

CONTACT

The Teachers' Digest

MEET OUR MINISTERS

The Acting Education Ministers reveal their favourite subjects in school, and more.

GOODWILL HUNTING

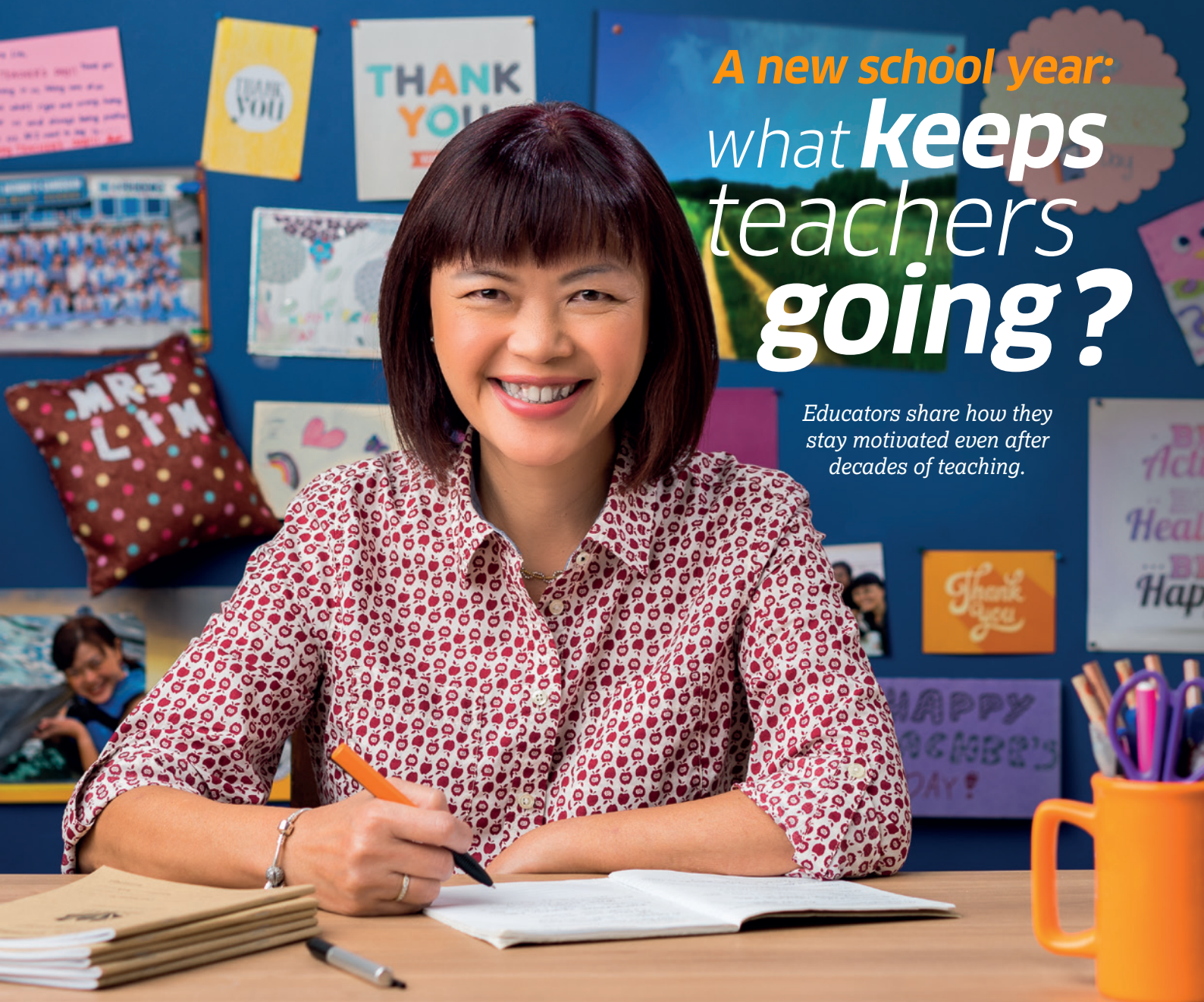
How can students be inspired to contribute to social causes? Two teachers tell us.

FLOORED BY PASSION

Hear from a teacher who does Singapore proud on the floorball court.

A new school year:
what **keeps**
teachers
going?

Educators share how they stay motivated even after decades of teaching.



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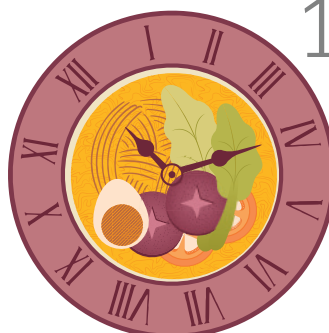
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Winning entries this issue

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Crossword

Can you solve this?

Show us how well you read *Contact* and you may be a winner!



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THIS ISSUE...



Are you ready for 2016? The long-serving teachers we spoke to for our cover story certainly are. Be inspired by how they stay motivated even after teaching for more than 25 years.

With two new Acting Ministers for Education on board, it is time to get to know them better. In a special edition of Heart To Heart, Mr Ng Chee Meng and Mr Ong Ye Kung reveal their memories of school and their hopes for the future of education.

We also hear from two educators who have influenced their students to do good. Their heart-warming stories may just spur you to do the same.

If you are still planning New Year resolutions, check out FYI for tips on becoming a better teacher alongside your peers, Lifestyle for your next leisure or school trip as well as In Focus for quirky perk-me-ups.

Starting from this issue, *Contact* has a new section, Come Out To Play, which takes a look at some educators with interesting

hobbies. Our first profile features a teacher who represents Singapore on the national floorball team.

And in the spirit of having fun, here is something to reward you, our loyal readers: take part in our new crossword contest on the back cover and you might win a little gift from us!

Happy reading!

The *Contact* Team

Readers' comments

What do you think of *Contact*? Share your thoughts at contact_online@moe.edu.sg
Published entries will receive a Limited Edition MOE NETS FlashPay Card!
Get the soft copy of the magazine at www.moe.gov.sg/teachers-digest



The October cover story on how teachers can equip students with skills and attributes needed to thrive in the future absolutely hit a home run. This has been a burning question in my mind when I ponder our pupils' future. After reading the article, I feel even more motivated to empower my pupils as well as my own children with the suggested skills and mindsets. Thumbs up!

Mdm Diana Yao
Teacher
New Town Primary School

The content is informative and very relevant to the teaching fraternity. I especially like the Heart To Heart segment. It is the first thing I read all the time. It provides insights into being a reflective practitioner – a trait which all teachers must have. I look forward to many more good years of being in "*Contact*"!

