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EIC trainer Zakiah Mohamed Ali (front row, with blue headscarf) photographed with Tatarstan teachers. She has been training teachers there since 2011. PHOTO: COURTESY OF EDUCARE INTERNATIONAL CONSULTANCY

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S'pore firm trains Tatarstan educators to train other teachers in classroom skills



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The Republic of Tatarstan, which lies east of Moscow, has been establishing a name for itself in recent years. Just last year, it topped national rankings in Russia for having the best investment climate among the Russian Federation regions.

Indeed, this region of 3.8 million people has become known as a "Russian Singapore", not just for its economic success but also its education ties with this country.

Education consultants from Singapore's Educare International Consultancy (EIC) have been helping Tatarstan to reform its education system since it inked a master service agreement with the Education and Science Ministry of the Republic of Tatarstan in 2013.

Over the past few years, EIC consultants have been working with various parties in Tatarstan's education system, such as principals, teachers and officials, to provide training to 38,000 teachers.

"Many countries are aware that Singapore's education system is widely recognised. What we do is to carry the Singapore education system and the way we do things over to these places," said Mr Alex Shieh, deputy director of strategic development at EIC, the internationalisation arm of Educare, a cooperative of the Singapore Teachers' Union. EIC was set up in 2006.

This involves re-organising the education system in Tatarstan to make sure that all parties are aligned to the same goals and visions, providing tools for them to manage change in an organisation, as well as providing new ways for teachers to teach content.

EXPORTING EXPERTISE

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MR ALEX SHIEH, deputy director of strategic development at EIC.



This was done through a "training of trainers" scheme: About 100 educators in Tatarstan were first selected for initial training by eight trainers from EIC, and these 100 educators trained 400 other district trainers in Tatarstan, under the observation of EIC trainers.

Teachers are also trained in classroom management skills, and taught how to facilitate critical thinking. For example, they are shown how the use of visual aids can prompt deeper reflection, said Mr Shieh.

"By flashing an image of a natural habitat - for example, a forest - on a screen, and getting students to identify what it is before removing the image and discussing what will happen if the habitat no longer exists, deeper reflection about the effects of deforestation or climate change can be prompted," he said.

Teachers are also trained in methods to encourage student participation in class. For example, instead of calling on individual students to voice their opinions in class, all students are asked to write down their responses to a topic on a piece of paper, working in small groups.

Studies show that this three-year training, which also involved visits by Russian educators to a range of schools here - from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) to Republic Polytechnic and ITE College East - has borne fruit.

After the training, more than 6,000 students were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statement that classes in Tatarstan schools provided a conducive learning environment. Between 2013 and 2014, this rose by 0.5 point to 4.1 on a scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating strongest agreement.

There was also an improvement of 0.6 point to 3.7 when 96 school directors evaluated the extent to which they agreed that lessons offered collaboration opportunities.

Most recently, in an interview with geopolitical news portal Russia & India Report last year, Mr Rustam Minnikhanov, president of Tatarstan, highlighted how the development of education in Tatarstan has played a key role in attracting foreign investors.

This project has drawn interest from other regions in Russia.

Last year, 20 master teachers in Tyumen, a Siberian city, were trained to deliver teaching courses to other educators in the region following a partnership between EIC and the Department of Education and Science of Tyumen.

The Singapore firm also ran workshops in the Republic of Bashkortostan in January for 94 teachers and in the Republic of Udmurt in 2013 and 2014 for 140 teachers.

Other places where EIC has conducted education training include Bhutan, Libya and China.

EIC trainer Zakiah Mohamed Ali, 37, has been conducting training for teachers in Tatarstan since 2011. After the workshops, there was a distinct improvement in classroom engagement, she noted.

"Students who were previously shy became more confident in sharing their responses with their peers... With improved facilitation skills by their teachers, students were able to provide more thoughtful responses," she said.

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