

Lien Foundation and NTUC First Campus partner to drive quality, innovation and professionalism of preschool sector

\$6 million social sector partnership first of its kind in Singapore

10 September 2013

1. **Lien Foundation** and **NTUC First Campus** jointly announced today their partnership aimed at boosting Singapore's preschool sector. This unique collaboration between a philanthropic house and social enterprise aims to move Singapore's early childhood education sector towards even higher heights.
2. Both organisations strongly believe that high quality early childhood education is an important social leveler. It enables children from all backgrounds to have a good start in life. Studies show that investment in good quality preschool services yield high economic and social returns for a society. The Lien Foundation has committed \$5m to the partnership.
3. The investment by Lien Foundation and NTUC First Campus shows that there are deep capabilities in the social sector that can help raise the capabilities of the preschool sector. These initiatives complement the significant efforts put in by the Government for the preschool sector.
4. "We have a shared purpose and common values in our quest to level up preschool education in Singapore and to engender a preschool system for the future," said Mr Lee Poh Wah, CEO, Lien Foundation "This initiative is a bold response in support of the ongoing reforms taking place in the preschool sector. We wish to spur the development of more well designed preschools that not only optimize resources, they also become inspiring places of learning for children, teachers and parents. Most of all, we seek to address some of the systemic issues such as the urgent need for better trained & more experienced teachers."
5. The partnership will:
 - a. Influence design and delivery of programmes of future preschools through the development of a model childcare centre for the heartlands - My First Skool @ Braddell Heights Community Hub
 - b. Make learning by trainee-teachers more robust through the set-up of a second Caterpillar's Cove child development and study centre
 - c. Improve practice through research by conducting three major Singapore-focused research studies

- d. Boost the professional image and status of preschool teachers and parental literacy on early childhood education through a public awareness campaign
6. “This partnership brings together two organisations with a strong pioneering spirit, and a common passion in the early childhood field. The Lien Foundation has been a strong advocate for the early childhood sector, seeding new capabilities through the partners that it works with. Last year, it commissioned a report called ‘Starting Well’ that stirred a strong public debate on the state of early childhood education in Singapore, and how it compares with the best in the world,” said Mr Chan Tee Seng, Chief Executive Officer of NTUC First Campus. “NTUC First Campus, too, has also played a pioneering role in the preschool sector over its 35-year history, in the area of curriculum development, teacher training, and setting up of childcare centres within HDB estates. We are not satisfied with the status quo and will push the boundaries to bring the practice of early childhood education to greater heights, to benefit children and families in Singapore. The overall thrust of the four projects is to help raise quality, innovation and professionalism in the preschool sector.”

Next-Generation Preschool

7. Most Singapore preschools cater for less than 100 children and are located in premises designed for other purposes, and not early childhood education. My First Skool @ Braddell Heights Community Hub will be a forerunner of the coming generation of preschools designed to serve its key stakeholders – children, teachers and parents. Its unconventional size for more than 200 children and innovative design are aimed at heightening children’s learning, improving engagement with parents and enhancing the wellbeing of teachers.
8. This model centre for the heartlands is built upon knowledge and experience gained by the project team from designing and operating centres over the years, their engagement with teachers and parents, as well as some lessons learnt from studying overseas childcare centres. For instance, there are dedicated areas for children and adults as well as flexible spaces for children that serve different functions according to each age cohort and social group.
9. The conducive environment for teachers, children and parents also enriches the tripartite relationship that is critical to the children’s growth and development. Teachers can focus on facilitating children’s thinking, language development and social competencies, at the same time, interacting, building relations and nurturing their holistic development. Besides a purpose-built environment, the new preschool will employ more experienced teachers to ensure a high quality programme.
10. My First Skool @ Braddell Heights Community Hub incorporates four key innovative elements.
 - a. **Flexible learning and community space**
The courtyard play space is a seamless extension of the classrooms and is a flexible and safe play space where specially planned learning such as art and

movement activities can be conducted. The courtyard also serves as a community space where teachers, children and parents interact. Graduation concerts and parent seminars can also be held in the courtyard.

b. Exploration studios for specialised play

Three studios are designed to facilitate specialised play, creative play and music making for children. Children work with the sensory rich materials individually and with other children - playing together, negotiating ideas and sharing materials.

c. Use of technology to enhance children's learning and centre operations

Technology experiences are designed to create a project-based learning environment that helps children gain competence and experience using technology and develop critical thinking. Use of technology improves operations efficiency.

d. Teacher and parent spaces

The centre includes a teachers' resource room to address teachers' need for a discussion and planning space and a parents' corner where parents can engage teachers and access relevant resources and information.