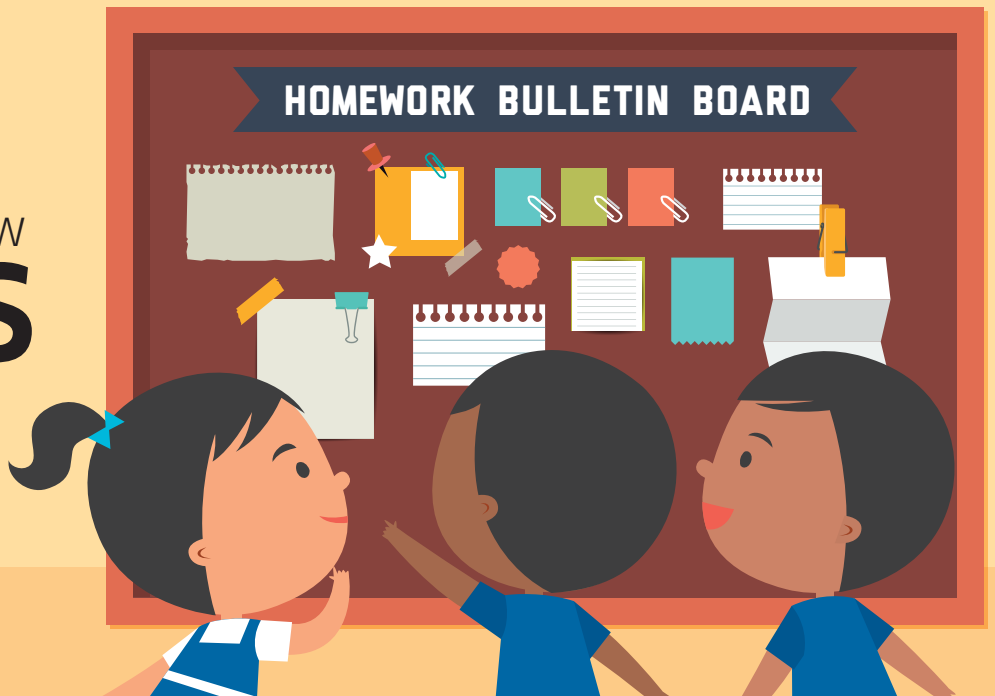
Mdm Premela Prabakaran
Head of Department
(Corporate Communications)
St. Margaret's
Secondary School

The issues raised by *Contact* are always current and presented in a way that compels deeper reflection. I love how even serious education matters are articulated as a "conversation". *Contact* is also about "soul-care": I remember an article that featured healthy recipes. The editorial team has made *Contact* a light-hearted read through attractive infographics and typography.

Mr Gideon Ren
Allied Educator
Bukit Batok Secondary School

New year, new ideas

We ask teachers which new educational methods they would like to implement in 2016.



★★ Best entry ★★

Ms Peggy Lee
Teacher
Frontier Primary School

I would like to try using a “Homework Bulletin Board”, which I learnt about during a professional development workshop. Pupils can write questions or doubts regarding their homework on a Post-it note and paste it on the bulletin board. Their classmates can then check the board during their free time to see if they can address their friends’ problems. This will encourage all pupils to offer their suggestions or solutions on problems and can also be used to challenge the stronger pupils.

Mr Daniel Sia
Teacher
Anglo-Chinese Junior College

In 2016, I plan to hold more roundtable discussions for students to voice their opinions in a safe and conducive learning environment. Such discussions in class help broaden everyone’s perspective and stimulate critical thinking, and livens up the classroom’s atmosphere. I conducted a debate in class once on whether we should allow more foreign workers in Singapore and the impact on the economy. The students, even the quieter ones, were talking more, which made the discussions richer.

Ms Chan Shu Hui
Teacher
Yio Chu Kang Primary School

I hope to use more game-based learning methods like interactive online quizzes. My school’s Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Head used the website “Kahoot!” to create an interactive quiz for us during a staff retreat, and it was a fun and exciting learning experience. I was motivated to earn points for every correct answer, and I hope my pupils would experience the same. The colourful interface would also keep my Primary 1 pupils interested.

Next Issue

HAVING FUN IN SCHOOL

How do you make your job enjoyable? Share your interesting ideas and you might be a winner!

EACH PUBLISHED ENTRY WINS A PRIZE!

Please send your submission to contact_online@moe.edu.sg by 28 Jan 2016. Submissions should be no more than 150 words, and these may be edited for length or clarity. Please include your name, designation, school, NRIC and contact number.

Meet our Ministers



One is a trained lifeguard. The other had won art competitions.
Turn the page to learn more about our Acting Ministers for Education,
Ng Chee Meng and Ong Ye Kung. Which teachers left a mark?
What are their hopes for the future of education? And what
were their favourite subjects in school?



KEEPING IT REAL

At seven, he wrote of his ambition to become a fighter pilot. By 17, he was soaring over Seletar in a Cessna before he could even drive. A childhood love of flying machines led to a 30-year career in the military. Today, he sits in a place where he can help others realise their dreams and ambitions.

Acting Minister for Education (Schools) Ng Chee Meng says he was “fortunate to have had the chance to marry my passion and my career”. While his work had sent him soaring through the air, his refrain to the younger generation is to stay grounded – to retain “a sense of responsibility to family, to broader society, and to country, even as they chase their goals”.

This sense of responsibility is Mr Ng’s “internal engine”, propelled by an awareness of the many opportunities he received on his own journey. He jests that, as a student, he was “not the most studious type”, and quips that his favourite subjects were PE and recess. Having been active in his Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs), Mr Ng believes they moulded his character beyond the classroom. He picked up swimming and table tennis in primary school. In secondary school, he joined the National Police Cadet Corps, and trained to be a lifeguard. Mr Ng then joined the

Science Club, won a national schools medal in Taekwondo and received his Private Pilot Licence through the Junior Flying Club – all in his two years at junior college.

“We were always reminded to ‘饮水思源’ – be grateful for your blessings,” he says. That was a lesson that he learnt in primary school. Mr Ng vividly remembers a story from the values-education textbook 好公民 (Good Character, Good Citizen). “It listed all the people who got up early in the morning to keep the country running smoothly – the soldiers, the cleaners and, of course, the teachers.” He was struck by the realisation that “many people had to do their part for me to be able to go to school”.

Looking back, he is thankful that a child like him, who is from an “ordinary, middle-class family with no special networks”, could access good education and career opportunities. The chance to help make this happen for the next generation made it “impossible to say no” when he was called to serve in politics. It was his chance to do something “significant ... for the country I love,” he says.

