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Address speech for the Joint Prize-giving Ceremony of the Caritas Prevocational Schools

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Address by D.D. Waters, J.P., Assistant
Director of Education (Technical), at the
City Hall on 22nd July, 1980, on the
occasion of the Joint Prize-giving
Ceremony of the Caritas Prevocational Schools

Firstly, I must thank you all for inviting me here today to address you and for inviting my wife to present the prizes. It is a great honour for both of us to be here.

I in fact addressed the Caritas Prevocational Schools at their Joint Prize-giving Ceremony in 1976 and I am certainly no stranger to many of you. We have worked closely together for a number of years.

When I first joined the Hong Kong Government in 1954, Hong Kong had a population of around 2.4 million people. Of these around 238 000 were studying either in day or night school. Our education budget then was around 35 million dollars excluding the Hong Kong University (there was no Chinese University or Polytechnic at that time).

Today with a population of around 5.1 million, we now see that around 1.4 students are studying either in day or night school. The Education Department budget for this financial year is approximately 2 943 million dollars.

When I first started working in Hong Kong, there were only about twenty of us employed, full-time, teaching in post-secondary technical institutions. Today, with the rapid expansion of the Polytechnic

/and the

and the establishing of five technical institutes, together with other technical institutions, the number of full-time teachers working in post-secondary technical education must be well in excess of 1 100.

This is a remarkable build-up and few if any places in the world can boost the technical education growth that Hong Kong experienced in the 1970s.

The late Mr. Sydney Burt who was at one time principal of the old Technical College used to say with a smile on his face - and perhaps with tongue in cheek - that providing we kept building, technical education would remain auspicious.

And certainly, over the years, technical education has never stood still.

On the other hand, almost everyone has relatives in school and this immediately makes many self-styled curriculum experts with just the right instant answers to all our many educational problems.

This of course is human nature and natural.

I firmly believe, however, that criticism and searching for the Education Department's "Achilles heel", although perhaps unpalatable, on occasions, is good for our souls and is the best tonic for complacency which is not unknown even in the best of circles.

/Education around

Education around the world suffers as much as the rag-trade from swings in fashion. Often when things change, people expect miracles and when they do not occur, ideas move on to something else. For example, programmed learning in the late 1960s. However, not all change is progress as we all well know.

I am afraid I cannot agree with those who denigrate local education and who, if they had their way would have all of us in the Education Department wearing hair-shirts. Although impressive results have been achieved over the years, bearing in mind the population explosion and other factors - it does not need an education guru to tell us the system can still be improved. After all, nothing is perfect.

There is no doubt that the prevocational schools have come a long way since the late 1960s when they were first established. I am very proud of the fact that I was a member of the original Prevocational School Working Party which was set up by the old Industrial Training Advisory Committee. We produced our report in January 1970. Education Department policy for prevocational schools was, for a number of years, modelled on that report.

I have always considered prevocational schools as one of our "success stories". I make no bones about it. I believe in prevocational schools. I am sure they are the right kind of education for certain types of pupils. I am convinced that an academically biased education does not suit everybody.

/At one stage

At one stage, as you probably remember, there was talk of not expanding the prevocational education system. In my view, it would have been a pity and I am pleased to see that we are planning for more prevocational schools over the next few years.

Someone asked me the question a month or so ago, "why have prevocational schools been so successful?"

The first answer that I gave was that I felt it was largely because of the personalities that had been involved in these schools over the years. I do not wish to mention any specific names here but, in my view, there were, and there still are, people engaged in prevocational education who are conscientious, dedicated and who really believe in what they are doing. This is one of the key reasons why these schools have succeeded.

Another reason why they have succeeded is because of their close links with the technical institutes. These close links have existed ever since the Morrison Hill Technical Institute was first established in 1969 and since prevocational school leavers were admitted direct to the second year of an apprenticeship and to the second year of a part-time day-release craft course. This practice commenced in September, 1970.

Education Department policy for the prevocational schools has changed over the years. Such changes are inevitable. We have to move with the times and while I am convinced that the recommendations made by the Industrial Training Advisory Committee Working Party in the early

/1970s

1970s were correct at the time I am equally sure that the changing of the curricula to give it a more academic bias in 1977 was also correct.

I would also add that I am very pleased to see that Forms Four and Five are to be introduced into prevocational schools, starting in the academic year 1981/82. I do not believe that all our school leavers should go on to Forms Four and Five. Many benefit far more by taking up employment after completing Form Three and by linking this with part-time education. Nevertheless, I am convinced there are many very bright prevocational school pupils who are fully capable of going on to Forms Four and Five and of getting good results in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

Lastly I would again thank you for inviting my wife and me here today. It is a great pleasure for both of us to be here with you all.

I also take this opportunity of congratulating all the prize-winners here today and all the graduates and I wish you every success in any future studies that you may pursue and in your future endeavours.