs.

V: Non-performing Teachers & Teacher Professionalism

Teachers are the vanguard of education reform. Unfortunately, many teachers serving in the public education sector suffer from lack of motivation, due to being guaranteed automatic promotion by virtue of simply holding their posts. This, alongside an entrenched annual incremental remuneration reward system, are major reasons contributing to underperformance of public school teachers and educators. The removal of non-performing teachers can take up to three

years, owing to excessive red tape. The Teacher Redeployment policy implemented since the last decade, which transferred senior teachers, assistants and principals around, has reduced schools to a uniform level of mediocrity.

In the past four years alone, nearly 4,000 teachers opted for early retirement every year, of which a significant number were senior teachers, administrators and frustrated principals (2017-2020 MOE data). To restore standards in education and the teaching profession, there needs to be an overhaul, from the entry point of teachers and education officers, to the appointment and promotion of education leaders and, more importantly, the establishment of an ombudsman system to handle the problem of underperforming teachers.

23. The MOE and Public Service Department must demonstrate accountability in handling problematic teachers.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-31)

Our hierarchical education system is a major stumbling block to the firing or dismissal of problematic teachers in schools. Too many conscientious principals have been frustrated to the point of opting for early retirement, while others have little choice but to continue tolerating teachers and senior assistants who display a clear lack of motivation to work.

24. Review the absolute authority held by the Education Service Commission in executing the recruitment, appointment and promotion of education officers.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-32)

Teachers who have a record of underperformance and non-motivation should be singled and rooted out at the entry point. Similarly, the appointment and promotion of education officers should not be influenced by nepotism and political patronage.

25. Shift the investigative authority vested in the Ministry of Education to an Ombudsman or Independent Panel.

(Fiqah Roslan, Tiada.Guru, Proposal 3F-5)

Multiple cases of probes into teacher misconduct have been swept under the carpet just because the MOE claimed “there was no evidence.” A whistle-blower

survey conducted by Tiada.Guru, a Sabah-based campaign of grassroots victims, whistle-blowers and activists, revealed instances of political intimidation and fabricated evidence in some of these probes. A necessary-hire-and-timely-fire mechanism has to be employed to salvage the education loss of students.

26. Ensure that in-service teachers go through monthly professional learning development.

This must be done through professional learning communities at both subject and professional levels in school, as stated in the MEB, to form the basis for continued reformation as a practice.

27. Reinstate the three-year renewal policy of the teaching licence.

This is to ensure that all teachers, even upon confirmation in the automatic time-based promotion system set at a maximum of three years, remain motivated to engage in regular professional learning development. This should be applied to all ranks of teacher educators—Novice (DG41), competent (DG44), professional (DG48) and expert consultant (DG52-DG54).

28. Establish an impartial professional body to assess teachers' competency prior any promotion.

This is especially important when it comes to assessing the middle and senior ranks—DG48, DG52 and DG54.

29. Remove teachers from the civil service and put them under the jurisdiction of school authorities.

Empower school authorities, i.e. the school board of governors, to decide on an appropriate hire-and-fire policy for teachers, including the principal. Besides reducing governmental red tape in this matter, it is also in keeping with the vision to decentralise education. The board must be led by reputable professionals, as is the practice in Hong Kong and EU countries. State funding for schools must include allocations for teachers' salaries, on top of school development and maintenance.

VI: Students' Physical & Mental Health

The primary and secondary school health curriculums are designed to benefit students with life-long life skills and good health literacy. While these curricula are fairly wide ranging and cover topics such as physical, socio-emotional, mental and spiritual development, child safety issues, as well as nutrition, diseases and first aid, student and youth lifestyle and morbidity profiles have registered worrying trends, as indicated in the 2017 National Health & Morbidity Survey (NHMS). The suicide rate amongst youth is also of concern. From January 2019 to May 2021, there were 872 suicide deaths of young people, with 15–18-year-olds comprising 51% of the total 1,708 cases, according to police data.

30. Make the school system an essential part of the national mental health system.

(Chan Yit Fei, Agora Society Malaysia, Proposal 3F- 33)

- i. Establish a functioning mental health system within each school or within a district that oversees schools, that includes facilities for safe counselling.
- ii. Lay counsellors, including teachers, must be well-trained in identifying symptoms of mental problems and must network with professional counsellors, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists.
- iii. Run programmes in schools to educate students, parents and the community.
- iv. Give appropriate support to the underprivileged groups, including undocumented or stateless migrant children, and establish easy-to-access platforms to report grievances.

31. Schools must set up a Student Health Programme Committee.

(Chan Yit Fei, Agora Society Malaysia, Proposals 3F-33 & 34)

The ministries of health, youth and education must collaboratively set up a health monitoring and support system for students. Assign a health officer to work with schools and government clinics in the district on health programmes to equip students with good health literacy and practices to combat obesity, stunting, malnutrition and mental problems.

32. Recruit professionally trained teachers to teach the physical and health education subjects.

Stop the ad hoc practice of replacing the health or physical education period with other subjects, or having non-option teachers (i.e. teachers who have not undergone formal training in particular subjects) to teach these subjects.

33. Take a systemic process approach to address the lack of self-resilience in students, including mental health issues.

Such measures can include online classes, a caring school environment and equipping parents with knowledge on child and teenage development.

VII: Early Childhood Childcare

Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, there were only 4,812 registered childcare centres, an enrolment rate of barely 10%, the lowest in ASEAN. Poor quality early childhood childcare education (ECCE) puts children at risk of toxic stress, abuse, neglect and educational disadvantage.

34. Establish an integrated, comprehensive Early Childhood Childcare Education System.

Children under five years old comprise 8% (2.6 million) of the total population in Malaysia. To enable a stable and economically developed nation, Malaysia must invest in building high-quality, affordable and accessible ECCE system infrastructure, as strong early foundations in physical, socio-emotional, language and cognitive development, as well as nutrition and health are formed during a child's early years.

(Education Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 3F-35)

- i. Place all types of ECCE institutions, including private ones, under a single agency.
- ii. Review the curriculum to make it holistic. Engage kids through play, toys, nature or projects instead of a formulaic academic approach, and ensure that education policies are free from religious indoctrination.
- iii. Prioritise establishing alternative, community-based childcare models, such as family playgroups, community toy libraries, home and family-

based childcare centres within neighbourhoods, especially People's Housing Project flats.

- iv. Devise a Compulsory Child Protection Policy.
- v. Enact an ECCE Profession law that stipulates minimum qualifications for preschool teachers and care providers. Establish an independent ECCE professional regulatory body to oversee the development of care providers and preschool teachers.
- vi. Build partnerships with NGOs and the corporate sector to reach marginalised and remote communities.

Concluding Remarks

To overhaul the country's education system, we need professionalism, accountability and integrity in leadership. This requires transparency, maximum stakeholder participation, and decentralisation of power and education at both structural and systemic levels. Of particular urgency is to remove partisan politics from education.