MAKE OUR HISTORY REAL

Singapore is “a miracle”, says Mr Ng, and he hopes that schools can help young people learn about our country’s struggles and

triumphs without dismissing it out of hand. To Mr Ng, it is not enough to tell students that Singapore's success was hard-won – educators need to convince the young with hard facts and historical evidence.

The key is for educators to know Singapore well enough to engage with students and “make the textbooks real”, he says. For instance, soon after independence, the British announced the withdrawal of their troops, years earlier than planned. “How many of us know that back then 20% of our GDP (gross domestic product) depended on the British? Imagine ... one-fifth of our economy suddenly gone. Even eking out a living wasn't a given,” he says.

Mr Ng adds that what made the situation even more challenging was that Singapore did not have much of a defence force then. “Our security cover was suddenly gone and we had to build up the SAF (Singapore Armed Forces) from scratch.” This is the level at which teachers will need to engage the youth, he says, to help them “own, share and feel” Singapore's journey as a nation.

Mr Ng saw first-hand the impact such real-life engagement with our nation's history can have on students when Singaporeans mourned former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's passing in March 2015. “I think something fundamentally shifted in our outlook,” he recalls. “My daughters are good examples. They learnt afresh about Mr Lee's story and saw multitudes coming together to pay their respects at his wake. They too queued for hours to pay their respects and I could see that they had a new level of appreciation for Singapore's history because they saw for themselves what Mr Lee did for our country.”

THE TEACHER'S ROLE

The pioneer generation had worked hard to build the nation. Mr Ng hopes that “in time to come we will have other champions – Singaporeans who inspire, and that includes our teachers.” A teacher's impact cannot be underestimated, he says, because “what you've done continues to make an impact 10, 20 years down the road, when they are no longer your students ... you make a difference that you may not even be aware of.”

Mr Ng speaks from personal experience, having had teachers – such as Mdm Salome Chua, his Science teacher in Secondary 1 and 2 – who “changed [his] life”. She provided a “loving environment for a boisterous bunch of boys”, and took time to share her life journey and values with them. He is still in touch with her today.

The role of educators has not changed for many years, Mr Ng says. Regardless of how technology continues to evolve, he sees education as a fundamentally “human endeavour” with our teachers at the core, being “real-life models, living out [their] convictions”.

THE NEXT STEP

“We are building on 50 years of strength,” he says, and Singapore has done well so far. “We work very hard. We are committed. We have excellent technical abilities, and a good ability to think.” But, for each generation to do better than the previous one, Mr Ng says “our schools and teachers need to keep asking: what can we improve to help our students succeed? Singapore is an exceptional story. If we allow our people to be content to be average, then Singapore will become average.”

The key to avoiding stagnation, he believes, is innovation. Echoing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat's calls for Singapore's economy to shift from being “value-adding” to “value-creating” in nature, Mr Ng says Singapore needs to raise a generation which is able to “synthesise, see patterns, sense opportunities, embrace risk, and can live in the ‘grey’ areas without feeling disoriented”. He adds that, “We can't ‘teach’ innovation ... we need to create an environment for it to grow.”

How will we do that? For a start, Mr Ng says his own experiences of learning beyond the classroom and outside of school has shown him the value of what he calls “getting your hands dirty”.

“Sometimes, it is OK to let them scrape their knees, or go on field camps and not shower for three days,” he says. While he is “all for creating a nurturing environment”, Mr Ng feels this should be balanced with building the toughness and resilience children need to “fail, stand up, and try again”. Reducing students' fear of failure and building their capacity to take calculated risks is an “urgent” priority if we are to do well in the next 50 years, he says.

Mr Ng does not presume to tell teachers what they “should or should not do in the classroom”, acknowledging that it is their area of expertise as teaching professionals. He simply adds: “As long as we know it's the right thing to do, let's get our hands dirty and do it. With determination, commitment – and love – I'm confident we will get there.”

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CHOOSING YOUR OWN PATH

Unable to read English until Primary 3, young Ong Ye Kung did not have an easy start when it came to school. But most would agree that he has done a pretty good job catching up, given that he is, today, the Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills).

What happened between his struggling school days and taking office at the helm of the Education Ministry? His office at MOE's HQ offers a few hints of the journey he has taken – a hard hat from his time as a director at Keppel Corporation; paintings by a student he met as Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister; and, surprisingly, a section of the Third Rail of the MRT track – a memento he requested as a farewell gift from his eight years on the SMRT Board, and a nod to his lead role in investigating the 2011 train disruptions.

Mr Ong has had an eventful career. But when asked about which part of his journey has taught him the most important lessons, he does not talk about losing the 2011 election, or even working closely with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. He talks about his mum.

“My mum was a teacher,” he says. “She was strict with her students, and she was strict with me and my brother. She taught me obedience, the difference between right and wrong, and showed me what determination looks like.”

His father was constantly busy with either his political work or the running of the family's fish farm. That left his mother as the constant presence around the house. Hardly able to speak English herself, she went out of her way to pick up the language so that she could teach him. Mr Ong says with a chuckle, “I half-suspect sometimes she wasn't sure what she was teaching me. But I could see how much it mattered to her. She really tried.”



REALISING HIS STRENGTHS

As the family spoke only Mandarin at home, Mr Ong continued to struggle with English through Nanyang Primary and later at Maris Stella High. It was not till he entered junior college that he began to try speaking the language more often.

For a while, his “favourite subject” was not so much about what he enjoyed most, but what he “minded least” – which, unsurprisingly, were his Chinese lessons.

Mr Ong’s best memories of school took place beyond the classroom – dabbling in multiple sports, such as volleyball in primary school, basketball in secondary school, and track and field in junior college (he was a long jumper). He was also an avid artist, sketching and painting in watercolours and acrylics from primary school till he started work. He even won a few school art competitions along the way.

Mr Ong says his parents had somewhat different approaches to his education and diverse interests. “My mum was more hands-on with my studies and she wanted me to do well. My dad, he wanted me to work. He is a believer of ‘earn and learn’. He said I should perhaps be a struggling artist,” he says, half in jest.

Yet, Mr Ong shares that his father supported his career choices, even as a politician, though he suspects his father probably does not wish him a political career. Looking back, the minister says that growing up watching his father work as a politician, speaking publicly and helping others, “probably had a big part to play” in guiding him towards his current vocation, “without either him or I realising it.”

THE INFLUENCE OF ROLE MODELS

That is why, as a father of two teenage daughters, Mr Ong speaks with conviction about the importance of role models. “You can give students all the education and career guidance you want, but in the end it comes down to this – who are the role models they see around them?”

