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BUILDING OUR YOUTH FOR THE FUTURE

Speech by Mr Lawrence Wong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth & Chairman for the National Youth Council, at the Singapore Youth Conference

Distinguished guests,
Youth and youth sector leaders,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1. A very good afternoon to all of you. It's good to see everyone joining us for this Singapore Youth Conference. This is the first time we are bringing together so many of our partners to discuss matters that are important to you. We are very excited about what lies ahead for the youth sector, and would like to share with you our plans. I'll give you a further update and as we share with you our plans, we would also like to hear from you, so that we can take your views and perspectives into account when we shape our plans going forward.

Vibrant youth sector

2. Singapore's youth sector has come a long way over the past decade.
3. In the past, there were very few dedicated youth programmes or youth organisations. I set up a youth mentoring organisation more than ten years ago, called PromiseWorks. We were one of the very few youth social enterprises then, and in fact we've got an award for it from the CDC. We might not get an award today, however, as there are many such organisations. But that was the landscape then, more than 10 years ago, and now the landscape is quite different.
4. Over the years, NYC made a deliberate effort to nurture and grow the youth eco-system. So we now have over 200 youth organisations, that are active and reaching out to youths from diverse backgrounds. They cover a wide range of groups, from uniform groups to community groups, both big and small. There is a rich and diverse menu of programmes that our youths can participate in.

5. There are so many active organisations and programmes, our youths are also more involved in social groups and leadership roles. We just completed the National Youth Survey – something that we do on a regular basis – and the results show that about two-thirds of youths are involved in social groups: be it in the arts, sports, community, welfare groups and so on. This is an increase from 44% a decade ago. So a decade ago, 44% of youth we surveyed were involved in social and community leadership, and today that figure has increased to two-thirds, 66%. This is a positive trend.

6. The survey also showed that youths who are more frequently involved in social groups, especially community or interest groups, also tend to be more satisfied with life. If you are looking for the secret to a happier life, be involved in the community.

7. Take the example of Pin Qi, a graduate from Temasek Junior College, now 24. She participated in the Youth Expedition Project (YEP) to central Cambodia when she was a student in Temasek JC and since then she has continued to lead YEP teams from her JC alumni.

8. These YEP teams built a library and sanitation facilities in a village in Cambodia, and also taught English to the children there. The team members saw the positive impact they could have on the children. All this inspired them to get more involved in community work. The YEP for them was truly a transformational experience, and they have found tremendous fulfilment by touching the lives of others in a meaningful way.

9. This is the positive side of what we are doing and we are very happy with the results. Unfortunately not everything is positive. When the team came back to Singapore they faced great difficulties finding a VWO that would match their interests. They could not find opportunities or platforms to continue volunteering. Some of the team members also hesitated to step up and lead subsequent YEP teams, as they felt their leadership training was not enough to prepare them adequately.

10. Despite being fired up by their YEP experience, not everyone carried on volunteering when they returned. As one of the members put it, and I quote, “it’s a pity the passion is allowed to die down after the programme finishes.” And indeed it is a pity.

11. The story is not a unique one, and I’ve heard many other similar anecdotes. It shows that while our youths have many opportunities to be involved in community projects, there is still a lot of scope for improvement in the ways we go about our youth development and engagement efforts.

A national body for holistic youth development

12. I'm sure many of us who are involved in youth work are aware of these issues. We have today many youth programmes and different organisations offering many different initiatives. But it's useful to take a step back and look at the bigger picture – to see how our various efforts can be better coordinated, to complement one another more effectively and to achieve better impact nationwide. More importantly, how we can serve our youths in a more effective way.

13. This is why, after some reflection and deliberation internally, I have decided that we should restructure and strengthen the National Youth Council (NYC), to ensure better coherence and coordination in our youth development efforts.

14. Since its founding in 1989, NYC has been a division under the People's Association (PA). In fact, I'm not sure how many of you know this, but this year is NYC's 25th anniversary. It's well into its adult age, and much like a young adult, it is time for NYC to take on larger responsibilities, and play a bigger role.

15. We will cut the apron strings, and take NYC out of PA and set it up as an Autonomous Agency. We will also take Outward Bound Singapore (OBS) from PA, to be part this revamped NYC.

16. In short, NYC will be a standalone autonomous outfit, overseeing important youth programmes, like the Youth Corps as well as the key programmes in OBS. And I believe this move will put NYC in a much better position to be a national youth champion and also a leading voice for youth affairs in Singapore.

17. But NYC cannot and should not do everything alone. It will serve as a bridge to work with government agencies, community partners and youth sector organisations, both large and small, established and new, to drive holistic youth development. We want to work in partnership with all of you. As much as NYC will be bigger and strengthened, NYC cannot do everything on its own. It needs to coordinate better and link up with all the different organisations more effectively, and it needs to work in partnership with all of you.

