

# A S\$10-million boost for Singapore's pre-school sector

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SINGAPORE — The pre-school sector is getting a S\$10-million boost as the Government seeks to attract new pre-school teachers and raise the level of professional development among current teachers.

The amount, to be spent over the next two years, will go to about 600 scholarships and teaching awards, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing announced yesterday.

As Singapore expands the number of childcare centres, in line with the 2008 five-year masterplan for 200 new centres, Singapore has to prepare to increase the number of trained teachers, said Mr Chan.

"This is so that new centres that are built will have the quality that we want them to have, while maintaining the affordability that we also desire," he said.

Efforts over the past two years have borne fruit, with 3,500 new teachers joining the sector last year, increasing total manpower by 25 per cent. Attrition dropped from 15 per cent to 13 per cent, even as the labour market tightened.

In this round of initiatives, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) will introduce new scholarships for students to pursue a full-time diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (Teaching). There will be 80 new scholarships per year for full-time diploma courses at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Temasek Polytechnic.

The MCYS will also introduce 15 scholarships per year for the Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education course, offered by the Singapore Institute of Technology together with Wheelock College.

To encourage existing teachers to embark on specialist courses in childhood

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pedagogy, a new category of teaching awards for 15 recipients will be introduced.

Existing part-time diploma scholarships, which will now be open to teachers who have not yet taught for a year, will also be extended to include the part-time diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (Leadership) course.

Childcare centre operators and teachers welcomed the new initiatives, saying it

would significantly help to retain teachers and draw new ones.

It will also alleviate the financial burden on smaller childcare centres, which spend substantial amounts training their teachers, said operators.

But with some centres saying they may increase salaries as their teachers become better qualified, could this lead to parents paying higher fees?

Mrs Ng Gim Choo, managing director of EtonHouse, said she would consider increasing pay by between S\$200 and S\$500. But as a private operator, fees are usually increased yearly, as a result of other factors such as increasing rentals, and not a direct result of increased manpower costs, she said.

Mrs Shirley Lim of Metropolitan YMCA Singapore said fees may be increased if childcare centres decide to go for degree-qualified teachers, instead of just hiring diploma-qualified teachers.