

Speech by Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education at the Community Chest Sharity Day on 14 August 2019 at Gardens by The Bay

Good morning, everyone. Let me first acknowledge a few important people.

Mr Philip Tan, Chairman, Community Chest. Thank you for all the great work you have been doing to help the community.

Mr Chew Kwee San, Vice-Chairman of Community Chest Committee and Chairman of Sharity Day Sub-Committee.

Mr Felix Loh, CEO, Gardens by the Bay.

1. Today, we want to acknowledge the importance and the great work of Sharity Day. We have done this for 35 years, and it has become such a good platform for students – both primary and secondary, as well as students with different abilities – all coming together for a day of fun, sharing and giving.

2. It's a tremendous outreach. Besides everyone that's here today, we are also reaching out to two hundred thousand other primary school students through collaterals, which I think is another very good outreach effort. When I was coming in, I met some pre-school students. I think we are including pre-school students for the first time, so the range of students getting involved is getting wider and wider.

3. This event illustrates two things, and I just want to talk about them briefly today. Number one is inclusiveness. This is a general approach in our education system, that there are more and more students with special education needs in our mainstream system. Our teachers are not very used to dealing with students with special education needs, but they are learning, and they are learning very fast. We are supporting them with Allied Educators who are specialised in learning behaviour. And I think we want to beef up our Allied Educators, train them better, give them better career paths, so that our schools can become more

inclusive. And more importantly, our students learn the value of being inclusive. It is very important that we send a signal to all our students, even at a very young age, that all of us may have different abilities, but all of us stand together. And whoever gets bullied because they are different, in whatever way, we must always stand up against it. This is a fundamental value that we must teach all our students.

4. The second value that this event represents is volunteerism. We have been implementing Values-In-Action (VIA) for many years, and Sharity Day has been one important platform for many of our students to be involved in giving. VIA now covers 100% of all our students and we make the activities age-appropriate. Our younger students in primary school do simpler tasks, like helping the school take care of their pets, as some schools have hamsters or rabbits. They can help pick up litter in class; they can write cards to cheer up students or other kids who are sick.

5. In upper primary, they start to do things like coming to events, becoming ambassadors. They spread the message of kindness, go to hawker centres and encourage patrons to return their trays, which is sometimes quite difficult, but nevertheless our primary school students are trying.

6. When we look at the volunteerism rate in Singapore, it has been going up. I asked for the data from MCCY yesterday and they told me that 2018, over the past 10 years, from 2008 to 2018, the percentage of volunteerism has gone up for those between the ages of 15 and 24. It was 23% in 2008, and now it is 40% – almost double. For those between the ages of 25 and 34, it has gone up from 13% to 27% – more than double. Overall, for all ages, it has gone up from 17% to 29%. So volunteerism has gone up for all ages.

7. I think this has a lot to do with the fact that from young, our kids learn about volunteerism. I have dialogues with students – sometimes in universities and polytechnics – and they always raise with me the issue

of inequality in Singapore. How to make Singapore more equal, and make Singaporeans progress together. When I ask them if they've ever lived in a rental flat, or one room flat, or lived in poverty, they say no. And when I ask how come they feel so strongly for the lower income, they think for a while but couldn't figure it out. I asked if it could be that when they were in school, they were exposed to VIA and the ideas of inclusiveness and volunteerism. They thought about it and agreed that maybe it was.

8. So for all of us involved in education, remember that we have one of the most powerful social tools in our hands. Because whatever we teach our kids today, day in and day out, 25 years later or 30 years later, it's an inexorable shift in society because they will carry these values into their adulthood. And today, we have a very comprehensive curriculum in Character and Citizenship Education (CCE). We are reviewing it, and we need to keep on looking at it, but some of the deep moral values that we must incorporate in our CCE is what I mentioned earlier. Inclusiveness. Always stand up against bullying. And volunteerism. Always believe in giving. So thank you very much again for bringing us all together, and we will continue to work together. Thank you.