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Sunday September 24, 2006

Loos clean enough to study in

**Schools in Singapore have begun bestowing the title 'toilet ambassadors' on students in the hope that they will adopt the toilets and transform them into spaces for learning, reports FOONG PEK YEE as the clean toilet campaign gains momentum.**



PILOT PROJECT: Lau (second from right) at the Zhangde Primary School in Singapore where its principal Sroya Jaswant (far left) briefed him on the effectiveness of turning the school toilet into a place pleasant enough learn in.

FANCY having a discussion on how to turn human waste and urine into cooking gas and fertilisers over a chicken rice lunch?

This is what Housing and Local Government Deputy Minister Datuk Robert Lau Hoi Chew did. It was a little nauseating to hear him describing, rather explicitly, how to turn human excretion into "solid gold" during a lunch interview at his office last week.

Yet Lau, who returned from the World Toilet Summit in Moscow earlier this month, is looking at turning it all into a much-sought-after project. And he has been looking south for inspiration. In Singapore, certain schools have begun bestowing the title "toilet ambassadors" on some of its students, who proudly wear the badges to declare their status.

The island state's Zhangde Primary School is one such school.

Its "learning toilet" programme has seen its pupils adopting the school toilets and transforming them not only into clean toilets but also a place to gain knowledge.

The subject of toilets, however, is certainly not something that has automatically gone down well with all parents.

As such, Zhangde's principal, Sroya Jaswant, said the school authorities have had to conduct a "meet-the-parents" session to explain to parents the objective and rationale of the programme.

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She said changing the mindset of parents and convincing them of their children's role as toilet ambassadors – whom the school prefers to term restroom ambassadors – was a crucial step in kick-starting the ambitious programme.

First of all, she said, parents needed to be assured that the programme was not about having their children clean the school toilets.

“It is about turning the toilets into a learning place,” said Jaswant in her paper “Restrooms Good Enough To Rest In”, presented at the National Toilet Expo and Forum (Natef), an event initiated by the Housing and Local Government Ministry with the support of other relevant ministries, in Kuala Lumpur last month.

Jaswant said the programme, which started a year ago, has seen students being put in charge of the general ambience and orderliness of the restrooms they frequent.

They come up with themes to beautify the toilets (with drawings and decorations) and the topics must tie in with the school curriculum, she explained.

The themes thus far include “The Plant Kingdom,” “The Living Ocean,” “Man and his Environment” and “Outer Space.”

As such, visits to toilets can now be seen as a fun learning experience, giving toilets a newfound status. Assembly talks also include the subject on proper behaviour in restrooms, she added.

The restrooms have since become “cleaner and drier”, Jaswant noted. She also added that the students’ pride and sense of ownership of the restrooms has seen them consciously making every effort to upkeep the place.

Zhangde has attracted more than 50 schools which have come to view the state-of-the-art restrooms, said Jaswant.

The programme has the support from the Restroom Association Singapore (RAS), which initiated the Happy Toilet School Education (HTSE) programme about two years ago.

RAS president Tan Puay Hoon said the HTSE provides training for teachers to ensure the sustainability of their school programmes.

This is in addition to several innovative and hands-on activities such as *Let's Talk About Loo-tiquette* (school assembly talk), *Loo Excursion* (visit to clean public toilets), *Light Up My Loo* (school toilet decorations), *Loo, Attention* (toilet audit) and *Cheers to My Happy Toilets* (reward and recognition like plaques for decorated school toilets and badges for toilet ambassadors).

“Through the students, we also hope to influence their parents and relatives to be socially responsible toilet users,” said Tan, who presented the paper “Developing Gracious Behaviour In Toilet Starts From Young”.

She said the RAS, established in 1998, had via its HTSE programme reached out to more than 140,000 primary and secondary school students from about 100 schools.

Those appointed as toilet ambassadors have to attend training sessions conducted by teachers to enhance their performance, Tan said.

According to Jaswant, the status of Zhangde’s restroom ambassadors is on par with that of its student counsellors.

Zhangde has also found international fame, and at the top of

Lau's itinerary for his study tour to Singapore recently was a visit to the school's toilets.

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