

# Mental health gap in schools

## Students call for more counsellors, peer support and service accessibility

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** Inadequate access to mental health support in schools is putting students at risk, student representatives tell a youth forum.

Ellvin Samuel Thanabalan, 18, said a clear support system in schools is crucial as teachers are usually the first people students turn to, given the amount of time they spend in school.

He said despite teachers' guidance, the current support system has too few counsellors and limited access.

He suggested that schools consider engaging psychiatrists or clinical professionals on call, allowing students to easily reach out to share issues that can be very serious at times.

"Besides this, schools should provide more comfortable spaces where students can unwind, such as lounges, to help relieve stress and support their mental well-being," he added.

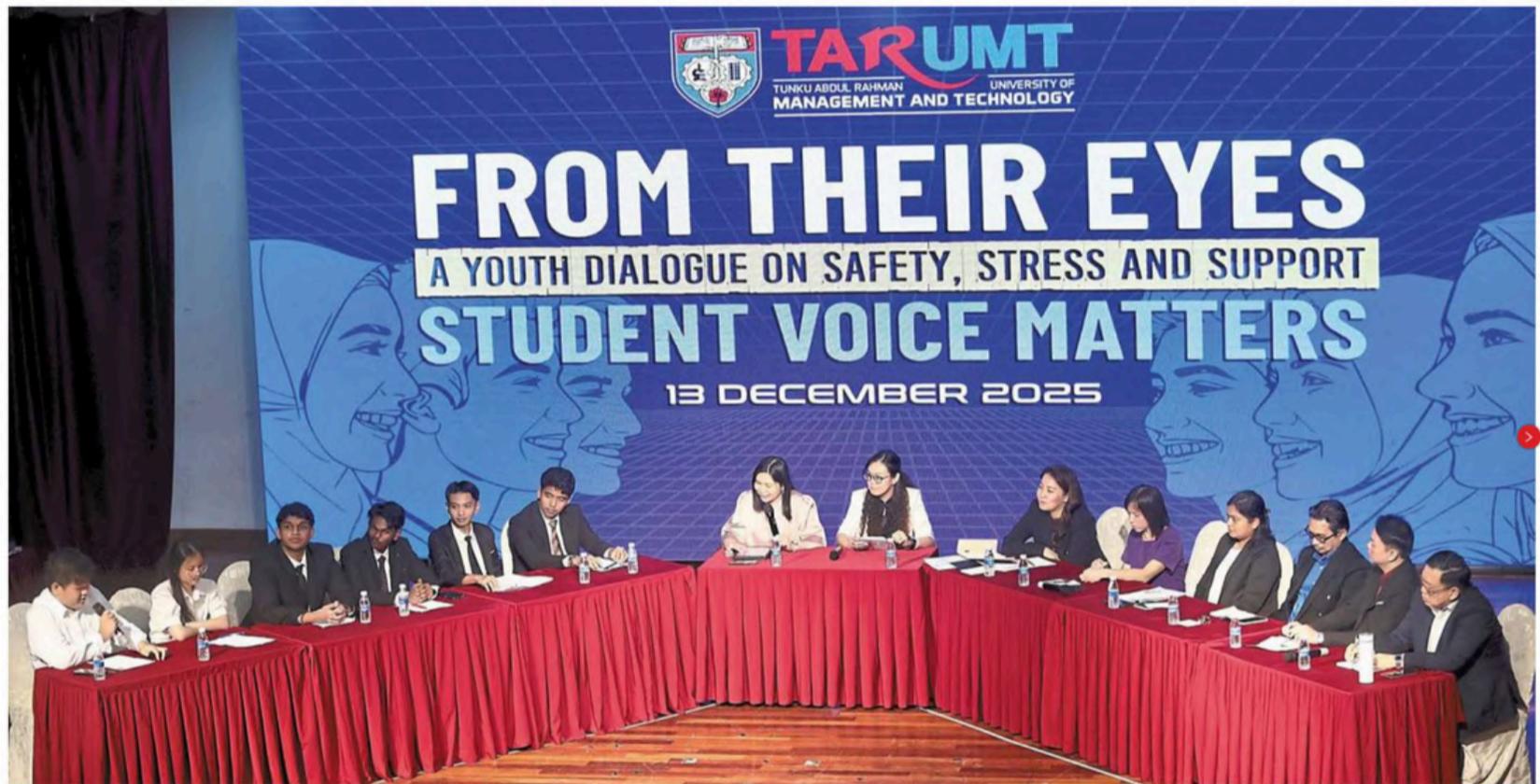
Ellvin was among the students who spoke at a youth dialogue on safety, stress and support titled "From Their Eyes: Student Voice Matters", at Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT) yesterday.

The event was held to brainstorm and gather insights for the Safe School 2.0 initiative, a joint effort by academics from TAR UMT and other higher learning institutions to address psychological well-being and safety issues in Malaysian schools.

Another student, Muhammad Fahim Zahran Mohd Fazli, also 18, proposed setting up more peer support programmes in schools, where students are trained to provide basic guidance and emotional support to one another.

"Besides teachers, most of us have friends in school whom we share our issues with and get advice in return. Sometimes we trust our friends more.

"Having this peer support programme not only trains teenagers to help the mental health of their peers but will also foster a healthy school culture through positive relationships," he added.



**Speaking up:** (Sixth from right) Datuk Dr Monna Ong Siew Siew, associate professor at TAR UMT and lead researcher of the Safe School 2.0 initiative, with panellists and student representatives during a forum at TAR UMT in Kuala Lumpur. — **LOW LAY PHON/The Star**



**United front:** (Eighth and ninth from left) Ong and Tan Sri Chan Kong Choy posing for a group photo with panellists and student representatives.

Another student Ng Jun Han, also 18, called for mental health support on campus to be more accessible and better organised, noting that many students are unaware of existing services or unsure whom to approach for help.

He said some students end up suffering in silence.

While students shared their

experiences and suggestions, panellists highlighted solutions such as early intervention and systemic changes to strengthen mental health support in schools.

Medical practitioner Dr Lim Kok Wee said early warning signs present a critical opportunity for schools to intervene before issues escalate.

"When students mentally break down, they no longer have the capacity to handle stress.

"Their ability to focus on studies declines, and this often manifests as poor academic performance," he said, adding that one key indicator is "fluctuation in school grades", which parents and teachers should monitor closely and address early.

Assoc Prof Dr Normala S. Govindarajo from HELP University's Faculty of Business, Economics and Accounting said schools need stronger management when it comes to student support systems.

She said proposals under the Safe School 2.0 initiative include hiring more counsellors, strengthening support structures and training teachers to provide basic counselling skills.

"There is a clear shortage of staff to monitor and support students' mental health, with the current ratio standing at one counsellor to 500 students, which remains limited in many ways," she said.

Panellists also stressed that open communication between students and teachers is key to preventing misunderstandings and addressing problems effectively.

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