

# Making P1 registration simpler can help make it fairer: Study

Process is confusing and gives advantage to privileged children, says Yale-NUS study

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Simplifying Singapore's primary school registration system is key to making it a fairer one – especially for those with less resources, according to a recent study.

The registration process – stacked with over 180 school options and a tiered system made up of several phases – is confusing and gives an advantage to privileged children, the Yale-NUS College study said.

Parents of such children, for instance, will have alumni connections to popular schools or may have the money to rent or buy a home near these schools, and change their address to increase the child's chances of getting a coveted place in the school, it added.

To increase diversity in such schools, the study said one solution can be reserving Primary 1 spots for children from low-income families, especially at the most popular schools.

And despite the stereotype of the overly competitive Singapore parent, the study said parents usually work together – instead of against one another – to navigate the enrolment system.

That is because the registration process requires parents to be “conversant... in a series of complex calculations” to assess their options.

The study, published in December last year, was based on the analysis of local media coverage of the registration exercise from 2010 to last year, as well as posts on the KiasuParents portal – run by a group of parents – between 2015 and last year.

It was conducted by Yale-NUS assistant professor of social sciences (psychology) Cheung Hoi Shan and sociology lecturer Mira Debs.

According to the study, some features of the registration exercise, such as the parent volunteer scheme, lack transparency and result in parents having too many choices.

It said: “The most savvy parents who can access the online forum KiasuParents are still confused and anxious, suggesting that non-users are at an even greater disadvantage.”

The system, it added, favours families who have alumni ties to popular schools, and those whose parents have the time, financial resources and skills to volunteer.

“Those who have attended elite schools and can afford to pay the \$1,000 registration fee (for alumni societies) can draw on their alumni status, those with an abundance of time and relevant

skills can become parent volunteers, and those with money can purchase a house within a kilometre of their desired school,” it said.

It added that parents without these advantages “end up taking their place at the end of the line”.

To solve these problems, the study suggested reducing the number of school choices by allowing parents to make a ranked preference of a few schools – similar to the secondary school selection system.

The study also suggests introducing a consistent and transparent selection process across schools, and reducing the number of privileged groups in the system.

“Retaining sibling and distance preference but requiring everyone else to ballot could also make the system more equitable for those without prior affiliations, or the cultural capital and economic resources to volunteer their time,” it said.

The Education Ministry is reviewing the Primary 1 registration framework to see how it can increase the number of places set aside under Phase 2C, said then Education Minister Lawrence Wong in Parliament in March this year.

Phase 2C – the fifth of seven phases in the annual registration exercise – is the open phase for those who do not enjoy any form of priority admission, and is based on home-to-school distance.

It is considered the most competitive, as it sees the most number of schools needing a ballot compared with the earlier stages.

This year's Primary 1 registration exercise kicks off on June 30 with Phase 1, which is for children whose siblings are already in the school.

Phases 2A(1) and 2A(2) are for children with alumni or other close connections to the school, while Phase 2B is for those whose parents have served as volunteers or are clan members.

Students, depending on their gender, can choose from about 185 schools.

One parent said that while simplifying the system may help, it will not address the problem of the resource gap between schools.

Financial adviser Jeanette Huang, 35, whose daughter will be taking part in this year's registration exercise, said: “Unless more resources can be allocated to neighbourhood schools, low-income children will still find access to good schools difficult because they do not live near them.”

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