Parents are a hugely important influence, especially when it comes to the messages they send to their children about success. Mr Ong admits that trying to be a good parent is fraught with “worries and dilemmas”, but he and his wife focus more on being “there to support them

Many of you do this (teach) because it is a calling and a passion. I hope my daughters will grow up like you.


when they need us, understand what they are going through and giving them time to grow”, and less on achieving stellar grades in school.

This is Mr Ong’s personal embodiment of his larger hopes for education in Singapore – that teachers will “broaden the idea of meritocracy – where ‘merit’ isn’t boiled down into a number or a grade”, and where Singapore has a system that adjusts to take into account the various forms that “merit” comes in.

DIFFERENT PATHS TO SUCCESS

In various speeches in his first months in office, Mr Ong has repeated his call for various parts of society – parents, schools and academic institutions, the Government, and employers – to bring about a cultural shift away from chasing qualifications from a young age and towards “making our school system a lifelong system, where we are able to devote ourselves to work in our chosen field, find passion within it, and achieve real depth and mastery”.

This is a difficult shift that will take a long time, he says. But it is worthwhile – not just because the jobs of the future will demand high-level skills, and the curiosity to learn constantly will enrich lives. He sees education’s role as “helping each person lead purposeful lives ... in which no matter which path they take, it is with integrity and dignity”. It is what he wishes for his own daughters as they figure out their paths – that they “wake up happy to go to work, with a spring in their step”.

And while Mr Ong is quick to qualify that he is “in no position to tell his daughters what to do with their lives”, he does have a clear idea of the role models he hopes they will have. It is here that he brings the conversation back to the profession his mum “dedicated her life to”. To our educators, Mr Ong has this to say: “Many of you do this because it is a calling and a passion. I hope my daughters will grow up like you.” 

A new school year: what **keeps** teachers **going?**

Three teachers who started their careers before 1990 reveal how they stay motivated.

When Mr Vasudavan Pillai reaches Yishun

Primary every morning, the teacher does not sit at his desk, checking emails while waiting for the morning assembly. Rain or shine, at 7am sharp, he stations himself at the school gates of his own accord to greet students and their parents.

"I'm there also when school is dismissed. It's a meeting point where parents can talk to me," says Mr Vasu, who teaches Tamil as well as Character and Citizenship Education.

Over his 35 years of teaching, this has been the tried-and-tested way for the former discipline master to get to know each batch of new students. "Once you win them over, it's smooth sailing," he explains. "In that sense, engaging students and parents helps me feel passionate and enthusiastic about what I do."

SENSE OF RENEWAL

The long-serving teachers *Contact* spoke to see every year as a fresh start that reignites their passion for the profession.

Mrs Agnes Lim, Head of Student Well-being at St Anthony's Canossian Primary (SACPS), views each year as an opportunity to make a difference to another group of students. "It's rejuvenating. I find the children so fun to be with; they have so many ideas and so much energy," she says.

Ms Solastri Suyot, who became Master Teacher at the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS) this January, cherishes the opportunity to connect with different batches of students. She had most recently taught English Language and Literature at Tanglin Secondary, where she had been for the last 12 years.

“Every day and every year is a learning experience because your ‘customers’ are different. It never gets boring,” she says.

DEDICATION TO STUDENTS

Ms Solastri’s commitment to understanding new batches of students gets her fired up every year, even after 31 years of teaching.

Once she knows which classes she would be teaching in the new year, she approaches colleagues who have taught these classes to find out what the students are like.

“I will catch up with the teachers over a cup of coffee to ask them what makes the individual students tick,” she says.

The teacher also checks out her students’ results and socio-economic status. “If the student’s basic needs are not met, we don’t even have to talk about getting him or her to self-actualise,” she says.

In these cases, she gets in touch with the parents so she can enlist home support. Such commitment has helped strengthen the bond between her and the students.

NOVEL EXPERIENCES

Apart from getting acquainted with different students, teachers may find themselves picking up innovative ways of teaching or taking up different portfolios throughout their careers. For these seasoned teachers, change is invigorating in itself.

Throughout his career, Mr Vasu had dealt mainly with students as a Tamil teacher as well as former Head of Mother Tongue. But for the first time in 2015, he became a Year Head – a role that involves looking into students’ holistic development. The 59-year-old embraced this position with a desire to give his best.

Mr Vasu talked to school leaders and consulted Year Heads in other schools to prepare for his new role. One year on, he has grown into his role of addressing the socio-emotional needs of Primary 1 to 3 students, as well as co-ordinating teaching within each level.

He particularly enjoys the chance to focus on more students, instead of just those taking Tamil classes. As part of his new responsibilities, he now sits in at level meetings to give input on school programmes and works with case managers to help students with discipline problems or learning difficulties.

“I have found the new role and working with more members of the school staff very rewarding. I now have a wider perspective of issues and challenges faced by both teachers and students,” he says.

At SACPS, Mrs Lim also takes changes in her stride. Last year, she was tasked to teach Science, a subject that she had not taught for 10 years.

“Everything is so different now, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to know how to teach Science,” says Mrs Lim, who saw the change as an opportunity to improve her skills.

Engaging students and parents helps me feel passionate and enthusiastic about what I do.



Mr Vasudavan Pillai embraces new responsibilities with an open mind and the desire to give his best.



Ms Solastri Suyot enjoys introducing new teaching methods in her lessons and to other educators.

Every day and every year is a learning experience because your 'customers' are different. It never gets boring.

She turned to her peers for tips on teaching the subject. "I had no qualms about talking to my younger colleagues for advice," she says.

They then showed her how to use new equipment like data loggers, which record the intensity of heat and light, and shared online science videos that were great teaching aids.

When she was a Lead Teacher of English at Tanglin Secondary, Ms Solastri enthusiastically introduced teaching methods she had learnt from experts or read about to her classroom and the rest of the school.

She adopted and shared the idea of a community of inquiry, where students sit in a small group, ask questions and learn as a group with the teacher as a facilitator.

Ms Solastri is also filled with ideas on getting students to think critically after attending a recent 45-hour online learning course with Project Harvard. Her goal is to make thinking "visible".

"There must be routines in the classroom which encourage thinking. This even comes down to me as a teacher thinking aloud and modelling the thinking process," she says.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Despite their decades of experience in teaching, these teachers still take time to think about how they can improve, pick up new skills and apply what they have learnt.

Ms Solastri reads voraciously about pedagogy, from books to periodicals. One of her favourites is *The Skillful Teacher* by Jon Saphier which "provides the building blocks to good teaching" and has been a useful guide for when she mentors younger teachers.

