NEW STRAITS TIMES

NST Leader: Schools for the poor?

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Special schools for the hardcore poor is an idea whose time shouldn't have come. But it has, and is a hotly debated one. - NSTP file pic

SPECIAL schools for the hardcore poor is an idea whose time shouldn't have come. But it has, and is a hotly debated one.

This is what happens when an idea hits the road before it is brewed to maturity. No one would quarrel with the government's intent to school everyone, even the very poor.

After all, it is the government's responsibility to ensure no Malaysian is left unschooled. But special schools for this very purpose? Surely, there are better ways to democratise education.

We ask the Education Ministry to give the alarming idea a very deep think. There are many things wrong with the idea.

Firstly, the brand is a non-starter: national type secondary school for the hardcore poor. No self-respecting parent would want to send their children to such schools.

Secondly, whether the Education Ministry realises it or not, such streaming of schools is an attempt at segregation. In this day and age, Malaysia can't afford to have a national education policy for two classes of schools: one for the poor and another for the rich.

The government, whether advertently or inadvertently, is promoting a class war. Isn't the private-government school divide enough worry for the government?

It is not that we do not have enough schools. Even some of those we have are not in a good state of repair, especially those in rural areas.

By the Education Ministry's own admission to the media in February, 830 schools throughout the country were in need of repairs. Others are in need of redevelopment. Many are unsafe for occupation.

Qualified teachers, too, are in short supply, both at the primary and secondary school levels. The problem is most serious in Sabah and Sarawak. The Education Ministry likes to think that the teacher shortage is a complex problem. We disagree.

For the longest time, teachers have pointed out to the ministry that they were calling it quits because of work overload, much of it due to administrative tasks. Never has fatigue been quoted so often as a reason for their resignation or early retirement as it is being done now.

The number of teachers calling it quits isn't small. They run into many thousands. Yet, the Education Ministry is slow to react. This should be the focus of the government rather than building new schools for the hardcore poor.

Besides, the hardcore poor or otherwise can be taught in schools that are already a part of the current education system. If evidence is needed, history — almost 66 years of it — tells us that the poor didn't remain in the clutches of poverty merely because there weren't special schools for them.

There were other factors at play then. Government schools did produce some great scholars and public servants from less well-to-do families.

But truth be told, our education system needs reengineering. One impediment is this: the Education Ministry isn't sure what the purpose of education is. This is a question of philosophy, a starting point for the pursuit of knowledge.

It is a question of what to teach and how to teach it. We have not got this right for a very long time. As a famous adage puts it, if you do not know where you are going, you will end up someplace else.

A special school for the hardcore poor is someplace else.