

\$33m school for autistic kids will offer 600 places

Better-equipped building will provide art, IT and vocational training

By SUMATHI V. SELVARETNAM

A SCHOOL started specially for children with autism will be able to reach out to 600 young people aged between two and 18 when its new, better-equipped campus opens next March.

Pathlight School's \$33 million home in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10 will provide primary and secondary education, run vocational training, go big on IT education and also have an early intervention centre to identify autism among pre-schoolers.

The school has been in need of bigger premises for its growing enrolment, having gone from 41 students when it was set up four years ago to the current 415.

"We are bursting at the seams," said Ms Denise Phua, the supervisor of the school's board.



SPECIAL TALENT: Pathlight's performance group members dazzled the audience with their fancy footwork at the cheque presentation ceremony yesterday.

ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Yesterday, the Ngee Ann Kongsi, a Teochew philanthropic group, put \$2 million into the school's building fund in a ceremony attended by Senior Minister of State for Ed-

ucation Grace Fu. The Ministry of Education put up \$26 million, and Pathlight raised the rest.

The school's three-storey vocational training centre will

offer training for jobs in art and design and food and beverage as well as in life skills, among others.

The school's IT curriculum will be taught in at least four

computer labs, up from the two at its current campus in Ang Mo Kio Street 44.

The expanded IT facilities also mean that the school will be able to open its IT classes to autistic students from mainstream schools.

Ms Phua, who also heads the Autism Resource Centre (ARC), the charity running Pathlight, said those with autism are weaker in social skills and tend to be more interested in computers than people.

IT has therefore been identified as a focus that will give them a better shot at eventual careers, added the Jalan Besar GRC Member of Parliament.

Ms Phua said the ARC is drawing up an early intervention programme which can be adopted by centres here to define minimum standards for assessment, teaching and management of autism. The programme will be accredited by the National Autistic Society in the United Kingdom.

Noting that early intervention can make a big difference in the development of children with autism, she welcomed opportunities to work with the Health Ministry in the screening, identification and placement of special-needs children.

One in 10 among those with autism tends to have special talents, compared to just one in 100 among the general population, she said, so they could be contributing citizens.

She said: "I want many of them to be able to pay income tax instead of receiving social welfare."

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