

**SPEECH BY MINISTER CHAN CHUN SING AT NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EARLY  
CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE 2024  
ON 17 OCTOBER 2024, SANDS EXPO AND CONVENTION CENTRE**

A very good morning to all my guests of honour.

2 Today, we are here to honour you.

3 You are my guests of honour because day in and day out, you take care of our children. Without you, it would be fair to say that quite a big part of the Singapore economy will grind to a halt.

4 On a more serious note, today is perhaps a dream come true for me to stand here in front of you to share the joy of your five-year journey. But I'd also like to make a correction, because while I say it's a five-year journey, it's not actually been five years. I had the distinct honour of being on three sides of the triangle in this journey.

5 We had this dream of having an NIEC, something akin and parallel to our NIE, when I was in MCYS and then MSF. Then, I was on the side of NTUC, taking care of Seed Institute. I always remember that we had many long discussions on how we can one day bring together all the expertise that we have in the early childhood development sector, so that we can move forward together, faster and better.

6 I would like to tell you a little fun fact about the name NIEC. I had always wanted this institute to not be called NIEC, but to be called NICE, because I thought it was such a nice acronym. I remember this discussion with Lai Fung then, and a few others, who told me that it was not a very good name. I said "No, NICE is a nicer acronym, we can call it the National Institute of Childhood Education". The staff came back strongly and said, "No, it's going to be called the National Institute of Early Childhood Development". I said "No, but NIEC is not an English word". But on hindsight, there was a reason why the staff pushed for "NIEC" despite my desire for a nice acronym.

7 There is a difference between the National Institute of Early Childhood Development and the National Institute of Childhood (or Children's Education). Fundamentally, your job is not just about education. Your job is also to help our children find their social emotional balance and to develop them holistically beyond just educating them.

8 In fact, if you do your job well, NIE and MOE schools will be very thankful because you establish the foundations on which the schools build on and for which Lifelong Learning depends on.

9 So this is how critical your job is, and this is why I consider NIEC a better representation now.

10 On this fifth anniversary, I'd like to thank all the pioneers who have made this journey possible. Many of you are around today, you will know the challenges that we had to bring the different institutions together that Teck Yong has mentioned. There were differences in cultures and professional practices, and we had to find ways to bring all this together.

11 Today, we have reached a milestone where we are all together as one big family. Today, I also hope that we will go forward, stronger and faster, in three different aspects. The practice of early childhood professionals cannot stop at where we are today.

12 We know that the challenges are multifaceted and constantly evolving. You look around the world today, parents have higher expectations. We are better able to understand the diversity of needs amongst our children. The professional and pedagogical practices are also constantly evolving. Technology is becoming an increasingly prevalent part in people's lives, including our children. We have to ask ourselves some tough questions: how do we combine the best of technologies without losing the humanistic way that we want to bring up our children?

13 So I have three wishes for NIEC as we go forward in the next lap of your journey. First, I hope that you will continue to deepen your professional knowledge and dive deep into the diversity of practices, because I do not believe that the practices in this community will be homogeneous.

14 In fact, one of the things that we had debated long and hard many years ago was whether we should have a national curriculum for our early childhood development sector. One of the conclusions that we quickly came to was this: the younger our children are, the greater the heterogeneity, the greater the diversity we need in our practices.

15 Amongst our children, there will be those who are neurodiverse, have special needs or are talented and gifted across different domains. We cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach. Our people, our professionals must be equipped with the diversity of skill sets to handle this diversity with ease and manage the diversity of talents that we can work with.

16 So I hope that as we go forward, you will continue to grow your knowledge base, work with partners, not just in Singapore, but also overseas – and embrace the diversity of practices so that we can do justice to the talents that our children have.

17 My second wish is that beyond education, we will focus on the social emotional development of our children. Today, I can confidently make the argument that without strong social emotional development, it will be much harder for us to build the rest of our education journey. Look at the influences that our people are exposed to from all over the world, the kind of value systems that they are exposed to, the kind of perspectives that they are exposed to, the kind of technologies that we use. Look at the social emotional challenges of many of our teenagers and young children have.

