

NEW STRAITS TIMES

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

17 May 2012

EDUCATION: Teachers are heroes, not HMs

By Helen Chew, Kuala Lumpur

I AM writing in response to Liong Kam Chong's letter (NST, May 4) about the importance of selecting good principals. While I agree that "good and efficient headmasters are a rare breed", I feel that the writer has exaggerated the role of principals.

Liong said: "You can have a good headmaster in a bad school, but you cannot have a bad headmaster in a good school."

I beg to differ. Having taught more than 25 years in schools, including two premier schools in Kuala Lumpur, I have often wondered why we need to have principals.

Perhaps I have had the misfortune of having to work with principals whose mission is to make life difficult for teachers.

For example, having lengthy staff meetings, allocating meaningless duties for teachers during weekends and school holidays and implementing grandiose projects for self-glorification.

At the end of the day, what really matters is what happens in the classroom, where learning is supposed to take place.

Every time a teacher is absent from school, there is no teaching and learning. Yet, a principal can be absent for months and lessons will go on.

In one school where I had taught, the principal was sick. Finally, after he had a bypass operation, he went on three months' leave. Did the school collapse?

On the contrary, life went on as usual and the examination results reflected the good work put in by the students, teachers and, of course, parents. In recent years, absentee principals have become common. They have to attend meetings and seminars organised by the Education Department.

Hence, they are seldom in school. Some of them are also busy lobbying at the department for promotions. Can the school function without absentee principals? Yes.

The key to having excellent schools is to have responsible teachers who go to classes punctually and carry on teaching, not those who believe that when the cat is away, the mice will play.

Conscientious and responsible teachers go about their work according to their timetables. We do not need principals to monitor our movements, or worse, give unnecessary advice. Self-empowerment is the key to boosting teachers' confidence and helps them take pride in the profession.

To conclude, the careful selection of teachers is long overdue. Without great teachers, no school can ever excel. We need teachers who not only can impart knowledge effectively, but also impart the joy of learning, and not just learning for the sake of passing examinations.

We need teachers with moral courage so that they can voice their opinions against administrative policies that are not in the students' interests.

The list can go on but suffice to say that excellent teachers are not always rewarded or acknowledged.