18. Let me share a little more about the plans which this new agency will drive.

Supporting youth aspirations

19. First, NYC will do more to support youth aspirations in diverse fields.

20. I know young Singaporeans are naturally concerned about doing well in school and at work. But there are also many who value achievements beyond the academic and financial, and who want to maximise their potential in areas like the arts, sports, community work and entrepreneurship.

21. Just last weekend, I attended the Super24 dance competition which was held here. It's a unique dance showcase, developed by a Singaporean dance group "O School". And I see Kenny, the founder, sitting in the audience here. Super24 involves 24 people dancing within a very tight 8m by 8m space. They perform for 90 seconds, and are judged all around, from all the different sides. It requires not just individual dance skills, but also a lot of teamwork and group coordination. In a way, it's a metaphor for what we have in Singapore. The space is very tight and there are a lot of people in this compact space, we not only have to do well individually, but also work together and if we do so we can produce magic. Super24 is a very good metaphor for what we represent in Singapore.

22. I was very happy to see broad-based participation from many schools and tertiary institutions in the event. To me, what was even more heartening was that there were many alumni groups participating. These are not students but young working adults – many were in dance CCAs before, meaning they were active in school, but they continued to be active after joining the workforce, and they still come together to practice and fine-tune their craft. You can tell that they have put in countless hours of practice perfecting their routine. They are not doing it for the big prize money, but because of their love and passion for dancing. It is very heartening to see this passion, and I am sure there are youths that are passionate about other things.

23. We want to encourage and support such youth aspirations – the dare to dream, to do, and to go for your dreams.

24. One key enabler and platform is *SCAPE, our youth hub in Orchard Road. Over the last four years of operations, *SCAPE has established itself as a youth hangout.

25. I believe we can make *SCAPE even better. We are embarking on a review of *SCAPE, to see how we can enhance the space and make it a more effective platform to support youth aspirations. NYC will work closely with the Board and Management of *SCAPE to see how the spaces in SCAPE can be enhanced for this purpose, particularly in specific areas of youth interest, be it dance, music or media. To do so, we will have to go through some consultations, find out from youths how we can be more focused, and look at where these areas are to develop a stronger identity and focus for *SCAPE.

26. Beyond *SCAPE, we will also plan more youth spaces and programmes in other parts of the island. We don't want everything to be in the city centre itself. Singapore is small, but big enough to have many other nodes besides *SCAPE, and we will look into how we can broaden our youth spaces so that we can reach out to more youths nation-wide and have more platforms to support youth aspirations. That's our first priority – looking into how we can support youth aspirations better.

Mentoring our youths

27. Secondly, NYC will do more to provide guidance and mentorship for youths.

28. Teenagers, coping with studies as well as adolescent blues, are in need of role models whom they can look up to, and who are able to give them moral support and encouragement through difficult times. For those of us who are older, those of us that have overcome or gone through our adolescent blues, I'm sure we will all be able to recognise that we are who we are today because of certain mentors in our lives. This could be our family members, teachers, people in religious groups that we went to. Whoever they are, I'm sure all of us, in our younger days, had adults that we looked up to, and that gave us guidance and mentoring.

29. Mentoring is something that we want to focus on, and mentorship is something OBS excels at. OBS has almost 50 years of experience in adventure-based training and youth development, and trains about 20,000 participants every year.

30. I was at Pulau Ubin last week to visit OBS and was very impressed by what I saw. Their training is excellent – not only is it robust and physically challenging, but the instructors also know how to turn the physical challenges into personal and developmental learning points. They use the physical challenges to provide teaching moments for the youths.

31. OBS, as part of the revamped NYC, will be our national youth developer. We will remodel and resource OBS for this role, and we will expand OBS' infrastructure and programmes so that it can reach out to more youths.

32. In fact, we have already started this journey, and OBS has started with a new 5-day programme this year for 4,500 students from different secondary schools.

33. I met the students when I was at OBS and saw them working together doing different things: tackling the rope courses, abseiling, rowing as well as doing canoeing expeditions around Pulau Ubin.

34. The students enjoyed themselves. They all come from different schools and backgrounds, around Secondary Three and Four, but they were clearly bonding and growing together, and importantly, having fun and enjoying themselves. Don't just take my word for it. I'll cite some of the actual feedback we received from the students.

Regine Lu from CHIJ Katong Convent: "I've learnt so much at OBS from different people from different schools and I am inspired to lead others more effectively."

Jowell Fong from Northland Secondary School: "I am now ready to be a better leader with the experience of bonding a team, making friends with strangers and working with someone I don't know."

35. These are just some examples that are a very strong endorsement from students themselves on the quality of our OBS programmes, and we want to do more so that more students can benefit.

36. OBS also has a large alumni base, and these are alumni who are inspired by their experiences at OBS, and who want to give back. We will involve this alumni more actively to give back through community service. They can also be tapped on as mentors to the younger youths, to pay forward the mentorship and guidance that they had once received.

