

## NATIONAL DAY RALLY 2011

# More help for families with special needs children

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SINGAPORE — Families with special needs children will receive a leg-up in the form of increased financial assistance, and capacity in both special education (SPED) and mainstream schools will be increased, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the National Day Rally yesterday.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) will consult the community to “work the best approach”, said Mr Lee, who highlighted the need for attention to such families as he spoke about widening social safety nets.

Details on the increased financial assistance are expected to be released at a later date.

While SPED schools such as Pathlight and Lighthouse are doing “good work”, Mr Lee noted that there were long queues for places in some SPED schools, hence the need to raise capacity, as well as quality in SPED schools.

The announcement “heartened” Member of Parliament for Moulmein-Kallang GRC Denise Phua: “People with special needs, able and not able, rich or poor, deserve access to good education, jobs and social space.”

A few parents whom TODAY spoke to were disappointed about the lack of concrete action revealed at the Rally, such as popular blogger Mr Lee Kin Mun, better known as Mr Brown, 42, whose 10-year-old daughter is autistic.

Ms Choo Kah Ying, 39, who has a

Currently, financial assistance is provided via subsidised fees through special schools or the schools’ parent charities. Hence, it is heartening that the Government is giving more. These students are the sons and daughters of Singapore, like all mainstream students. I am very glad to have the Government work with special needs schools on challenges such as the bottleneck of trained and skilled special needs professionals and the need for consistency in the quality of curriculum and pedagogy of teaching.

**Member of Parliament Denise Phua, who is also Pathlight School board supervisor**

15-year-old son, pointed out that special needs education and therapy are “heavily subsidised or free in many First World countries”. She added special education would be best served if it were under the MOE and not the MCYS, like in other countries.



In the kitchen at the Joan Bowen cafe, which aims to equip youth with special needs with a range of culinary skills. PHOTO COURTESY MICA

Mr Lee noted that beyond Government initiatives, the community has a part to play.

He highlighted the Joan Bowen Cafe, which was opened by a couple with a special needs child, as an example of a laudable effort to integrate those with special needs into the community.

The couple opened the cafe to help youth with special needs and also for their daughter, Ms Joan Bo Wen, who needed a safe work environment. “They learn food preparation through a manual with pictures and detailed instructions. Through patient guidance, they gradually gained confidence to serve customers,” he said, noting the cafe has done so well that it has opened a second outlet.