

Education during a pandemic and beyond

Archival News | New Straits Times | 06/03/2021 | Author: THARANYA ARUMUGAM | a
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PUTRAJAYA: THE speed at which the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded in the country put decision-makers to the test and more so when they are heads of critical sectors such as school education.

Senior Education Minister Datuk Dr Radzi Jidin, who was sworn into his position a year ago on March 9, was met with the unprecedented announcement of a Movement Control Order (MCO) less than a week after he assumed office.

The MCO which took place effective March 18 last year, saw a nationwide shutdown and forced meetings with his administration online.

Radzi needed to make quick and effective decisions at a time of great uncertainty globally.

“One of the biggest challenges throughout the pandemic has, of course, been having to figure out the best decisions despite the unknowns about the pandemic,” he told journalists when met at his office here on Thursday for a special Setahun Malaysia Prihatin interview.

When the MCO was announced, he said the ministry was uncertain of what it would entail or mean for the education sector.

“Officers in a ministry have the understanding and knowledge of structural and policy implementations.

“However, this time around none of us nor anyone out there had any experience handling such a crisis involving the education sector at a large scale.”

Recalling the early moments when the pandemic happened, he said tackling school operations was a key challenge, and home-based teaching and learning (PdPR) amid school closures became the most heated topics of discussion at the ministry’s war room.

The ministry was well aware of the constraints concerning Internet connectivity and availability of gadgets and devices for students and teachers.

Hence, the initial approach taken by the ministry was to allow PdPR to be conducted based on suitability and convenience of teachers and students.

“Some teachers conducted classes online, while some sent the homework manually where parents could return the completed worksheets to the teachers at the schools or via the Parent-Teacher

Association (PTA).

“Although this was difficult, parents understood the challenges we were facing and Alhamdulillah, we managed to continue PdPR to ensure no learner was left behind.

Besides introducing blended learning, he said the ministry realigned the curriculum to ensure students could master the subjects and modules during the shortened teaching period.

Digital Educational Learning Initiative Malaysia (Delima), the ministry’s online learning platform was used to its full capacity and capability by providing educational materials to students.

On June 24, 2020, schools were allowed to resume in phases as Malaysia began to see a drop in cases, a decision which was not easily made, Radzi said.

With no prior experience of reopening the education sector amid a pandemic, the ministry first got down to drafting a comprehensive standard operating procedure (SOP) to be implemented across over 10,000 schools nationwide.

Among others, the ministry factored in space availability to ensure physical distancing could be observed at all times.

“Parents were doubtful but as students gradually returned to school, they were supportive of the decision.”

Schools were later shut again in October when the third wave hit Malaysia, but the ministry received flak for its decision.

“Various parties labelled it as a drastic measure, which was uncalled for. We will listen and take in all opinions or views, but ultimately it is the ministry’s responsibility to come up with a decision on the best way forward factoring in the students’ and teachers’ safety and health.

“It is a learning curve and we have been learning throughout the year figuring the methods and measures to be taken. Hence, we took a proactive step by temporarily closing down the schools as cases were on the rise.”

On Feb 16 this year, Radzi announced that schools will reopen in stages starting March 1 with preschoolers and primary 1 and 2 students, which he noted was not an easy decision. Several parties had criticised the ministry for going back and forth in its decision.

“There are no flip-flops in war. All decisions and strategic moves were made after careful deliberation and analysis of recent data, case statistics and discussions at various levels,” Radzi said.

“With prolonged school closures, there is a high risk of students dropping out of the education

system, especially those from the low-socioeconomic background, while some students have no access to digital learning.

“We decided to welcome preschoolers and primary 1 and 2 students first to give them room to understand and adopt the SOP. I was also glad and impressed to see parents acting in full compliance by sending their children only until the gates.

“The attendance rate has been good with students adhering to the SOP. We understand there are some challenges with the end of school session, but we have worked on five different models and schools are free to adopt other models deemed fit to ensure students are sent out accordingly.”

Another challenge the ministry faced was empowering TV Pendidikan to fill the gaps and help students with PdPR, especially examination candidates.

“Some have questioned the use of educational channels as schools are reopening. We will continue to improve these channels as they are being watched by students who have yet to return to traditional classroom learning, such as students at dual-session schools who may not be able to return due to space constraints.

“For instance, as primary students fully return to schools next week, the target audience would shift to secondary school students, especially those due to sit for their SPM at year-end. The channels can also be continuously used as part of teaching and learning.”

Radzi further said, figuring out assessment modes for students also posed a challenge, especially since the ministry decided to do away with UPSR and PT3 due to the uncertainties and to save students from examination stress or depression because they were unable to have face-to-face learning.

The ministry introduced a new single entry point application system for Form 1 and Form 4 students looking to enter specialised schools.

Additionally, it has drafted a detailed and comprehensive SOP involving over 400,000 SPM candidates as the examination could not be called off.

“SPM is an internationally recognised examination. Any changes require pre-planning and decision-making.

“We realised that SPM 2020 is the most challenging year for the examination in history. Hence, we postponed it to allow more room for students to study so that they would not be under pressure.

“For the first time ever, SPM answer scripts would be marked online. This has proven to increase productivity, hence results could be released sooner. This method of marking is something we feel can be adopted permanently.

Radzi said another challenging area to manage the past year was school infrastructure, concerning maintenance allocation and construction projects.

“We came up with a formula that is fair and comprehensive ensuring schools nationwide could be properly maintained.

“The ministry also looked into rehabilitating long-abandoned school projects, ensuring schools are equipped with facilities for pupils with special needs (MBK) and MBK infrastructure development.”

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Source By: New Straits Times