

Survey on primary schools

Parents happy with their children's schooling: IPS poll

Survey of 1,500 shows over 90% are satisfied with quality of schools, education system

Amelia Teng

Some people may doubt the slogan "Every school, a good school", but most parents in a recent poll do believe it.

More than 90 per cent of them felt that Singapore's education system is among the best worldwide and were satisfied with their children's primary schools, according to an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey. But the results also show that about a quarter of parents had trouble enrolling their children into a school of their choice.

They also felt fairly stressed about helping their children with school examinations and syllabuses, and large amounts of homework.

IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, who led the survey – the first of its kind here – said the findings dispelled the myth that many parents are very unhappy with the education system.

In his research on marriage, parenthood and singles, he had observed that people sometimes said they hesitate to have children partly because of the stress of the education system. He wanted to hear from parents if the school system is really as "daunting" as it is made out to be. The survey of 1,500 Singaporean and permanent resident parents conducted last year, however, found that most were contented with their children's primary schools, he said.

The sample of parents, whose median age was 42, had a proportionate number of children in almost all the 180 or so primary schools here.

Dr Mathews said: "Most people do feel that the school their kid goes to is a good school. Even if they didn't think so, they are satisfied with the (school) quality."

"(The results) also busted the myth that most parents are in a mad rush to get (their children) into a good school by volunteering

and moving house to get a place in that school," he said. "Sometimes, we play up the notion that most of our parents are 'kiasu' (Hokkien for competitive). That may not be the case for many, at least now."

Close to three-quarters (73.6 per cent) of parents said they could enrol their child in a school of their choice. More than three in four respondents did not undertake activities such as volunteering to secure a school for their child.

However, about 28 per cent of parents said they had experienced challenges in enrolling their child in a school of their choice. Of this group, more than half said there were too many applications to the school. More than 30 per cent also felt places for children with no alumni links were limited and there were few "good" schools nearby.

Dr Mathews said the overall findings are a reflection of the gradual shift in parents' mindsets. "Many of us as parents grew up in a system that placed a lot of emphasis on examinations and grades, so that pattern is still prominent in our mind."

But parents today are also concerned about their children's character and socio-emotional develop-



According to IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, the survey also shows that parents are concerned about their children's character and socio-emotional development. ST FILE PHOTO

ment, he added.

Almost all parents – 94 per cent – listed teacher quality and an emphasis on character building as important reasons for picking a school. Factors such as a competitive environment, affiliation with a good secondary school and parents' alma mater were ranked lower.

At least 97 per cent indicated that the features of a good school included having teachers who cared about the socio-emotional development of students, and providing opportunities for students from different family backgrounds.

Slightly fewer – about 73 per cent – said a record of high Primary School Leaving Examination scores made for a good school, and only 24 per cent considered having a huge amount of homework as important.

In response to queries, the Ministry of Education said it is "heart-

ened" that parents "have confidence in our education system, and are increasingly supportive of schools' efforts to provide a holistic education for their children".

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

Dr Mathews said parents' attitudes play an important role in their children's education, especially in primary school.

"If a parent thinks that the school is bad, there's a high chance the kid will also think the school is bad. If parents think the school will not help the child, you can be sure that the child will believe so too."

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Torn by conflicting desires, goals for their kids

Parents want everything, it seems.

Over half of those surveyed wished for schools to focus more on moral education, but also wanted them to put greater emphasis on academic subjects such as English and mathematics.

They said they were satisfied with their children's schools and teachers, but also wanted school curricula to be more manageable.

These desires might seem contradictory but people do have many considerations to weigh, noted Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

On the one hand, he said, they would like the school system to be more manageable.

"At the same time, they don't want to lose out. They know the reality is that their kid needs good proficiency in academics, even IT skills and many soft skills."

Parents face a tussle between wanting their child to be both academically competent and an all-rounder, one whose moral values and development are not neglected, he added.

When asked about their child's future, about 66 per cent believed university qualifications would still be more important in securing better work opportunities, compared with acquiring skills through schemes such as SkillsFuture.

"This suggests that many parents still cling to the traditional Singaporean mindset that a prerequisite for a successful career is getting a first degree," said Dr Mathews.

Ms Jamie Chan, 36, a corporate communications officer, said she makes a "conscious effort not to impose my expectations on my children, and to appreciate them for who they are".

Said the mother of two daughters, aged six and eight: "As parents, our job is to get to know our children, and help them discover their strengths."

Ms Mabelyn Ow, 45, who works in the creative industry and has two sons, aged five and 11, said: "There's always this sense of conflict."

"You feel so much for your child when you see him tired and crying from juggling everything – co-curricular activities, supplementary classes, trying to finish his homework."

"Yet, you want the best for him – you want him to do well so he is not left behind."

Amelia Teng

66%

Percentage of parents who believe university qualifications will still be more important in securing better work opportunities.

