

PRESS CLIPPING

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FROM DREAD TO DELIGHT

Autistic student overcomes fears in mainstream school and tops class in geography

LOH CHEE KONG
cheekong@mediacorp.com.sg

WHILE most of his peers were excited about making new friends and exploring the unfamiliar surroundings, Huang Kaisong, who was then in Secondary 1, dreaded attending classes.

"Everyone didn't understand me," recalled Kaisong, who has autism.

But within a year after joining Pathlight School's pilot programme, where selected students with autism are offered a blend of special needs and mainstream education through a collaboration with Chong Boon Secondary School, Kaisong topped his Geography class.

Now 16 and in Secondary 4, he can't wait to go to school each day. "I get to mingle with the mainstream students. I also get to talk to them about computer games," he said.

Inclusive education, while common in

many developed countries, is something new to Singapore.

Pathlight's satellite model, which started in 2005 with just 15 students, was the second special needs school here to house its children in mainstream schools. The other is the Canossian School of the Hearing Impaired.

Student numbers have hit 40 and the success of Pathlight's satellite model has spurred the Ministry of Education recently to announce plans to implement more satellite special education (Sped) classes in mainstream partner schools.

In an interview with Today, Ms Denise Phua, Pathlight School's supervisor and president of the Autism Resource Centre, felt that previous attempts at inclusive education failed because many did not realise that compassion in doing the job alone is never enough.

"If you only have kindness, you are almost always bound to fail. You need competence and organisation. We knew we must not fail. If it fails, the future generations would say, 'we've been there, done it and it didn't work'," she said.

Getting the "underground" project off the ground was not easy, said Ms Phua.

The school, which started in 2004 offering primary school education for students with autism, was barely a year old when Ms Phua and her team explored the idea of inclusive education for the students.

Initially, some of the Chong Boon Secondary students felt uncertain, she said.

"Students with autism, generally, are very poor in their social skills and they would go about doing their own things unless we facilitate their mixing around," said Ms Phua.

The satellite model, she feels, can be duplicated not only in other mainstream schools but also across all disabilities.

Ms Phua, an MP for Jalan Besar GRC, said: "The real world is not made up of a group of top citizens living and working together. You can't expect people to

suddenly accept and value one another's differences when all along you've not grown up together."

In spite of the Government's recent strides towards inclusive education, it has not budged on its position that Sped schools remain under the charge of voluntary welfare organisations.

But Ms Phua said: "Every child should have access to all the good things that the Ministry of Education have been initiating (in mainstream education). Someone must take ownership of the overall governance."

Pathlight has a total of 380 students, and it will move to bigger premises near Townsville Primary School by 2009.

Despite her efforts, Ms Phua dismisses the idea of labelling her as a "champion" for the cause: "If there's only one or two champions, it's going to fail. It will take hard work on all parties, not just the Government. We all need to want to raise the bar. We will demand and ask for it, but we also need to dirty our hands to get something going."



LEARNING MODEL: Ms Denise Phua (right) watches as the Pathlight students (in blue T-shirts) interact with their mainstream peers from Chong Boon Secondary.