



Kiasu parents have an unhealthy obsession with 'top schools' at P1 exercise

Stats around the primary school registration highlight the need for more work to realise Singapore's 'Every School a Good School' vision.

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When the slogan "Every School a Good School" was introduced in 2012 by then Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, critics said this was far from reality. Others dismissed it as a mere platitude.

Mr Heng later went on to clarify the essence of this vision: Every school is good in its own way and should aspire to develop its own unique and valuable niche, thereby bringing out the best in its students and contributing to a diverse and vibrant school landscape.

It has been more than a decade, but based on the patterns we have observed in the Primary 1 registration exercise in recent years, the sentiment in favour of "top schools" has become only more entrenched among parents.

HOT AND CONCENTRATED DEMAND

Our analysis of data from the Ministry of Education (MOE) on Primary 1 registration across all primary schools between 2009 and 2022 showed that competition for places has remained hot and concentrated.

A sizeable proportion of schools receive more applications than available vacancies. In Phase 2C, which is open to any child not yet registered in a primary school, approximately one in two schools was oversubscribed on average.

While the competition is less acute in Phase 2B, where applications are open to children of parent volunteers, members of connected clans or churches and active community leaders, the proportion of oversubscribed schools has nevertheless been increasing since 2016, especially among brand name schools like Methodist Girls' School, Ai Tong School, Tao Nan School, CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School and Catholic High School.

We also observed that demand for top schools has been increasingly concentrated. Economists typically measure concentration using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), which assesses the extent

to which an industry is dominated by a few companies that soak up market share. A low score close to zero suggests demand is evenly spread out, while a high score closer to 1 indicates demand is concentrated among a few players.

By applying the HHI to schools and their application rates over the past 14 years, we noted generally low scores. This is to be expected, however, since realistically no single primary school can absorb every student.

What was more concerning was not the absolute HHI score but its relative change over the years. We observed that the HHI score had trended upwards, especially in Phase 2B where it grew by approximately 30 per cent between 2018 and 2022. What this indicates is an increasing concentration of P1 applications towards a select number of schools.

The fact that the share of oversubscribed schools and the concentration of demand towards a few select schools have both risen simultaneously in Phase 2B suggests that oversubscribed schools have been increasingly drawing demand from less popular schools, rather than from existing popular ones.

FIRSTS AMONG EQUALS

Given the rise in oversubscriptions and the convergence of applications towards particular schools, it seems clear that many parents do not subscribe to the notion that every school is equal.

What types of schools receive the lion's share of applications? According to our findings around Phase 2B, schools that have received MOE awards, are autonomous, under the Special Assistance Plan (SAP), are government-aided, or offer a large number of co-curricular activities in sports and uniformed groups tend to be more popular.

These characteristics have a significant impact on a school's application rate, even after taking into account differences in cohort size and the number of available places.

Specifically, schools that received first-tier MOE school awards in the past, like Henry Park Primary School, received 50 more applications for every 100 available places, compared with schools that never received these awards, like Elias Park Primary School.

Similarly, schools with autonomous, SAP or government-aided status, like Anglo-Chinese School (Primary),

received at least 55 more applications for every 100 available places compared with schools that did not come under these categories, like Ahmad Ibrahim Primary School.

BETTER RESOURCED SCHOOLS

The fact that the popularity of a school is so strongly connected to its observable qualities offers clues as to why some parents perceive certain schools to be better than others.

First, while it is true that all schools in Singapore provide good physical infrastructure and employ competent teaching and administrative staff – as expected of a world-class education system – there are still notable differences.

One such difference is a school's access to funding. Primary schools in Singapore can either be classified as "government schools" or "government-aided schools".

Both types of schools are well-funded by the Government, but the key difference between them lies in their capacity to raise private funds.

Government-aided schools are in a stronger position to do so primarily because of their longstanding support from established alumni networks. The Methodist Girls' School alumnae association received \$75,261 from their membership subscriptions in 2020 alone.

While government schools are not precluded from receiving private donations, they receive significantly less than their government-aided counterparts. In 2021, Admiralty Primary School, a government school, raised a total of \$3,500 from donations and sponsorships, compared with Singapore Chinese Girls' School, a government-aided school, which raised \$56,000 the same year.

Having access to additional financial resources can lead to richer educational experiences, such as the ability to build state-of-the-art science labs, fund overseas immersion trips, or provide air-conditioned classrooms.

While every school in Singapore is equipped to achieve its educational goals, some are in a better financial position to do so.

EDUCATION AS A CULTURAL GOOD

A second reason for the perceived hierarchy of primary schools is the social and cultural weight society attaches to attending a "branded" school that can have implications for social

advancement.

As the demand for qualifications in terms of both quality and quantity intensifies, parents are increasingly competing in what sociologists call "categorical inequality".

In this system, one's membership in an elite category – such as being a Harvard alumnus – is what matters most, rather than how well one does within that particular school. Education has evolved into a cultural good with symbolic and material implications, and schools act as status symbols that differentiate one's position in the social hierarchy.

Many parents are acutely aware of this nature of competition, using not only grades but also the cultural power of school membership to give their children an advantage and help them stand out from the crowd.

CONFRONTING THE OBSESSION

These realities underscore the monumental question Singapore needs to answer: What must we do to end this national obsession with school status and branding so that we may turn the vision of "Every School a Good School" from platitude into reality?

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MOE's goal of making every school good. Some have even pioneered innovative programmes to promote the development of niche skills among their pupils.

As part of their Applied Learning Programme (ALP) this year, Primary 5 pupils in Dazhong Primary School were tasked to come up with tech-inspired smart home solutions to save water and electricity.

In a similar spirit, Damai Primary School conducted a photo journalism programme for its Primary 3 pupils in 2021 to build up their media literacy skills, exposing pupils to the dynamic world of journalism.

Other examples abound, demonstrating how despite the lack of alumni funding, a "branded" school name, or even oversubscribed Primary 1 registration numbers, some schools are committed to being good in their own unique ways. Whether these efforts are enough to forge a truly diverse primary school landscape remains to be seen, but the stage for further progress has definitely been set.

CHALLENGING HIERARCHIES

Without a doubt, some competition is always healthy and can spur good performance, but at this juncture in our national conversation, it is time to amplify the voices that speak for diversity and equality.

In recent months, public dialogue between the state and its people has shifted towards a re-evaluation of our social compact – those ideas and visions that hold our society together – especially with regard to education and work.

In her recent parliamentary speech in April, President Halimah Yacob called upon Singaporeans to "recognise the competitive stresses that have built up in our education system" and "not be unwittingly drawn into an educational arms race".

Our political leaders have shown their commitment towards reviewing traditional approaches in the realm of education. Society too must challenge its own assumptions.

We must dispense with hierarchical views of students and schools, lest we become stuck falsely dividing our nation's children as competent or incompetent, deserving or undeserving, worthy or unworthy.

Come July 4, the Primary 1 registration exercise will kick off, and in each parent's hands lies the power to confront the hierarchies that anxious parenting has long helped to entrench.

We hope that parents embrace education as more than just a tool to get ahead, but an opportunity, right at the heart of youth, to bring out the best in every child.

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Analysis of data from the Ministry of Education on Primary 1 registration across all primary schools between 2009 and 2022 showed that competition for places has remained hot and concentrated, say the writers. In Phase 2C, which is open to any child not yet registered in a primary school, approximately one in two schools was oversubscribed on average. ST FILE PHOTO