Complete Review of Education System Is The Way Forward

KUALA LUMPUR, May 13 (Bernama) -- The debate on teaching and learning Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) has been dominated by the views of parents who believe there is an advantage to learning in English and national language loyalists who hope to retain the Malay language's supremacy.

Both sides have put forth interesting and, sometimes, ridiculous arguments for their stand. However, it seems that nationalistic fervor and political considerations have won the battle for now.

So both subjects will revert to being taught in Bahasa Malaysia from 2012.

PPSMI is another example of how changes to the education system are frequently being made to meet new aspirations. These changes however, have been more piecemeal than holistic.

In retrospect, a holistic review of the education system is long overdue, especially since the last one, called the Rahman Talib Report, took place about 51 years ago. Before that, the education sector had been reviewed by the Razak Report of 1956.

Since the last report, the objective and role of education has changed in terms of the emphasis on the country's transformation from an agriculture-based economy to an industry-based one.

Nonetheless, given Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's ambitious plans to transform Malaysia into a fully developed and high-income nation that is globally competitive, a total revamp of Malaysia's education system is definitely the need of the hour.

HAVE WE MISSED THE TREES FOR THE WOODS

According to industry experts, such as Tan Sri Mustafa Mansur, president of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM), a good education system is exactly what is required for Malaysia's transformation into a fully developed and globally competitive state.

However, given the current state of affairs, where employers find it hard to recruit the right people and the lack of integrity and patriotism in society, the transformation goal could pose quite a tough challenge.

For the ex-teacher-turned-industrialist, these problems reflect the shortfalls in the current education system and provide good reasons for its comprehensive review.

"In a nutshell, the education system needs to undergo a thorough review, similar to what was done for the Razak and Rahman Talib Report, in line with the new goals and needs.

"People in the industrial sector are very concerned with the state of the education system, since we are one of the principal end users of the system's products," Mustafa told Bernama.

He suggested that a review committee should be set up with representation from a cross-section of society, including NGOs, economists, historians and even ordinary citizens.

The committee should look into all matters, including enhancing knowledge and improving the standards of English in schools.

"It will be fitting if the committee is chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak given that his father was the architect of the Razak Report," he noted.
ENGLISH VS BAHASA MALAYSIA

While PPSMI could help students stay ahead in science and mathematics, and to some extent, English, Mustafa said he believed the national language still had an important role to play in nation building, unifying a pluralist society and instilling patriotism among citizens.

"We need to emphasize English and we need to strengthen the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia, which is the language of unity.

"Looking at the present scenario in which unity is lacking and some people criticise their country with impunity in cyberspace, it is imperative that we enhance unity and patriotism through the national language, especially among the younger generation.

"Having said that, this does not mean we can choose to ignore English, which is now accepted as the international language and the language of knowledge.

"Our rural inhabitants are already handicapped by their inability to understand English. They are, therefore, deprived of an important tool to succeed in a highly competitive environment. They do not have alternatives like their more fortunate counterparts in urban areas," he pointed out.

A GLORIOUS PAST WITH ENGLISH

Mustafa also recalled that in the past, Malaysians were the first choice to head committees at international meetings because of their proficiency in English.

He lamented that this was not the case anymore.

"Now, we are handicapped when it comes to arguing our case and writing lucid reports in English, so we lose out in bilateral and multi-lateral negotiations," he added.

The public service sector will also be one of the main beneficiaries of English-speaking citizens.

Furthermore, Malaysia aims to transform into a high-income nation and attract high-value investment in sectors, such as banking and finance, industries and services, which are global and typically require good English speaking, reading and writing skills.

Nonetheless, for employers, the inability to speak or write in English is only one of the problems plaguing the education system.

SHORTFALL IN SKILLS TRAINING

Mustafa also called for greater emphasis on vocational and technical education, which has experienced declining student numbers since 2006.

In 2005, there were 72,500 students undertaking technical and vocational training, but their numbers have been declining progressively since 2006. By 2009, the figure was down to 57,782 students.

For the FMM, this is a serious drawback since new local and foreign investments in the country depend on people with strong technical and vocational skills.

The problem again lies in an education system that has given little emphasis to the promotion of vocational and technical training. The fact that Sijil Pelajaran Vokasional Malaysia (SPVM) certificates are no longer issued is a good example of this troubled segment of the education sector.
At the same time, there is no proper recognition for people with technical and vocational qualifications. For example, there is no authority to recognize their competence or issue licenses.

"I feel that it is high time for the government to come up with a salary schedule based on the level of vocational skills," he said.

Mustafa also noted that the current mindset of society that only school dropouts enroll for vocational training courses has to change. They might not realize that in some countries like Australia, a plumber could earn as much as a doctor due to the recognition of his skills.

Thus, a holistic review of the education system can help yield solutions for the current woes and help to achieve Malaysia's future goals since it can be part of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

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