

Opening Address by Mrs Fanny Law, GBS, JP,
Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower
at the Launching Ceremony of
Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA)
Hong Kong
on Saturday, 25 February 2006

Dr Bernard Spodek, Dr Betty Chan, Professor KM Cheng, Distinguished
Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here this morning to witness the establishment of the Hong Kong Branch of the Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA) and to address leading educators and practitioners in early childhood education.

2. The launch of PECERA (HK) represents yet another milestone in the development of early childhood education in Hong Kong, with emphasis on research and evidence-based practice. As a non-government initiative, PECERA (HK) signifies the vibrancy of the private sector in the delivery of early childhood education and the enhanced role of Hong Kong in the international educational arena.

3. Brain researchers are convinced that 50% of a person's ability to learn is developed in the first four years of life, and another 30% by age eight. In these four years, the infant brain makes 50% of the brain-cell connections which provide the pathways for all future learning. Because the early years are a period of considerable growth as well as vulnerability to harm, the quality of early childhood education is critical for future success. Young children require tender and

sensitive care for their experience in the early years can elucidate or diminish inborn potential. The protection, nurturing and stimulation provided by parents and caregivers shape early development.

4. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government recognizes that in committing itself to the well-being of our younger generation, we promote the well-being for all. The blueprint for education in the 21st century “*Learning for Life, Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong*” published in 2000 emphasised the importance of early childhood education as the foundation for lifelong learning. Since then, we have taken progressive steps to upgrade the professional standards of early childhood educators, and improved the teacher to pupil ratio. We have enhanced the quality assurance of early childhood education by developing common indicators for self-evaluation of kindergartens and child care centres. Beginning in September 2005, we have harmonized the governance and supervision of pre-primary services to assure more effective delivery of edu-care services for our young children.

5. We have also published a curriculum guide on pre-primary education for the reference of early childhood workers. The framework encompasses physical, cognitive and language, affective and social, and aesthetic aspects, covering six learning areas, namely, physical health and fitness, language, mathematics, science and technology, self and society, and art. The aim is to lay the foundation for whole-person

development.

6. As the initial goals established in 2000 are being realized, we are now in the process of seeking further improvements and setting higher standards. Our aim is to move swiftly towards a coherent, high quality pre-primary education service backed by more professional and financial support. Let me share with you the key strands of the improvements being contemplated.

7. The core of the environment during early development is people. Because early relationships matter, we value those who relate to young children and have to equip them with the knowledge required to provide the focused and sensitive care that offers the essential catalyst for healthy growth. A professional teaching force can make a difference in the quality of service.

8. For historical reasons, the entry qualification for early childhood practitioners was modest. As a first step, we will upgrade the basic entry requirement to certificate level and offer degree programmes for suitable candidates.

9. As regards serving teachers, I am pleased to say that most of them are highly motivated to learn. Over the years, we have seen an increasing number of serving teachers obtaining a degree or higher qualifications through part-time studies. To encourage continuing professional development and allow flexibility, we shall offer incentives and invite tertiary institutions to provide credit-bearing refresher and

short courses, including site-based staff development programmes.

10. We are also planning for a new certification programme for serving and aspiring principals to strengthen their role in leading schools.

11. In terms of quality assurance, school self-evaluation will be validated by external school review in future. We are also considering the feasibility of a merit award for quality pre-primary institutions as an incentive for continuing improvement.

12. As a society, we entrust the most significant responsibility to those who are responsible for the care and education of our young children. Early childhood education entails more than formal education in pre-schools. We need the concerted effort of parents, primary school heads and the public to promote the awareness of quality early childhood education and to achieve a common understanding of its core values. As Pearl S. Buck said, “If we fail the children, we all fail.”

13. The inauguration of PECERA (HK) provides an invaluable platform for sharing ideas, research findings and cutting edge practice to guide us in our further investment in early childhood education for the benefit of our children, now and into the future. We are convinced, as the Rand Review in late 2005 confirmed, that “early childhood programmes entail costs, but the paybacks could be substantial”.

14. May I wish you all an enjoyable and fruitful seminar and I look forward to welcoming you back to Hong Kong for more sharing at the PECERA Conference in 2007.