

BY LEOW SI WAN

More school places for kids with special needs

SPECIAL education in Singapore is getting a boost, with more places for children with autism and intellectual disabilities, and a review to look into support needed for the schools.

Pathlight School for children with autism will gradually add 300 more places from next year, boosting its capacity to 600 by the end of 2013. These children will go to school in the former Chong Boon Primary School premises, located near Pathlight in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10. The former primary school will be refurbished.

Also in the pipeline: the expansion of Metta School, a vocational school in Simei for children with intellectual disabilities and autism. Some 150 more places will be available there from 2013.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Ms Sim Ann, will also lead a Ministry of Education (MOE) review to look into support for special education here.

These announcements were made by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat after he toured the Pathlight School premises yesterday.

Describing special education needs as "very complex and diverse", he said there is a need to study the sector "very thoroughly".

Whether other special schools would also be expanded rests very much on the outcome of the review led by Ms Sim, he added.

The review is expected to be completed in six to nine months' time.

Ms Sim, who was on the visit to Pathlight yesterday, had started visiting special education schools in June.

She said that "by and large, capacity for most types of disabilities" is sufficient, but there are waiting lists for specific groups of students.



Mr Heng and Ms Sim sitting in on a maths class while on a tour of Pathlight School yesterday. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

One such group is children that Pathlight serves: They have autism but are able to handle the demands of mainstream education.

"So, for instance, in the case of Pathlight, this would be for students with autism but who are able to access the mainstream curriculum... yes, there is a waiting list and that is why the expansion plan is being implemented in order to address that," Ms Sim said.

Another area that MOE hopes to strengthen is vocational training for children with special needs, she added.

From her visits to schools so far, Ms Sim said she has noted several areas of concern among educators.

They told her that the special education community wants society to accept students with special needs, that families with such children need financial and emotional support, and that there is a need to retain special education teachers, as well as give them opportunities for professional development.

She added: "The other important concern really is our ability to specify very clear outcomes for these children who all have different types

of needs."

This will help ensure that their time spent in school is worthwhile and that resources are put to good use, she said.

Ms Denise Phua, the supervisor of Pathlight, applauded the decision to increase places at the school.

She said: "We have more than 200 applications each year. The support of MOE in supporting the additional places and capacity is very needed and very appreciated."

Taking into account that mainstream schools are also boosting their support for children with mild special needs, she said she believes the special education landscape "will be much eased in the next few years".