

A welcome boost for the pre-school sector

THE Singapore government's commitment to more than double its spending on the pre-school sector to over \$3 billion over the next five years will provide a huge boost for this long-neglected industry. It is also a major step towards fostering equality of opportunity – the best antidote to inequality, which the government has vowed to tackle.

The move, announced by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in his annual Budget speech on Monday, will see more anchor operators entering the market, providing an extra 16,000 spaces by 2017. The Ministry of Education (MOE) is also taking a keener interest in the pre-school sector, with plans under way to set up several kindergartens while a new Early Childhood Development Agency – overseen by both the MOE and the Ministry of Social and Family Development – will be established to drive improvements across the sector.

The government's announcements come after the re-

lease of a number of recent studies – including one commissioned by the Lien Foundation that ranked Singapore 29th out of 45 countries in early childhood education standards.

The huge investment being poured into the pre-school sector should help reassure parents that quality and affordability – two of their chief concerns when deciding where to send their children – will be closely monitored. The government should ensure that all pre-school operators, and not just the anchor players, stand to benefit from the new schemes, so that there is a level playing field for all and parents have a wide range of choices.

All these initiatives, however, would be meaningless unless pre-schools are able to consistently attract good teachers. As Mr Tharman himself noted, “good teachers are the key to a quality pre-school sector”. The upcoming increase in salary grants to the anchor operators –

currently NTUC First Campus and PAP Community Foundation – will result in all their teachers being either graduates or diploma holders, up from 80 per cent today. There will also be greater support in curriculum and teaching guides for pre-school providers, while teachers can look forward to scholarships and training grants to upgrade themselves.

Beyond these incentives, there must also be a concerted effort by all parties to promote early childhood education as a career of choice. Operators will only find it viable to establish pre-schools once they are assured of being able to recruit enough willing and qualified staff.

The announcements in this year's Budget are a significant signal from the top that there will be adequate support available to those who need it. Now the ball is firmly in the hands of the industry to seize the opportunities and hopefully raise Singapore's pre-school standards to more respectable levels.

EDITORIAL