11. This model heartland childcare centre is expected to redefine some parameters for the setup of a childcare centre and lead to an evolution of a quality childcare facility. It will be a model for which other My First Skool centres can adopt designs, curriculum and practices that are appropriate in their own context. The centre is expected to be opened in December this year and will take in 200 children aged two months to six years and 16 infants.

Boost Teaching with Second Child Development and Study Centre

12. The Lien Foundation and SEED Institute will set up a second The Caterpillar's Cove at the Devan Nair Institute in the first quarter of 2014. This child development and study centre in Jurong will provide high quality teaching through an innovative curriculum and programme, and employ teachers who have at least a degree in early childhood.

13. Located next to SEED Institute, The Caterpillar's Cove @ Devan Nair Institute will act as a living classroom and teaching school for trainee-teachers to observe and be attached to the centre for practicum and research. This will boost their learning experience at SEED Institute and allow them to join the sector more practice-oriented and work-ready.

14. Like the first The Caterpillar's Cove in Ngee Ann Polytechnic that started in 2007, this second centre will allow early childhood education professionals conduct research on curriculum and emulate best practices in an authentic childcare centre setting. The high level of innovation in the centre could influence future benchmarks and spur quality improvement in early childhood education, benefiting children and budding teachers. In

addition, the new centre will offer infant care services to address the lack of research in Singapore for this age group.

15. The Caterpillar's Cove @ Devan Nair Institute will cater for 130 children, including 12 places for infants. 10% of places will be for children from less privileged families for the next five years. Financial grants, funded by The Lien Foundation, have been set aside to support these families.

Improving Practice through Research

16. The partnership will focus on three much-needed areas of research to provide better insights on how early childhood education in Singapore can be improved. The research aims to increase the community's understanding of child development including the crucial role of early experience, early childhood curriculum, cognitive and social development and parent engagement. Its outcomes will provide evidence on the need for continued advocacy for the provision of quality early childhood services.

17. Led by its head, Emeritus Professor Marjory Ebbeck and a team of six researchers, SEED Institute's Centre for Research and Best Practices will examine:

- a. Early Intervention and Help for Disadvantaged Children

This study is designed to provide insights and measure learning outcomes in children from low-income families. A specially designed intervention programme will be implemented and assessed to see if it has increased children's cognitive functioning and self-regulation capacities.

- b. Impact of Parent Engagement

A study to investigate in what ways ready access to parent resources and information increase parenting skills which will help children cope with a range of transitions. This study will also investigate if providing opportunities for parents to have ownership of their ideas creates closer partnerships with early childhood centres.

- c. How Birth to Three Years Matters

An evaluation of a relationships-based curriculum for infants, toddlers and children up to age three years, with a focus on their wellbeing and learning outcomes.

18. The research will take place from end-2013 to 2014. The findings are expected to throw light on these information-scarce areas, benefitting parents, teachers, policy makers and lecturers in early childhood education.

Raising Public Awareness

19. A national campaign will be launched to lift the status and image of Singapore’s preschool teachers. Besides boosting public recognition of the critical role that preschool teachers play in the society, the campaign will also become a business innovation platform for Singapore-based MNCs to get involved in the early childhood sector on a long-term and commercially sustainable basis. Several companies have responded with initial interest and more details will be announced at a later stage.

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About the Lien Foundation

www.lienfoundation.org

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to foster exemplary early childhood education, excellence in eldercare and effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

In the area of early childhood education, the Foundation aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called “Starting Well” that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education. To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, “Vital Voices for Vital Years” that examined leaders’ views on improving Singapore’s preschool sector.

The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation’s efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation has championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success has inspired a scaled-up national version in Singapore.

About NTUC First Campus

www.ntucfirstcampus.com

NTUC First Campus (NFC) is a leading player in the early childhood sector here in Singapore. With little money or expertise, the NTUC took on the running of ten crèches from the Government 35 years ago, and has never looked back. In its 35 years history, it pioneered the professionalisation of the sector through the setting up the RTRC (now Seed Institute), and Singapore’s first child study centre, The Caterpillar’s Cove. NFC was amongst the first to embrace play-based approach. Today, it has a tested and proven bilingual curriculum across its network of 120 childcare centres.