

The Straits Times says

Vital step-up for disadvantaged kids

The Circle of Care programme, introduced at two pre-schools three years ago, attests to the difference that early and holistic intervention can make to the learning and social abilities of under-privileged children. The scheme, run by the Lien Foundation and Care Corner, led to higher rates of school attendance and learning gains among the children receiving attention. Gratifyingly, the programme will be expanded to 15 pre-schools, and two primary schools have come within its ambit to see how children could be helped to make the transition to Primary 1. There is a vital need to keep children with difficulties in mind, even as the education system at large strives to promote all-round development that will hold

children in good stead in a changing world.

Care Corner was founded in 1981 with the objective of helping the lower-income, particularly blue-collar workers, at a time when intensifying regional economic competition widened the rift between them and the wealthy in Singapore. Circle of Care is one of the ways in which this objective is pursued, with beneficiaries being served regardless of their race, language or religion. The project is a good example of the need to move beyond the idea of charity in helping the weak – for example, through cash support – and draw on the diverse contributions of professionals working together purposefully to bring about social change.

The advantage of the scheme is inherent in its

name. The programme weaves an integrated “circle of care” around the child, one consisting of teachers, social workers, education therapists and community partners. Typically, they work apart, concentrating their special expertise on segmented aspects of a child’s development. The scheme brings them together, pooling that expertise to identify the root causes of the child’s difficulties and to provide help on different fronts concurrently. Literacy and numeracy skills feature prominently on the educational priorities of the programme, which tries to prevent children in troubled circumstances from falling back because of a lack of sufficient support at home.

However, such schemes can work only if fami-

lies realise their potential to transform lives down the generations. It is natural for troubled parents to concentrate on the immediately relevant as the future of children takes a step back in pressing circumstances. Yet, a durable answer lies in seeking or accepting social intervention which provides children an escape route from the obstacles that their parents face. There is no shame in this, no proverbial “loss of face”. Singaporean parents owe their children the gift of a future unburdened by the woes of the present.

Professionals play an essential role but volunteers are well-placed to intervene informally in areas where concerted action can bring about lasting change for the better in vulnerable lives.