Ms Solastri also makes it a point to record her reflections on her teaching every day for 10 minutes. For the past three decades, she asks herself: "What did I do well? What worked and what didn't?".

It could be as simple as noting her students' furrowed brows when they tried answering a specific question, and then thinking back on whether she had taught the topic well.

"The reflection log is not just to inform me of my practice, but also documents my journey as a teacher," she says, when asked why she continues to maintain a reflection log after accruing so much experience.

On occasion, teachers who sit in on her class give her feedback on whether her teaching methods are effective. “Sometimes I am blind to what I am doing and it helps when someone else comes in to observe,” says Ms Solastri.

She reciprocates by coaching her younger colleagues. With her new role at ELIS, the Master Teacher looks forward to mentoring English teachers from other schools beyond Tanglin Secondary.

The educators also keep an open mind to learning, even when the teaching comes from their students. Says Mrs Lim: “Because I work with young people, I have never felt left behind. My students taught me things like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Snapchat, Spotify.” She adds with a laugh: “Some of my friends who are not teachers don’t even know these things.”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Teaching at SACPS has extra significance to Mrs Lim as it allows her to give back to her alma mater every day.

“I am grateful because I was shaped by the values that they taught me,” she says. “They treated me as an individual and respected me as a person. My teachers were also very committed to their job and were always cheerful, no matter how tired they were.”

The bubbly Mrs Lim seeks to nurture her students in the same manner that her teachers had done 40 years ago. She encourages her students to think positively about themselves, and offers them a listening ear when they are feeling down.

“Many of my former students are my friends on Facebook and I feel proud when I see how they have become responsible, thinking adults,” she says.


Mrs Lim remembers a student who did not do well in school, but whom she noticed would rather draw in class than listen to her.

“I realised that academics was not her passion, but art was. I sat down with her and told her that even if her grades were not stellar, she could

excel in art. She was not a failure,” Mrs Lim says. “I was very proud when her artistic eye led her toward a career as a professional photographer.”

Mr Vasu has similar stories to share. He recalls helping a boy who used to fail Tamil to score a “B” for his PSLE.

“I realised he liked music, so I got him to listen to Tamil songs and he really became interested in the lyrics, which built up his vocabulary and speaking skills. I told him that if he kept believing in himself, he would improve. His results boosted his confidence and self-esteem,” he says.

Mr Vasu adds: “I think of myself as a farmer and my students as the seeds. I nurture them, teach them values and skills, prepare them to face challenges in life. Seeing them ‘bloom’ into beautiful flowers is what keeps me going year after year.” 

I sat down with her and told her that even if her grades were not stellar, she could excel in art. She was not a failure.



Getting to know a different batch of students every year is rejuvenating for Mrs Agnes Lim.



Floored by passion

Contact kicks off this brand new section with a teacher who does Singapore proud on the floorball court.

Neither for glory nor for fame, but passion for the sport and the opportunity to enjoy the game with friends.

After a long day, most educators get ready to head home. But not Mr Yeo Kaixiang. He dons a helmet, padded jersey and gloves to begin the second half of his day – floorball practice.

The Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC) Mathematics teacher fends off fast-moving balls as the goalkeeper for the Singapore national team.

Three times a week, Mr Yeo's day begins at 5.30am and ends past midnight. But he embraces the long hours as part of a rare opportunity to represent the country while doing what he loves.

"It's a humbling experience to get recognition for playing floorball," says the 28-year-old, who enjoys the fast pace of the game and thrives on being the last line of defence.



What makes being on the national squad even more special to Mr Yeo is sharing the experience with two of his students.


Mr Yeo looked out for the duo during the lead-up to last year's Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. He drove them from school to training and then home, and advised them on setting priorities and time management to juggle school and floorball commitments.

The national team trained for over 15 hours a week and clinched the Gold medal at the Games.

Accolades aside, the camaraderie within the floorball community has kept Mr Yeo in the sport since 2006. When he first joined, the sport was relatively new. Everyone became friends because of their passion for floorball, despite hailing from diverse backgrounds.

"There is a familial atmosphere whenever we get together for games. I enjoy going to trainings and games just to meet these friends," he says.

The teacher-in-charge of floorball at ACJC also enjoys growing his students' interest in the sport. He motivates them with reminders of why they joined the sport in the first place.

"Neither for glory nor for fame, but passion for the sport and the opportunity to enjoy the game with friends." 



TOGETHER WE LEARN

Becoming a better teacher is far from a solitary journey. Draw inspiration from these tips and examples of collaboration to improve alongside your colleagues.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

Having a few companions on the journey is always better than going it alone. Try these tips:



1

BE POSITIVE

Avoid letting meet-ups become complaint sessions. Celebrate personal successes or share anecdotes of funny teaching moments. Also, affirm one another's efforts to create a climate of trust and openness.

2

SHARE RESPONSIBILITY

Collaboration becomes easier when duties are distributed fairly and based on each person's strengths. Establish clear roles too, so everyone is better prepared to contribute.

3

SET COMMON GOALS

This helps teams to organise their efforts more efficiently. For instance, a goal to improve students' learning would require the team to focus on finding strategies and interventions for the purpose.

4

EXPERIMENT WITH NEW TOOLS

No time to meet teachers from other schools? Use digital tools like Google Hangouts to connect during pockets of downtime. Let everyone share ideas at their own time with online tools – try a shared mindmap on MindMeister to connect ideas.

5

MAKE MORE TIME TO MEET

Besides formal meetings, get together for casual exchanges with your peers. Set up lunch or teatime sessions where you can share ideas or updates over a meal or cuppa.

bit.ly/collab_tips

With input from the Academy of Singapore Teachers.



TEAM UP TO IMPROVE

The best training comes in hands-on, collaborative ways. *Contact* takes a look at examples from here and abroad.



SINGAPORE: LEARNING FROM THE BEST

The new Centre for Teaching and Learning Excellence at Yusof Ishak Secondary School (YISS) helps teachers and trainees to learn from the best.

How it works:

For up to three days a week, five to seven Master Teachers from the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) co-teach with YISS teachers in demonstration classes. Trainees and teachers from other schools would observe these classes – sometimes behind one-way mirrors – to pick up effective teaching methods. The Master Teachers also mentor the teachers at the centre. Other experts from the AST, NIE and MOE also work with teachers to develop innovative pedagogies and strategies to cultivate students' character, values and socio-emotional resilience.

► bit.ly/sg_ctle



THE UK: LEADING LOCAL IMPROVEMENTS

By 2016, the UK aims to have a network of 600 teaching schools that lead the improvement of teaching standards in their respective districts. Teaching schools are based on the teaching hospital model, which provides hands-on training for medical students.

