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Comment: Talented parents pave the way
James Campbell
jamesca@deakin.edu.au

If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilisation, it expects what
never was and never will be -- Thomas Jefferson

ONE of the most important aspects of encouraging educational reform in Malaysia is
to develop and encourage buy-in by the citizenry into the need for reform and its
nature.

Buy-in by citizens in Malaysia's complex programme of educational reform is a
critical aspect of successful educational improvement. Whether we are discussing
the proper place and role of examinations, the medium of instruction or even
addressing the difficult and painful issue of racism in schools, the public interest in
these issues and the impact of each of these issues (and the myriad of other
problems which vex our educational landscape) requires us to recognise that parents
as citizens have a legitimate voice in educational issues.

Such acknowledgement in no way entails rejecting or diluting the professional
knowledge and expertise that educators have in advancing educational reforms.
Participation is best seen as respectful partnership where all participants learn.

Recognising that parents have a legitimate interest and positive contribution to make
to schools is part of an important debate both in regards to education and
democracy. Research into the positive contribution that active parents can play in
school communities suggests that parents are not simply a constituency whose main
role is to drop children off and pick them up from school.

Studies show that parental involvement in education ranging from active support and
encouragement of their children in the learning process through to involvement in
schools directly has a direct connection to improvements in educational attainment
and a sense of understanding and support for public schooling. Indeed parents
groups' involvement in public education is increasingly a fact that educators and
politicians have to contend with, like it or not.
In an educational environment where demands for accountability and transparency
of educational policies and programmes are now salient, the participation of parental
groups becomes a far more important part of the educational landscape than hitherto
experienced. More importantly, however, from my point of view is the ongoing role
that Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) play in schools.

Parents, who take part in the daily and often unrecognised work of committee
meetings, help in extra-curricular activities and fund-raising, are the unsung heroes
of our educational debate.

Promoting and enhancing school-PTA-community relations is a fundamental part of
transforming public education to meet the needs of the changing economy and
society of the 21st century.
Such support entails slowly extending the involvement of parents from the usual committee functions and support for out-of-school activities and fund-raising to extending the partnership role that parents can play in schools. For example, many parents have a desire to help and contribute to schools in ways which could genuinely add to the productive outcomes of schools' educational programmes. Using volunteers for activities such as literacy and numeracy support where there is a need is one such example.

Schools are also an excellent site to provide workshops and training for parents so that they can better help their children learn. Such partnerships do not exhaust the positive roles parents and schools can play with the former in advancing public education. Developing student learning and interestingly, advancing parental learning and participation through partnerships and engagement with public schools can truly reinforce the public nature of schooling.

Supporting and extending positive partnerships between parents and public schools can be a practical example of engaging the themes of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's recent Merdeka Day speech.

He pointed out that "each Malaysian citizen was crucial to the country's development and that he or she had the capability to contribute towards the nation's prosperity and well-being. The time had come for the country to fully utilise local talents". (Value Peace, Stability, NST, Aug 31, http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/20100831082827/Article/)

Where better to start than our educational institutions? Public support for public education is essential for Malaysia to realise its national development goals. Extending the public's knowledge of what goes on in schools, its participation and partnership in schools will aid in ensuring the continuance of support for public schools.

Recognising the vital role that an energised public, through Malaysia's committed parents can play in advancing Malaysia's development agenda is of critical importance. After all, as Najib declared, the "basis of integration among Malaysians should be built upon shared values".

It seems that our educational institutions are pivotal to inculcating those shared values. If this is true then it seems to follow that involving parents and the public, where appropriate, and where it benefits the interests of education and growth, in public schools is an important way of inculcating the shared values that are the basis of national development.

Najib's call for the nation to "fully utilise local talents" provides a way to begin achieving educational excellence.

Surely "utilising local talents" also applies to parents and the contribution they can make to our public schools? Seeking practical ways to realise educational progress through greater use and engagement of Malaysia’s talented parents and citizens in institutions is the key problem ahead. "Shared values" just might be one of the many positive results of this process.
The writer is a Lecturer in Education in Australia and author of Understanding Reform and the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Agenda: Discussion and Critique released by USM Press, 2010. Email him at jamesca@deakin.edu.au