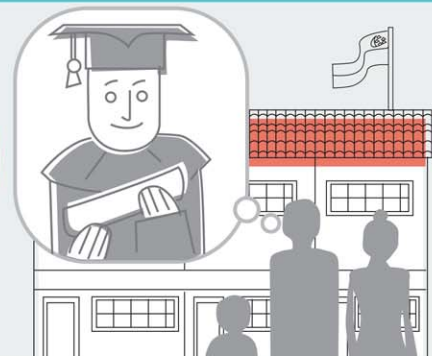
How parents see primary school

The Institute of Policy Studies recently conducted a survey looking at parents' perceptions of the primary school system. Here are some key findings.

Think highly of schools

90.4%

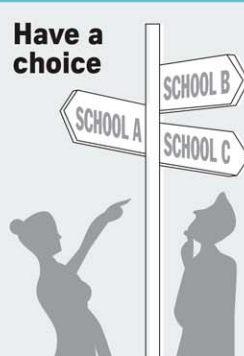
90.4 per cent of parents think that most primary schools in Singapore provide a high-quality education.



Have a choice

73.6%

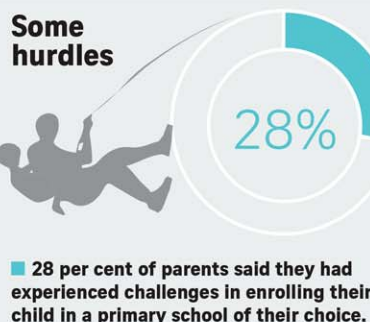
73.6 per cent of parents could enrol their child in a school of their choice.



Some hurdles

28%

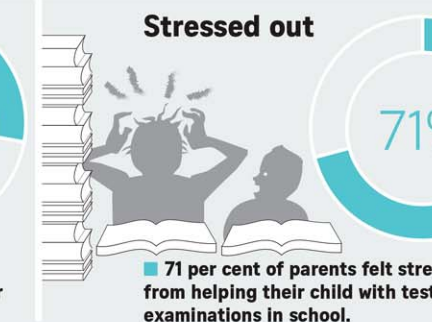
28 per cent of parents said they had experienced challenges in enrolling their child in a primary school of their choice.



Stressed out

71%

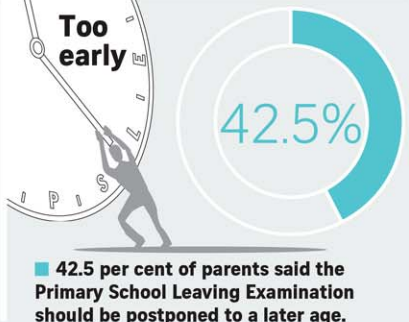
71 per cent of parents felt stressed from helping their child with tests and examinations in school.



Too early

42.5%

42.5 per cent of parents said the Primary School Leaving Examination should be postponed to a later age.



Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS: CEL GULAPA

Many parents say PSLE necessary, but helping kids study is stressful

The Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is still seen by many parents as necessary.

A slight majority of those surveyed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) did not agree that it should be postponed to a later age.

There had been calls to do away with or postpone the exam, which some say leads to unnecessary pressure for young pupils who are sorted into secondary schools and academic streams.

But IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said the survey results show there is "no clear consensus" on the PSLE. Less than half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed it should be postponed.

"Most people are not against the idea of high-stakes exams, a good

SYLLABUS HARDER THAN BEFORE

The syllabus looks harder than what I recall from my time. I am concerned that it will get exponentially harder in the years ahead.



MS JAMIE CHAN, who has a daughter in Primary 2.

proportion of Singaporeans still accept that," said Dr Mathews.

Last year, the Ministry of Education announced that come 2021, the PSLE would use wider scoring

bands, instead of a precise aggregate T-score, to reduce the obsession with academic grades.

Meanwhile, schoolwork, exams and the syllabus were common concerns for parents in the IPS survey.

About 71 per cent of parents said helping their child with numerous tests and exams was stressful, while almost 60 per cent felt anxious as they did not know how to help their child with the challenging syllabus.

About half of the parents said they were concerned their child could not keep up with what was taught or was not achieving the grades he was capable of.

Ms Jamie Chan, 36, a corporate communications officer, said her Primary 2 daughter has good teachers, but she also hopes the school syllabus will not get too tough.

"Her Chinese teacher, for instance, is doing a good job in capturing her interest in the subject, but the syllabus looks harder than what I recall from my time."

"I am concerned that it will get exponentially harder in the years ahead," said Ms Chan.

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Alumni, clan links least of considerations

Alumni links and affiliations with religious organisations or clans were the least of most parents' considerations when it comes to picking a primary school for their children, according to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

This is contrary to the perception that such connections are important in getting children into good schools, said Dr Mathew Mathews, who led the study.

Factors related to a school's external network were less important than attributes such as teacher quality, emphasis on character building and proximity to home. More parents – about seven to nine in 10 – also indicated that support for weaker students, facilities and infrastructure, and range and performance of co-curricular activities were essential qualities.

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