

Education still a social leveller but it goes beyond grades: Ong Ye Kung

Tweaks to system to foster broader definition of meritocracy, says minister at NUS forum

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Education is still the best social leveller, but there needs to be a broader definition of meritocracy, as well as the recognition that talent goes beyond just grades.

This is why the Ministry of Education (MOE) is tweaking the system, from ending streaming to giving the low-income better access to early learning, said Education Minister Ong Ye Kung yesterday.

He was speaking at a forum at the National University of Singapore (NUS) on whether education is still a social leveller today.

The other panellists included Mr Andreas Schleicher, director for edu-

cation and skills at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and Yale-NUS College president Tan Tai Yong.

The forum, attended by 329 guests, explored various issues, such as the divide between schools perceived as elite and neighbourhood, the role of pre-school education in uplifting children and the need for a more compassionate meritocracy.

Referring to the recent announcement to do away with the Normal and Express streams in 2024 for a system that allows students to take a combination of subjects at different difficulty levels, Mr Ong said: "In the 1970s, streaming was necessary to keep students in school... but looking at our needs today, I think that is not enough. So now,

we're going to band students at the subject level." The new system is meant to help every child discover his strengths and develop a growth mindset, he added.

He also highlighted the role of Uplift, short for Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce, in identifying the issues that hold children from disadvantaged homes back. It has already announced an annual scholarship for bright lower-income pupils admitted to independent schools.

Mr Ong said that the MOE has also set up kindergartens, which set aside places for children from lower-income households.

The purpose is "not to cap the top, but do what we can do to lift the bottom", he said.

Professor Tan said that while education has raised the standard of living over the years, society has become increasingly stratified, and fewer children from low-income

HOPE FOR CULTURE SHIFT

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MR ONG YE KUNG

families today are rising to the top. "Singapore's education system has become too differentiated," he said. While done with good reasons, this has led to an education system that sorts students by abilities, aptitudes and performances, he added. "But these aptitudes are not entirely free from socioeconomic factors, performance is not determined entirely by the natural and inherent abilities of an individual, but is, to a large extent, a function of socioeconomic and environmental conditions," said Prof Tan.

MOE is also trying to move away from grades, said Mr Ong, pointing out moves to cut down on exams in primary school, change the PSLE scoring system, ensure the Direct School Admission scheme fulfils its original aim of recognising pupils' non-academic abilities and focusing more on aptitude in admissions to polytechnics and universities.

"It would be unrealistic to tell parents that grades are not important," said Mr Ong, adding that the challenge is to strike a balance.

He added: "We are freeing up all these systems across the education system... trying to de-emphasise the overemphasis on grades.

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Education Minister Ong Ye Kung with (from left) Yale-NUS College president Tan Tai Yong, panel moderator Viswa Sadasivan, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development director for education and skills Andreas Schleicher, and Yale-NUS College student Ng Qi Siang. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN