

Instead of the "special consideration" of parking subsidies, it is morally necessary to ensure that teachers receive a "clean wage" – where we properly account for the contributions of teachers without needing to provide extra frills like free parking, says the writer.
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The morality of parking fees and a clean wage

It is misguided to waive parking charges for teachers. If they work overtime or make extra contributions, these should be recognised in their compensation.

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For *The Straits Times*

Singapore is long overdue for a conversation on how its teachers can truly earn a "clean wage". And the answer is not to continue providing parking subsidies.

In late March, the Ministry of Education (MOE) decided that teachers will now have to pay monthly parking fees for their cars and motorcycles if they choose to park within the school compound.

This was the culmination of a three-year consultation process which began when the Audit-General's Office's (AGO) 2014/2015 financial year report noted that the Institute of Technical Education, Singapore Polytechnic and Temasek Polytechnic did not impose charges or had charges that were below the market rate, as noted by the

Ministry of Education.

For instance, the free parking enjoyed in ITE colleges accounted for a loss of \$66,000 in monthly revenue. This the AGO viewed as being "tantamount to providing hidden subsidies" and it is "not in line with the requirements laid down in the Government Instruction Manuals".

Under the Public Service Division's clean wage policy, salaries need to be fully accounted for without any hidden perks and privileges such as free parking for civil servants.

After MOE's decision, there was an outpouring of public indignation against the policy, not only from teachers themselves but also from Singaporeans from all walks of life – Members of Parliament, former MOE civil servants, former teachers, and even husbands of former teachers – who were seized of the issue.

Member of Parliament Pritam Singh said "I stand against charging

parking fees for teachers who drive cars or motorcycles". A netizen added that, "surely we can cut some slack for the teachers for their devotion to our younger generation".

In short, the argument is that some innate actions (like teachers' dedication) cannot be priced and we are cheapening their sacrifices by charging for such a trivial thing as parking.

This is, on the face of it, an illogical argument – sure some actions cannot be priced, but parking surely can, and teachers should pay for parking like everyone else.

The same thinking was applied by Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) which recently tried to offer an alternative to the MOE decision – HCI teachers do not have to pay out-of-pocket for parking because they can utilise their personal development funds which were originally to be used to improve their teaching capabilities.

This is a morally misguided gesture as funds meant to be used for teachers' development – which arguably can improve students' welfare if teachers are better trained – will instead be used to subsidise vehicle-owning teachers.

POLICIES AS MORAL STRUCTURES

To see where the moral issues arise, we need to see the necessity to charge for parking not as a mere economic issue (that is, removing an unintended subsidy) but as a moral one – that is, why is it morally right to charge teachers for parking – and also consider a related point, which is why sidestepping this rule is morally misguided.

First, the rule relies on equality of treatment – teachers are not singled out in this – as all government-supported civil servants are similarly charged.

Some argue that teachers deserve special consideration. Mr Singh states that "some public sector professions and services – and I

count teachers among them – must always be seen in an elected government's eye through a lens that recognises their direct and indirect contributions to nation-building".

However, instead of the "special consideration" of parking subsidies, it is morally necessary to ensure that teachers receive a "clean wage" – where we properly account for the contributions of teachers without needing to provide extra frills like free parking.

A deeper but still mistaken argument relies on the fact that public policies do support some inequality of treatment – for example in affirmative action. But as the political philosopher John Rawls pointed out, such inequality should benefit the least advantaged member of a community.

Vehicle-owning teachers are by no means the least advantaged group within the school community.

The argument of inequality, therefore, justifies the charging for parking, rather than the reverse.

Further, if we apply a utilitarian argument to the parking fees issue, we see that parking fees will create the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. The parking fees collected can be used for other pressing needs which will most likely benefit a larger number of people – a critical moral reason to charge vehicle-owning teachers for parking.

American philosopher Ronald Dworkin argues that for people to live well, human dignity needs to be championed. He proposes two principles through which we can determine dignity.

The first is self-respect. In this case, self-respect would entail everyone recognising that some individuals should not enjoy certain subsidies if they can afford it and are also not entitled to it; this is a category into which most vehicle-owning teachers would fall.

The second principle is authenticity, which requires every individual to take ethical responsibility for their own lives. The current societal backlash against the parking fees policy is inauthentic because it inaccurately equates the extra (unpaid) work teachers put in with the enjoyment of parking subsidies (which is only applicable to the special community of vehicle-owning teachers).

Hence, if truly we feel that teachers are not compensated for their work, surely we ought to push instead for better accounting of teachers' labour.

Examples of compensation reform include allowing teachers to claim overtime pay if they stay beyond office hours – already standard practice in other departments within the civil service and in the private sector.

Further, teachers should be compensated if they use their own resources to create products for the betterment of their students.

Lastly, MOE can mandate that parking fees collected will only be used for activities that will benefit students.

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