

Special schools renamed to avoid stigma

Move to stop pigeon-holing kids with disabilities lauded

■ BY THERESA TAN

IN APRIL, officials from the Singapore Autism School sat down and discussed renaming the institution, whose doors had opened three years earlier.

They were worried the name of the school, located in Jurong, was drawing needless attention to the condition of its 70 students, among other things.

From those talks, a new moniker emerged in July: Eden School. "The name change reflects a respect for students to be identified as human beings in their own right, without specifying their disability," said principal Jenny Lai.

It is a philosophy that has been sweeping the special education landscape here. In the past few years, most of the 21 schools for disabled children have dropped words such as "special" from their names or unveiled new appellations.

Some of these changes came after lobbying from parents, who did not want their children to be pigeon-holed, said the vice-president of the Association for Persons with Special Needs, Dr Francis Chen.

"Some parents don't want others to know their children attend a special education school," he said.

Like others in the field, the Rainbow Centre's two schools for disabled children also changed their names recently, dropping the word "special" and adding "Rainbow Centre".

The schools - in Margaret Drive in Queenstown, and in Yishun - have programmes for children with conditions such as autism and multiple disabilities.

"Some parents don't want their children to feel stigmatised by the school's name," said executive director June Tham.

The Singapore School for the Visually Handicapped changed its name in August to the Lighthouse School to reflect its growing student base.

The 52-year-old institution has started taking in deaf and autistic pupils, said principal Koh Poh Kwang. "We changed our name so that it does not put off children suffering from other disabilities."

Lighthouse student Sakinah Zainal, 12, is all for her school's new name.

"I don't like people to know I'm visually handicapped. I'm scared they will laugh at me," she said.

Others are indifferent to the new names. Housewife Brenda Lim, whose daughter attends Lighthouse School, said: "It's just a name. I don't think a change in name makes much of a difference."

One of the few schools that are sticking to their original names is the Singapore School for the Deaf.

Deaf is an appropriate term to address people with hearing loss, said the Singapore Association for the Deaf, which runs the school.

However, the association changed the name of the Vocational School for the Handicapped to Mountbatten Vocational School two years ago.

The word "handicapped" has a negative connotation, its spokesman said.

"We don't want to constantly remind our students that they are handicapped, that's why we changed the name."

theresat@sph.com.sg



Visually impaired children share lessons with deaf students at Lighthouse School, formerly the Singapore School for the Visually Handicapped. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Deaf kids at school for blind

HE SI XING, 14, can see but he attends a school for the blind.

He is one of the 14 deaf students at Lighthouse School, formerly known as the Singapore School for the Visually Handicapped.

Due to the falling enrolment of blind students, the Toa Payoh school started taking in deaf students last year, and autistic children before that.

Set up in 1956 as the Singapore School for the Blind, it had some 100 blind students in the 1960s and 1970s.

Its student population started falling in the 1980s as medical advances, among other reasons, led to fewer children losing their sight, said principal Koh Poh Kwang.

At that time, the school changed its name to the Singapore School for the Visually Handicapped.

That was because fewer children were totally blind, said Mr Koh. Many were visually impaired,

meaning they could not see well.

Today, the school has 22 visually handicapped students and 18 children who suffer from multiple disabilities.

Students are placed in classes according to their disabilities.

They follow either the Education Ministry's syllabus or a special programme that focuses mainly on teaching them how to live independently.

In a Primary Six class, however, two visually handicapped pupils study alongside two autistic classmates.

Si Xing is unable to speak but he reaches out to his fellow students in his own way.

For example, he helps a blind student find her way around the school.

He also communicates with an autistic student through writing.

"I enjoy going to school and I like the kids here," he said in sign language through his teacher.