37. Aside from OBS' programmes, mentorship can also take the form of more specific advice for youths, for example, in the area of personal guidance or career counselling. NYC will look into how to provide youths with the appropriate mentors and guidance when they need them. That's our second broad trust, to provide and support youths with more guidance and mentorship.

Supporting youth voices and actions

38. Thirdly and finally, NYC will step up its efforts to support youth voices and actions.

39. As part of this process, NYC will provide more platforms for youths to discuss issues that they care about. We will help our youths understand better the policy choices we have to make as a society, and ensure that youth views and perspectives are taken into account as we continue to evolve our policies.

40. Importantly, we want our youths to also pursue causes which they feel lead to a better Singapore, and to do something to help their fellow citizens lead a better life. We want to encourage not just youth voices but youth action.

41. We want our youths to be part of our democracy of deeds. And this is a major reason we set up the Youth Corps.

42. We are starting our first run of the Youth Corps later this month, and we have close to 100 youths on board. They come from diverse backgrounds, ranging from ITE, Polytechnic and University students to young working adults.

43. In a few weeks time, these youths will come together for a week of training at OBS before they embark on their year-long commitment service, which will be broken up into two semesters, with an overseas and local community project in each semester.

44. We want the youths to continue their service after the Youth Corps, as joining the Youth Corps should be a lifelong journey of service. So we will engage our Youth Corps alumni, to stay active and to continue serving, for example, as mentors or trainers for the subsequent Youth Corps batches. Or if they are inspired to tackle a particular social issue, they can take up a fellowship with the Youth Corps, and collaborate with the relevant government agencies and VWOs to tackle the problems on the ground.

45. We will provide all Youth Corps members with support and resources to embark on meaningful community projects. For the youths who would like to spend time with the Youth Corps on a full-time basis, we will also provide them with support in terms of a stipend. This is something that is starting, with the first batch in June. We will continue to take in Youth Corps members. We have not openly publicised as the pilot batch is also an experience for us to learn and improve on the programme. We have a few community partners onboard, and youth organisations have also nominated members to join this first batch. We will run this batch in June, and another batch in December. Every year we will have two intakes of the Youth Corps and we encourage all our youths – whether from a youth sector organisation or individual youths, to think about serving in the Youth Corps.

46. Indeed, as these youths progress through the Youth Corps, we expect that their impact will increase as they gain in skills and influence. When they enter the workforce, they can lead CSR initiatives in their companies, they can become agents of change in the community. When they see problems in their community, they will have the know-how and more importantly the gumption to rally the community to resolve the issues together. Some might end up serving in our VWOs, either as Board members or as professional staff, and they will help to shape and strengthen our social sector. This is a major initiative for us, and one of the reasons why we are strengthening the National Youth Council so that we can oversee and implement the Youth Corps programme well. It is part of our broader priority to help support youth voices and youth actions within the community.

Building our youth for the future

47. These are some of the plans we have set out for NYC. They are ambitious but achievable.

48. They are achievable not through the Government's or NYC's efforts alone, but only with your support and partnership. I hope you will work with us and walk this journey with us, to build our youth, for the future.

49. As we build our youth, we are also building the future of Singapore. Of course, the future is uncertain and no one can predict what will happen. But one thing we can be sure of is that the character and values of our youth will shape how things unfold.

50. If every youth looks out only for his own interest and champions ideas that only benefit himself/herself or his/her interest group, then we will have no common ground on which to take our nation forward.

51. But if every young person feels the impulse and responsibility to serve; if everyone sees himself as his brother's keeper; if each plays a role to make tomorrow better than today, then we can be assured of a strong foundation for a brighter Singapore.

52. So the work that we do is of vital importance, not just for our youths, but also for our shared future. All of you are here today because you believe in this cause, and because you want to be involved. I hope we will commit to redouble our efforts to do even better; to inspire our youths to do even more in their communities and for Singapore. Your involvement, your commitment and your service is what will make Singapore continue to succeed in the years to come.

About the National Youth Council

At NYC, we believe in a world where young people are respected and heard, and have the ability to influence and make a difference to the world. Together with our partners, we develop a dynamic and engaging environment where young people are inspired to dream and committed to action. We hear youth >>> Here for youth

About the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth seeks to inspire Singaporeans through the arts and sports, strengthen community bonds, and promote volunteerism and philanthropy. Since its inception in November 2012, MCCY has been actively engaging the arts, heritage, sports, community and youth sectors. The Ministry aims to bring into sharper focus the efforts to build a more cohesive and vibrant society, and to deepen a sense of identity and belonging to the nation. MCCY will work with its stakeholders to create an environment where Singaporeans can pursue their aspirations for a better quality of life and together, build a gracious and caring society we are proud to call home.