Speech Day 7 November 2008
Principal’s Speech

Last year, I spoke about the joy of coming to school in St. Mark’s. I depicted the joy in such a way that it could have appeared as if I were describing the school as a playground. But a playground is actually not a bad analogy for a school.

Playgrounds have recreational equipment, and St. Mark’s is no exception.

First, we have Swing-sets
In St. Mark’s, there are not one but many swing-sets; they take students as high as they dare go.

Allow me to highlight a few of our swing-sets for you.

The science swing-set.

Our students have always done very well in the sciences. As always, everyone in the school has been encouraged to fly high.

Yes, they do fly high. For example, having earned 8A’s in the School Cert Exam and thus being eligible for early admission to a local university after F.6, one of our students opted to remain in the school for F.7 to attempt the A-Level Exam. He met the “Straight A’s” requirement set by the Prince Philip Scholarship Foundation, and is now a student at Cambridge University.

As well as flying high, they also learned to fly together. Two students were selected for an international science program last summer, but alas, there was only one scholarship. The student with the financial means withdrew from the scholarship competition so that his classmate got the $20,000 and both attended the program together as very happy St. Markan brothers. They do make us very proud.

And there is the language swing-set.

Despite the extreme difficulty in retaining good language teachers, our school is very fortunate to have a team of teachers of a very high calibre. In our school, there has been a delightful transition from the languages being classroom-based subjects for examination purposes only to having them used for work, games and extended
learning in our students’ everyday life.

Our students have continued to prove themselves in English, Chinese and Putonghua, reaching goal after goal and moving steadily towards the target set a couple of years ago in the 3-year plan.

**Climbing frames**
Once upon a time all of us must have negotiated a climbing frame in a park. Do you remember climbing up rung by rung, the challenge and the fear? What about the excitement when you finally arrived at the top?

In our school, we help students to achieve their personal best. No, we cannot stop the work being challenging, but we can and we do offer structured programs and guide the students every step of the way. I would like to share with you a case from last year. You will rejoice with us, I am sure.

There was this girl who was doing everything one can describe as “unacceptable” and “dangerous”. She actually wanted to quit school but the school refused to let go. Honestly, it would have been a lot easier for us to turn our backs on her. So what happened? Don’t you worry, for I have good news. The girl is now doing very well, having moved up over 100 academic places last term and she has also turned over a new leaf in terms of character and behavior, a big thank you to all my colleagues who did more than they were expected to for our students.

**Slides**
There were times last year when we feared we were losing some students who had gone astray. It was a very painful experience to see them slide; and it was an even harder fight to stop them from going under completely and to fish them out of the murky water.

Discipline is never a big problem in our school, but schools being schools, problems do exist. A school would not be a school without some student behaviour issues, and a school should not be called a school if it chooses to ignore the issues and not to help the offenders. In bringing up children, I hope you agree with me that we can never have done enough.
Last year, the school had a fair share of difficulties, behaviour and academic. All these at-risk students were helped to stop them sliding further away from us and now they are climbing back to safety, with many of them having already reached a safe place.

**Sandbox**
A sandbox offers opportunities to be creative, allows a safe framework for children to get messy and if they fail, it will not be the end of the world.

One of our major concerns last year was “Creativity”. All subject panels and functional taskforces injected a good dose of this element into their programmes and activities.

Students were provided with ample channels to show off their creativity in school, as well as outside school, where their confidence was boosted by the many awards they obtained in many areas.

**Seesaw**
Supported in the middle, one end of the plank goes up as the other comes down - balance plays a pivotal role in this equipment.

“Care” was another major concern last year; we evaluated our achievement not only on the success of the top tier students, but all. All children should be given the opportunity to prove themselves. We introduced many extra-curricular programmes aimed at helping students to develop sound work habits and to overcome academic hurdles.

**Merry-Go-Round**
Learning is a fun experience. Riders get to choose their favourite seat and the carousel is spacious enough to allow everyone to ride together. The wide variety of academic and extra-curricular opportunities in our school makes it possible for students to develop their potential at their own pace.

The school-based junior curriculum was formulated two years ago; last year the amount of time allocated to different subjects and class timetables were fine-tuned to ensure a smooth transition to NSS in 2009. Twenty subjects are being offered at the junior level, the same number will be offered at the senior level.
**Maze**

There were many moments when we felt like lab rats running around the labyrinth of educational reforms, which unfortunately, were clouded by a lack of policy clarity and consistency.

For example, how many times have MOI policies been changed in the past decade? How many more are to come? What about the impacts of the resulting confusion?

Staff ranking is an issue that has yet to be addressed.

The NSS is round the corner. Not a small number of issues are still up in the air, awaiting EDB confirmation.

When it comes to Special Education Needs, it leaves much to be desired. Too often, the assessment of SEN students is very much delayed. Staff training courses are quick-fix courses, & there is the doubt whether teachers are really ready. The focus is on integrating SEN students into mainstream schools, but it would be ineffective one-way integration only, unless enough is done for the other students, ie, the majority, so that they become aware, understand and truly integrate.

However, we have not for a second lost heart. Teachers are addressing these problems and are working hard individually, within their departments and as faithful members of the school team.

**Skating Rink**

The skating rink is exclusively for teachers and parents. The adults can relax a little, and prepare to perform beautiful figure skating programmes and fearful triple loops as well. Yes, the ice at times can be slippery and the skaters do fall, but as a team, they help each other back on their feet and keep skating.

Staff development and parent education programmes last year were very diverse, but all had a convergent objective to upgrade teaching and learning. Our school also worked hand in hand with other schools, and teachers made enhancement trips abroad. The exposure to methodologies quite different from what they were used to has made a significant difference. A fund was set up to subsidize teachers to pursue higher professional qualifications.
In the run-up to the implementation of NSS in 2009, we needed parents’ suggestions, and for our part, needed to help them to understand and support the new government and school policies. A communication platform was constructed, and it has been working effectively.

Now that you know about the play structures, I hope you like this playground.

This playground, our school, is buzzing with noise – both children and adults are working, playing, contributing, growing and glowing.

The magazine that our students have put together this year is called *In Accordance With Our School Hymn*. There’s a copy on your seat.

If indeed our school is a playground, then our school hymn provides the ever-present background music. As we celebrate our Diamond Jubilee this year, we hear our children singing our school hymn in unison, ever more sweetly, ever more loudly.

It is a happy and very blessed playground.