

Groom future Chief Ministers from pre-school level

By David Thien

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Kota Kinabalu: Sabah's future chief ministers should be groomed from kindergarten-level that will include instilling a love for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education subjects to meet emerging technology-driven challenges.

These were expressed by educationist Frederick Leyong Soh Andu and early childhood education specialist Sonia Chin in the first of the "Voices to Action" series by Sabah Action Body Advocating Rights (Sabar), in collaboration with the Kopitiam Council Podcast.

Sabah Action Body Advocating Rights (Sabar), in collaboration with the Kopitiam Council Podcast launched its first episode of the Sabah "Voices to Action" podcast with the aim of influencing parties and policy makers on what to prioritise in the governance and betterment of Sabah and her people.

Sabar will present its recommendations and findings to the State Government for further action later this year as Sabah's education challenges need to be overcome through policy reforms.

Frederick and Sonia said one of the urban early childhood education centres or rural kindergartens is where they could start their schooling journey to become better equipped leaders.

Thus, having quality teachers and kindergartens for urban and rural children is important in the non-discrimination sense of educational equity to bridge the urban and rural gap.

Educational equity aims to ensure all students, regardless of background, have fair access to quality education and opportunities to succeed, addressing disparities and removing barriers that hinder their learning.

It is about creating a system where every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability or other factors, has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Both speakers advocate for increased investment in teacher training, digital infrastructure and STEM outreach initiatives.

Sonia spoke on the importance of early STEM exposure, particularly in rural areas where access to quality pre-school education is limited.

They noted that STEM subjects although deemed difficult for many students is important to Malaysia for problem solving as developments such as Industrial Revolution (IR) 4.0, national economic competitiveness, automation, high tech data science and robotics, critical thinking, etc, create opportunities for a high-income economy, a high productivity rate, besides nurturing creative, inventive, innovative, logical thinking skills and which can reduce dependency on foreign labour workforce.

“Sabah’s future chief ministers must have the necessary exposure to mould good character, morality and a love for Sabah,” said Sonia. She called on the State Government to support private kindergartens as not all are financially independent, some are run by NGOs.

“Children can better learn STEM through fun and play, exploring these interests before formal schooling starts to encourage them to grow in this STEM journey of discovery, be independent minded to appreciate the world in which they live in,” she said. She noted that most parents now work to make ends meet and to pay for tuition later on.

Price increase in food cost and stationery, as well as salaries to hire qualified teachers for quality education are some of the funding sustainability challenges that the private education centres face.

“Infrastructure deficiency hampers educational access, particularly in rural areas where students have to walk for a long time to get to school, or have to take a boat etc. Access to public transportation can be costly.”

Frederick hoped everyone will play their role to provide the best education for Sabah’s future generations.

“Many parents are ignorant of the importance of STEM. Everyone has to play a dedicated role to provide the needed infrastructure and facilities, especially in rural schools so that they are laboratories that are equal or near-equal to urban schools’ standards,” he said.

He supported the role of the Dual Language Programme (DLP) in STEM education, noting that studying technical subjects in English prepares students for a competitive job market.

“English makes it easier to link with more published and online material resources. However, inconsistent DLP implementation, teacher shortages, outdated school infrastructure and limited digital access continue to hinder STEM progress in Sabah.”

According to him many schools in Sabah have small compounds and small class sizes cramped with many students that are not conducive for optimal attention from properly trained and qualified teachers.

Many are also not confident to take up perceived more difficult STEM subjects. Proper career counselling based on students’ aptitude for STEM or TVET potential is vital based on their interests.

“Government has to provide good infrastructure and pay better attention to repair bad roads besides providing proper laboratories and improving school facilities to be on par or near on par with urban learning centres.

“Government should also encourage professional development for teachers,” he said. This is about ensuring all schools have adequate funding, technology, and materials.

It is vital to develop STEM learning materials and teaching methods that are relevant and engaging for diverse learners.”

Sonia revealed an on-going pilot project where children are encouraged to communicate with senior citizens in a retirement care centre near her school.

“The children did beyond expectations,” she said, with seniors providing feedback on reminding them of their own grandchildren overseas or elsewhere.

An equitable education system can lead to more inclusive and cohesive communities.

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"Sabah Voices to Action - Shaping Sabah's Future Together" is a citizen-driven, non-partisan initiative running from March to June 2025, dedicated to amplifying Sabahans' voices, fostering meaningful discussions, and shaping policies on education, healthcare, public infrastructure, and good governance.

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