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Pupils' personal growth, not grades, top factor for a good school, say parents

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SINGAPORE – A nationwide survey has found that parents' idea of a good school is one where teachers care about their students' social-emotional development and that places an emphasis on character-building and discipline.

This was the response from an overwhelming majority of those polled by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to find out parents' perceptions of the Singapore primary-school system.

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Pupils' personal growth, not grades, top factor for a good school, say parents

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Those who regard a good school as one that produces top scorers and has its students entering reputable secondary schools still form a big proportion of the respondents, but they are fewer than the first group.

The study, conducted from December 2015 to March last year, took in the views of some 1,500 parents who are Singaporean citizens or permanent residents, with children studying at about 180 primary schools here.

Most of the parents surveyed (97.2 per cent) stated that having teachers who cared about the socio-emotional development of students is an important, very important or essential feature of a good school.

The majority also considered the quality of teachers in the school (94.1 per cent) and its emphasis on character-building (94 per cent) as important, very important or essential factors when it came to picking a primary school for their child.

More than 95 per cent agreed that it was important for a good school to help students develop a strong academic foundation, give opportunities to all students regardless of family background and have an emphasis on discipline.

Those who indicated that it was important, very important or essential for a good school to have students with high Primary School Leaving Examination scores and who go to reputable secondary schools formed more than 70 per cent of the respondents.

> Parents, perhaps after an initial period of apprehension and anxiety over school placement and lingering concerns when the child first enrols, do eventually come to appreciate their child's school.
>
> **The IPS study**

More than 60 per cent looked at factors such as whether a school is affiliated to a good secondary school as an important, very important or essential consideration.

Only about 24 per cent of respondents associated good schools with those that gave a lot of homework.

Busting the myth that Singapore parents are "kiasu" or competitive, the study found that about 77 per cent of respondents said they did not do anything to actively secure a place in a good school for their children.

Most parents (close to 74 per cent) said their child managed to get into their school of choice.

Another finding showed that parents' alumni connections and the advantage this might offer in the primary school enrolment exercise may be "the concern of a smaller group than what the visibility of the public discourse suggests".

Parents ranked alumni network, parental and community support, affiliation with a good secondary school and affiliation with a clan or religious organisation as the bottom five criteria considered to be important, very important or essential.

"We hear people mention how it's so difficult to get into the schools, or do all kinds of things to get into a good school, and it seemed like there is a rarity of good schools," said IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, 43, who led the study. "But when we aggregate those results, we realise that's not true. Many Singaporeans feel the school their child goes to is a good school."

Addressing the debate over the Ministry of Education's (MOE) vision "Every school a good school", and parents' doubts about whether this would be possible in Singapore's achievement-driven culture, the study concluded that respondents showed high levels of satisfaction with the educational system.

"This finding challenges common perceptions that there's a major gap between the prestigious and neighbourhood school," the IPS report said.

"Parents, perhaps after an initial period of apprehension and anxiety over school placement and lingering concerns when the child first enrols, do eventually come to appreciate their child's school."

In response to the report, the MOE said it was "heartened" that parents "are increasingly supportive of schools' efforts to provide a holistic education for their children".

"We're encouraged that they themselves are putting more emphasis on character development and considering broader factors when choosing schools for their children," a spokesperson said.

The ministry has taken steps over the years to move away from an over-emphasis on academic results by, for example, not naming the top PSLE scorers and doing away with school rankings. Last year, it announced changes to the PSLE scoring system as another way to take the heat off the constant focus on academic results.

"We're hopeful that with the support and partnership of parents, such efforts will contribute to the balanced and well-rounded development of our children," the spokesperson added.

Still, more than 70 per cent of the IPS respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were anxious about having to help their child with numerous school tests or examinations in school — their top source of stress.

More parents (43.8 per cent) also feel that more emphasis should be placed on teaching IT skills, versus the 22.3 per cent who supported a greater emphasis on arts and music education.

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PSLE still a necessary checkpoint for students: Study

Most parents also agree that primary school curriculum should be more manageable

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SINGAPORE – High-stakes exams, such as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), are still viewed by a majority of parents as a "necessary checkpoint" for their child's learning progress and a way to gauge their academic aptitude against their peers.

This was revealed in a nationwide study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) that took a quantitative look at the views of 1,500 citizen or permanent resident (PR) parents with children in local primary schools on their perceptions about Singapore's education system at that level.

When it comes to parents' perceptions of proposed policy solutions to improve the education system, the study found that less than half of respondents, or 42.5 per cent, agreed or strongly agreed that the PSLE should be pushed back or postponed to a later age.

The remaining 57.5 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that high-stakes exams such as the PSLE should be postponed to a later age.

Most parents, or 93.7 per cent, also agreed that the primary school curriculum should be made more manageable, while 87.7 per cent felt that primary school class sizes should be reduced to ensure all students get adequate attention. About two-thirds of parents also agreed or strongly agreed that the amount of homework in primary schools should be reduced.

IPS senior research fellow Dr Mathew Mathews, who led the study, said: "There's been a lot of talk to postpone exams like PSLE as a policy change, but we soon realised there's no consensus."

He told the media during a briefing last week: "For most people, they're not against the idea of high-stakes exams ... a good proportion of Singaporeans still accept that."

The issue of whether the PSLE should be abolished had been hotly debated in the last few years.

Back in 2013, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had noted in his National Day Rally speech of the "tremendous stress" that the PSLE had placed on students and families. He said changes to the examination system would "reduce excessive competition to chase that last point".

In July last year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the biggest revamp to the PSLE, where the "T-score" system will be replaced by eight Achievement Levels (AL) from 2021, where one's placing is delinked from his peers' performance.

As for policy changes to make schools more equal across the board, 95.5 per cent of parents strongly agreed or agreed that Government funding should be increased to neighbourhood schools. Over 92 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that the best teachers should be distributed to all primary schools, while 86.1 per cent expressed similar sentiments about standardising learning materials.

Noting how Singaporeans still subscribe to values such as meritocracy and equality of opportunity, the study said: "The findings suggest that parents do support some form of redistribution, and there should be efforts to give children of all backgrounds a fair chance at success."