How it works:

Teaching schools form alliances that involve schools that need support and strategic partners who can offer expertise. Designated schools coach current teachers as well as take on trainees with the aim of hiring them within the alliance. Teaching schools can customise their professional development curriculum to suit specific needs, allowing teachers to pick up methods and strategies directly relevant to their subjects and student demographics.

► bit.ly/uk_teachingsch



HONG KONG: SHARING EXPERTISE

Schools with certain areas of expertise are appointed as Professional Development Schools (PDS) to share their know-how with others.

How it works:

Similar to Singapore's Centres of Excellence, designated schools in Hong Kong would share specific techniques and best practices with their partner schools. This is done through inter-school talks, lesson observations, collaborative lesson planning and resource sharing. The PDS specialise in using different teaching approaches, such as self-directed learning or experiential learning, for subjects ranging from Mathematics to Liberal Studies.

► bit.ly/hk_pds



FINLAND: A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Substantial time for collaboration is a deeply embedded aspect of this Scandinavian school culture and a regular component of the workweek.

How it works:

Finnish educators often teach in pairs, allowing for collaborative lesson planning and problem solving. Across the Finnish school system, teachers meet at least once a week to develop and plan teaching instructions together. Another important aspect of teacher development in Finland is the formal peer group mentoring in which trained mentors guide and support new teachers. Importantly, teachers feel no pressure – there are no assessments and grades given.

► bit.ly/finland_teach

JAPAN: RESEARCHING LESSONS FOR BETTER TEACHING

Using the concept of “lesson study”, also known as research lessons, teachers in elementary and middle schools come together to examine their own teaching methods in a bid to improve themselves.

How it works:

First, the teachers set an overarching goal such as “getting students to develop thinking skills”. They jointly plan a lesson that combines the goal with subject-specific learning aims. For example, to help students think critically while learning about levers, teachers plan an activity for students to figure out ways to lift 100kg. One teacher conducts the lesson, the others observe. After discussing their observations, the group tweaks the lesson plan, which a second teacher implements. The team then produces a report of their learning.

Taking this further, schools can apply to be “research schools” to experiment with ways to teach a new topic before it is rolled out. After a year of research, the teachers would conduct large public lessons for thousands of educators to observe, critique and discuss the teaching methods and new content.

► bit.ly/jp_LS



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THE AHA MOMENT

When you are observing another teacher, watch out for those aha moments of students’ learning, instead of focusing on what the teacher is doing. During discussions or replays of the video, find out what he or she did to result in that success.

► See this in action: bit.ly/observe_aha

AN APP TO...

SHARE ANYTHING ON A VIRTUAL CANVAS



Padlet, free.
www.padlet.com

Brainstorming for ideas on a presentation or group project? Use Padlet and get your colleagues or students to work on it with you. Everyone can post images, videos, audio files, documents or links from the Internet on a shared blank virtual canvas. Teachers have been using this web application in varied ways, from displaying photo collages and student works to creating lesson plans and posting class assignments.

CHINA-US: AN INTERNATIONAL BOOST

Educators can improve overseas programmes too. Through the Chinese Guest Teacher and Trainee Programme, experienced teachers or trainees from China are matched with American schools, where they help to kick-start or expand the school’s Chinese language programmes. The Chinese teachers and trainees stay in American schools between one and three years, giving many US students opportunities to interact with native Chinese speakers. An added benefit is the cultural exchange among teachers and students.

► bit.ly/guest_teacher



Goodwill hunting

How can the youth today be inspired to do more for social causes? Two teachers share their experiences.

Pulling out weeds in the garden and herding snails into a pail are typically not part of an educator's job. Yet Ms Shirley Ong from Fuhua Primary enjoyed doing these activities twice weekly with her students for the "Adopt-a-Plot" programme from 2012 to 2013.

Leading by example encourages students to get involved, says the Environmental Education Advisor, who teaches Mathematics and Science.

"If I had only instructed them, nothing would have happened. But with me being personally involved, they could see that an adult is passionate about the environment," she says.

Students from across all primary levels volunteered for this activity during recess, after seeing how much fun Ms Ong and her students were having. Today, the garden continues to flourish as students keep up the habit of tending to the plants.



WALK THE TALK

Echoing the need to walk the talk is Mdm Sriwani Abdul Razak from Pasir Ris Primary, who greets any student she meets every morning, even if she does not know their names.

"I acknowledge them to let them know that every Pasirian matters, even when the expectation is for them to greet me first," Mdm Sriwani says. The Head of Department of Character and Citizenship Education started this exercise in 2014 to encourage students to reciprocate goodwill and create a positive school culture.

The Malay language teacher has also urged several of her colleagues to model good manners. The teachers' simple acts have led to more students greeting everyone, including their peers, without prompting.

PASSING ON VALUES

Mdm Sriwani has also influenced former students such as Metta Ni. The 16-year-old recalls how Mdm Sriwani ignited his interest in doing good when she worked with him on a project to raise funds for the school's charity.

Throughout the project, which involved selling stationery, Mdm Sriwani often reminded Metta to think back to the school's values, including "Respect for all" as well as "Share and care". She also facilitated discussions and roleplays about values, which helped the then 11-year-old internalise these values and apply them to overcome challenges he encountered while peddling his wares to the public.

"I remembered that I must show respect for all, so I was still polite after being rejected a number of times, sometimes by very rude people," he says.

Besides carrying the values with him to his secondary school, Metta shares that the positive experience of doing his part for charity has spurred him to take part in other social innovation projects even after graduation.

SHOW AND TELL

Another way Mdm Sriwani inspires students to do good is by sharing students' success stories. This sends a powerful message of how every little contribution counts, she says.

During assembly talks, she would play videos that highlight the good deeds that Pasirians and alumni members have done, to show students that "doing a small deed goes a long way".

These show-and-tell sessions helped kick-start "Project Care" – a programme that allows primary school students to spread a little kindness by purchasing and packing gifts for underprivileged children in other parts of the world. One year, the students sent "care boxes" brimming with oral hygiene products to Cambodia.

To make the annual project even more memorable, Mdm Sriwani makes an effort to update students on the difference their donated items have made. When Mdm Sriwani told her students that some of the Cambodian children did not know the purpose of the toothpaste and had eaten it as candy, the Pasirians learnt not to take a daily necessity for granted.

I acknowledge them to let them know that every Pasirian matters, even when the expectation is for them to greet me first.



Both Ms Shirley Ong (left) and Mdm Sriwani Abdul Razak (right) make sure to model good behaviour for their students.