18 The social emotional development of our children is the critical and core part of their foundation. I hope that NIEC will also continue to evolve the practices and conduct deep research into how we can strengthen the social emotional foundations of our children. Without them, we cannot have our children growing up well balanced, developing holistically and becoming well rounded individuals. This social emotional foundation must start right at the beginning, in the early years.

19 The third skill set that I think we need to embrace going forward is what I call stakeholders' partnership. Parents today have very diverse and heightened expectations of what the professionals in this sector are required to do. But we must also have clear guidelines, clear practices of what that partnership is. We cannot swing to one or the other extreme whereby everything is outsourced to the early childhood professionals. Neither can we swing to the other extreme where we are just focused on the few hours within the day of children's education.

20 But between the early childhood professionals and the parents, we need to form that strong partnership in order to have the right set of practices, the right role modelling for our young children. This is quite similar to what we are establishing in the schools, as announced in the recent Work Plan Seminar.

21 We need to make sure that we can harness the energies of the parents positively in partnership with us to do the best that we can for our children. But it is not just only about the parents. We all know the saying that it takes a village to bring up a child. We will be humble enough to know that we do not have all the skill sets, competencies, and experiences within ourselves. Indeed, we need to mobilise the energies and capabilities of everyone in the community to come together.

22 Many of you are already doing that. Today, when a child comes to any of our centres, they do not just learn in the centre. They go out to the community because this is part of their development. This is part of their social emotional development and how they interact with everyone.

23 The school, the classroom, cannot be our world. Instead, the world must be our classroom, and this is why we constantly have to reach out. When we reach out, we draw upon the rich experiences and the diverse capabilities of the community to complement us.

24 So, three simple wishes. I hope we will continue to deepen our professional competencies in the diverse areas in order to bring out the diversity of talents for our children. I hope that we will be able to focus on the social emotional development of our children, as the foundation that compliments the education that we are providing. I hope that we will strengthen the partnership between the professionals and the parents so that we can do the best for our children.

25 I congratulate NIEC, because I know you have made great strides. Today, we are launching the Centre of Excellence for Leadership in NIEC, and this is a critical part of our journey because we want NIEC to be that place whereby the best practices can be owned and shared. To do this, we will need to develop our professionals, including the leaders.

26 Leaders are key to the profession. You shine and fight, you take care of your fellow professionals, and that's why we are spending so much energy and attention to develop the leaders. We must grow our own people. We cannot expect leaders to come from elsewhere to lead this sector.

27 In time to come, many of you sitting in the audience today will be the leaders for the sector, to take us to the next level. You will be the leaders who will take care of a new generation of early childhood professionals that will come to join us.

28 Today, we are also pleased to announce that NIEC will be the home for all early childhood educators, and we would like all early childhood educators to regularly come back, interact and progress in their professional development in NIEC.

29 NIEC must be the centre where everyone can come together, share their best practices and support each other even in the most difficult moments.

30 So this is what we'd like to see NIEC going forward. I am quite sure that many of you will also have ideas of your own on how you can take the sector forward. This is where we want NIEC to be the centre, that home, where all of you can feel comfortable and confident contributing your ideas to take all of us forward.

31 I look forward to celebrating many more happy occasions with you. I hope that one day, we will be able to stand tall as one of what I call the four pillars of our education system.

32 I have this dream to have four pillars, the "four-legged stool" if you'd like, in our education system. The first leg is NIE - we started this many years ago. They have that depth

of professional knowledge and they are one of the respected institutions in pedagogical practice scheme.

33 Our second leg is NIEC. We have made great strides and I'm sure in time to come they will be the second leg of that four-legged stool.

34 The third leg we have just started is IAL – the Institute of Adult Learning. The Institute of Adult Learning must get its pedagogy and andragogy right, so that we can continue to invest in our people throughout their life.

35 So NIE, NIEC, IAL, and my fourth legged stool, which we are starting, will be the special needs community. We need that professional body of knowledge. Of course, the special needs community do not work in isolation. They work together with NIEC and NIE. I want to see this four-legged stool being strong partners with each other, holding up the entire lifelong education and training system that we will have in Singapore from the early years all the way to the senior years of our country. Without this four-legged stool, we will be unbalanced as a nation. That's an issue.

36 I thank you for this journey. Without your efforts and contributions, it will be hard for us to imagine a better future for Singapore and Singaporeans.

37 Thank you very much.