CHAMPIONS ELECT

At Fuhua Primary, Ms Ong says empowering students to lead greening efforts can spur them to champion environmental awareness even beyond school.

After learning how to make a terrarium in class, the students from Ms Ong's green club taught kindergarten children through a workshop of their own. Such outreach projects give Fuhua students a greater sense of ownership of the learning process.

Older students usually like mentoring the younger ones, adds Ms Ong. For example, her former green club student, 17-year-old Vivian Ong, enjoys returning to Fuhua Primary to teach her juniors about sustainable gardening.

The Polytechnic student credits the teacher-in-charge for sparking her interest in the environment 10 years ago. Both had worked closely to design an eco-friendly game and the teacher's passion rubbed off on the then-Primary 2 student.

"She taught me huge words like 'deforestation'. Pictures and videos about the world really opened my eyes," says Vivian, who went to Commonwealth Secondary via direct admission for environmental education.

"In the six years since I have left Fuhua, imagine the number of young minds like myself who




If I had only instructed them, nothing would have happened. But with me being personally involved, they could see that an adult is passionate about the environment.

are 'infected' by Ms Ong's passion for the environment," she says with a smile.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

For Ms Ong, seeing former students champion green causes years after they graduate motivates her to spread the word about environmental conservation to more of her students.

"I want to inspire them so ... if everyone just plays a small part, it will make a big difference," says Ms Ong, who is so passionate about conserving the environment that she includes tips for going green in her email signature.

Such pure passion may just be the X factor educators need to galvanise students to support a meaningful cause and keep on doing good. 

Secret island retreats

One of these off-the-beaten-track locations may just reinvigorate you and spark ideas for excursions or activities with your students.

LOCAL

PULAU HANTU (GHOST ISLAND)

➔ Don't let this island's ominous name stop you from diving into its surrounding waters, where you can get up close with rich marine life such as coral, anemone fishes, hermit crabs and bamboo sharks. Snap some photos underwater and share them with your students to raise their interest in Singapore's marine biodiversity. You can also explore the island's mangroves or take a dip in the natural swimming lagoons.

🔦 Dive with The Hantu Bloggers (www.pulauhantu.sg), a non-profit organisation that promotes awareness of local marine heritage or take a beginner open water diving course at the island.

💰 From \$150 per diver (excluding rental of dive equipment).

PULAU SEMAKAU

➔ Pulau Semakau may be a garbage dump but it is far from a trashy destination. Be surprised by the hidden wildlife you can find, including various types of frogs, snakes, dragonflies and butterflies. Keep your eyes peeled for the elusive smooth-coated otter in the mangroves, or look overhead for more than 80 species of birds such as the rare Chinese egret or the great-billed heron, which stands over one-metre tall.

🚶 Join a tour by non-profit group Nature Trekker (www.naturetrekker.org) to enter the island, which is usually closed to the public.

💰 From \$40 for an organised day trip (inclusive of ferry return ticket).

ST JOHN'S ISLAND

➔ Did you know that St John's Island was where Sir Stamford Raffles first arrived before reaching mainland Singapore? History buffs will also know that this southern island was once a quarantine centre for the ill and home for political detainees. These days, the island houses swimming lagoons, hiking routes and the Tropical Marine Science Institute, where you can attend a two-hour introduction to Marine Science. You can also discover the island's seaside flora and fauna with guides from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History museum.

🔦 The untouched beaches on neighbouring Lazarus Island are a 20-minute stroll away.

💰 Chalet stay from \$72 for one night (inclusive of ferry return ticket).

Photo from Debby Ng | Hantu Blog

Photo from bit.ly/jnzlf

OVERSEAS

KOMODO ISLAND, INDONESIA

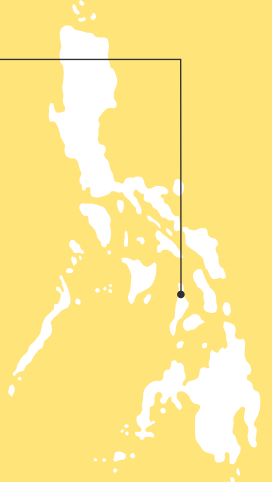
- ➡ Visit the Komodo dragons at their home in the Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Trek alongside its rangers and learn more about the world's largest living species of lizards by observation. Afterwards, admire the rosy blush of the soft sand on the island's Pink Beach, a natural wonder caused by the mixture of tiny red coral fragments with white sand. View colourful fishes and coral up close while snorkelling or scuba diving in the clear seawater.
- ✈ Fly into Labuan Bajo, where you can join an organised tour to Komodo island.
- \$ From \$1,100 (inclusive of return airfare and tour).



Photo from bit.ly/wikikan

MOUNT KANLAON, NEGROS ISLAND, PHILIPPINES

- ➡ Get high on conquering the summit of one of the Philippines' largest active volcanoes over the course of an exhilarating three-day trek. Geography comes alive as you observe and learn about natural features of the 2,465-metre stratovolcano including craters, lakes, hot springs and more. Even if you don't teach geography, share your photos and experience with students to broaden their horizons beyond the classroom.
- ✈ Most operators include pick-up from Bacolod-Silay airport if you book the trek with them.
- \$ From \$580 (inclusive of return airfare and trek).



NAOSHIMA ISLAND, SHIKOKU, JAPAN

- ➡ Explore countless exhibitions, museums and live installations at this Japanese destination. Admire how the Art House Project gives old houses a new lease of life as art. Not to be missed is the minimalist beauty of buildings created by famed Japanese architect Tadao Ando. Look out for his Benesse House, an art site that doubles up as a hotel. Visitors can also admire the artwork and architecture as well as take in the greenery and views of the Seto Inland Sea.
- ✈ From Tokyo, hop on the bullet train to Uno, where the island is just a ferry ride away.
- \$ From \$770 (inclusive of return airfare, bullet train and ferry ride).



Photo from 663highland.com CC-BY-2.5 bit.ly/663HL

Step out of the box to freshen up

Looking for different ways to survive the mental slumps at work? Try these unconventional mood boosters to stay refreshed on the job.

ENJOY HIGH-RISE ←SUNRISES

Await the morning assembly bell while watching the sun rise from a scenic high floor spot. Even if the view does not take your breath away, the trek up the stairs probably will! Natural light also boosts your brain's serotonin and dopamine – chemicals that re-energise you.

STOP AND GET CRAFTY→

Ever spared a glance at the dull noticeboards around your school? Make these displays more eye-catching by thinking of ways you (or your students) could embellish them – pin up inspirational quotes and colourful origami, or even design a mural around it. The boards are your canvas, Picasso.

←EMBARK ON A VIRTUAL EXPEDITION

Between lessons, transport yourself into the virtual world where you can get social with educators worldwide. Other than Twitter or Instagram, surf Pinterest to gain new lesson ideas. Start with these boards by creative teachers for inspiration: bit.ly/ed_pin1, bit.ly/ed_pin2

BUILD A HOUSE FOR YOUR CARDS→

Sometimes, we need a jolt of motivation when the going gets tough. Remind yourself of the positive impact you have made by creating an inspirational scrapbook of meaningful gifts, touching Teachers' Day cards, or parents' commendations that you have received.

EXERCISE? SKIP IT!→

Rather than jogging, try skipping around school to release stress. Start conversations with curious passers-by to share how your workout is also a fun way to relive carefree childhood memories. Who knows? You could kick-start a new fitness trend!



Happy
Teachers'
Day!

Thanks!

Happy
Teachers'
Day

HAPPY
TEACHERS
DAY!

Thank you
Mr Lim!
😊 Fiona

Dear Mr Lim,
You are the best!
Thank you!
Tom

Winning entries
this issue

Inspiring sights and sites



I love the “greenery” in this little cozy corner in my staff room, with the backdrop of nature and green cushions. The motivational posters on the wall are good energisers for a tiring day. This corner is also fully equipped with good reading materials to refuel our minds after a whole day of teaching.

Mdm Diana Yao Sufeng
Teacher
New Town Primary School



Taking a walk in my school garden energises me when I am feeling bogged down with work. I enjoy seeing the fountain of water and the fishes swimming so freely.

Mdm Beanes Kartara
Teacher
Holy Innocents' Primary School



On tiring days, walking past this area featuring photos from around the world reminds me to hang on and work towards the holidays, when there is a chance to see these amazing sights in person.

Mdm Lim Li Yin
Teacher
Queenstown Primary School

Thank you for sharing your photos!
Each published photo wins a \$30 voucher!



NEXT ISSUE SNAP AND PLAY

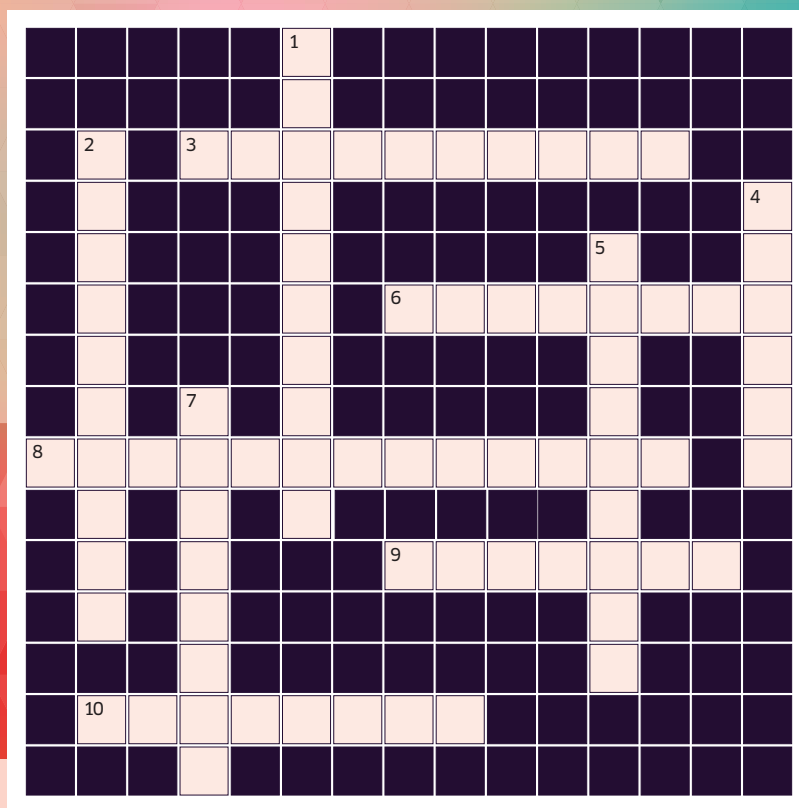
What's your favourite game?
Snap a selfie while you enjoy it
and tell us why!

- The competition is only open to staff of Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore.
- Each participant is allowed only one entry. The photo entry must be original and unpublished. The staff must be the original author and sole owner of his/her photo entry.
- The photo should be in high resolution, JPEG format.
- Submit the photo with your full name, institution, designation, email, NRIC and contact number, failing which the entry will be rendered void.
- Provide a caption (max 25 words), explaining what the photo is about and how it reflects the theme. Captions may be edited for length, flow and clarity.
- Send both photo and caption to contact_online@moe.edu.sg by 28 Jan 2016.
- The photo entry will be judged based on relevance to theme, creativity and originality. The judges' decision is final.
- Three winners will each receive an attractive prize. *Contact* reserves the right to change or replace the prize with another of equal or greater value should the featured prize become unavailable.
- Prizes are not exchangeable for cash.
- All winners will be notified by email. Prizes not collected within two weeks will be forfeited.
- The copyright of all entries shall remain with the photographer. However, *Contact* reserves the right to use and modify the selected entry as well as other suitable ones, with full acknowledgement to the copyright owners, for future use.

ANSWER & WIN!

Can you
solve this?

Show us how well you read *Contact* by tackling this puzzle (answers can be found within the magazine). The first three correct entries will receive an attractive prize each!



ACROSS →

3. Acting Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung was a _____ in his junior college's track and field team.
6. Schools in Japan can sign up to be _____ schools that experiment with the best ways to teach a new topic.
8. Student Vivian Ong remembers learning this word from Fuhua Primary teacher, Ms Shirley Ong, when designing an eco-friendly game together.
9. Acting Minister for Education Ng Chee Meng still keeps in touch with his secondary school _____ teacher, Mdm Salome Chua.
10. Which country has Professional Development Schools that are similar to Singapore's Centres of Excellence?

DOWN ↓

1. _____ is the author of the book *The Skillful Teacher*.
2. Which position does Anglo-Chinese Junior College teacher, Mr Yeo Kaixiang, play in the national floorball team?
4. Ms Chan Shu Hui from Yio Chu Kang Primary hopes to use this website in her lessons in 2016.
5. Who is the architect who designed the Benesse House on Naoshima Island, Japan?
7. Sunlight can boost your brain's serotonin and _____ (chemicals that re-energise you).

**THINK YOU HAVE
THE ANSWERS?**

Send a clear photo of your completed entry to contact_online@moe.edu.sg by **28 Jan 2016**. Please include your full name, institution, designation, NRIC and contact number in your email.