

Education arms race cannot be solved by MOE alone

Education Conversations will be more meaningful if schools, employers, parents and students also spell out what they are willing to do differently.

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When Education Minister Desmond Lee announced his ministry's Education Conversations recently, one phrase gave the exercise its real weight: the education "arms race".

The Ministry of Education (MOE) can review examinations, admissions and pathways. Yet an education arms race is sustained by social behaviour as much as by policy, and policy alone cannot fix it.

MOE has recognised this directly. At this year's debate on his ministry's budget, Mr Lee warned that the fixation on grades and achievements "diminishes the joy of learning", "takes away time from character building", and "pits our children against one another". He also said MOE is prepared to review milestone examinations, Direct School Admission (DSA), and secondary school posting.

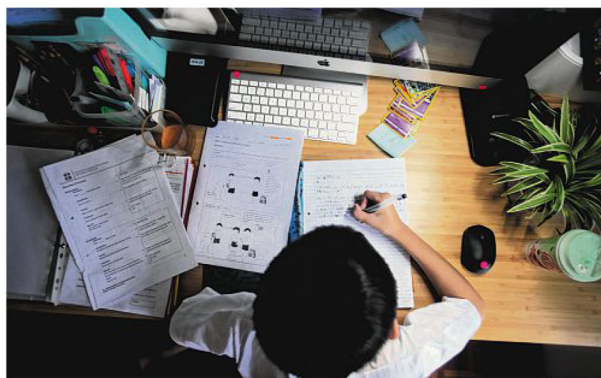
That is a significant opening. The harder question sits with all of us.

STRESS OVER PSLE

A 2017 study by the Institute of Policy Studies found that while many parents valued character education and believed every school is a good school, they still placed weight on academic results. Some 70.8 per cent cited helping children with tests and exams as a source of stress or anxiety, and close to three in four saw high Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) scores as an achievement-centred indicator of a good school.

More recent data points in the same direction. A 2024 CNA survey of 1,000 parents of Primary 5 and 6 pupils found that 99 per cent said good PSLE scores were important, 85 per cent said their children were stressed about the PSLE, and 64 per cent said they themselves were stressed. It also found 60 per cent sent their children to tuition classes. Among them, 65 per cent sent children to three or four classes.

Each family may feel it is acting responsibly. Collectively, these choices intensify pressure for all children.



Arms races rarely end because one party steps back. They end when enough people trust that others are also prepared to change. PHOTO: ST FILE

This is not irrational. Parents compete because the stakes feel real. Popular schools are oversubscribed and balloted. Property listings and housing fliers routinely advertise proximity to sought-after schools as a selling point. Many parents believe that doing well early keeps more doors open later, from school placement and subject choices to admissions pathways.

A recent National Institute of Education study reported how advantage can compound: even among students with similar PSLE scores, those from better-resourced families made greater academic gains later. This

is how meritocracy risks hardening into what then Education Minister Chan Chun Sing has called an 'inheritocracy' of privilege: when inherited resources shape who can convert effort and ability into recognised achievement. A family that eases off alone may worry that it is disadvantaging its own child. The arms race endures because stepping back feels risky unless others do so too.

THE PRESSURE CAN RETURN

MOE has already seen how policy changes can be blunted by social behaviour. When mid-year exams

were removed to reduce the overemphasis on grades and create space for more engaging learning, some parents turned to tuition centres that offered mock mid-year exams. While the formal pressure point was removed, competitive behaviour reappeared elsewhere.

The same culture is reinforced beyond the home. Relatives shape what children hear. Alumni networks influence how schools are spoken about. Employers signal which credentials count. If society professes support for multiple pathways while treating some schools as superior, policy change will be quietly undone.

The real question for the Education Conversations, then, is not only what MOE should change. If they are to embody a We First approach, they must also ask what schools, families, employers and the wider community are prepared to do differently. How can Singapore keep high standards while giving children more room to develop the curiosity, character, creativity and confidence they will need beyond school?

WHEN POLICY MEETS REALITY

DSA reflects the challenge. It was designed to recognise talent beyond exams and broaden merit, giving students room to develop their strengths. But it began with a group of highly sought-after Integrated Programme schools, and those roots still shape how it is seen. If families read DSA mainly as an early entry point to the most sought after schools, expanding it will not ease the arms race – it will only add lanes to the same race.

The issue is not a lack of interest. Applications from Primary 6 pupils rose from 9,000

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in 2018 to a record 16,000 in 2024. Yet, in 2023, only about 11 per cent of pupils entered secondary school through DSA, well within the 20 per cent MOE set aside. Some of that capacity went unused even as applications climbed.

Fierce competition and unused capacity can coexist only if demand is lopsided – possibly suggesting it is concentrated on a familiar handful of schools while places elsewhere go unfilled. If that is the pattern, the binding constraint is not the number of DSA places. It is how narrowly families define a place worth wanting. Adding places would not relieve the squeeze unless parents and students gain the confidence to choose schools beyond the established names, including those without the history of the original Integrated Programme schools. The shift required is as much in public imagination and confidence as in policy.

Expansion must also keep DSA

true to its purpose, and here a cleaner principle helps: two tracks, kept distinct. Singapore already has an academic route into secondary school – the PSLE. DSA should be the other: grades-blind, and focused on talent.

However, Primary 5 results are required for DSA applications. That blurs the purpose of DSA.

The aim should be to help more children flourish in schools suited to their strengths, including schools that may not carry the strongest public prestige. That requires broadening DSA in two ways: making it more accessible as a pathway, and giving families confidence that choosing a school for fit, not prestige alone, still keeps doors open.

PSLE remains the perennial challenge. Since the early 2010s, Members of Parliament across party lines have returned to the same question: can Singapore reduce the weight of one examination at age 12?

Full subject-based banding addresses part of this challenge

after posting. It gives students more flexibility in secondary school, so PSLE need not define their learning level across all subjects. That helps, but posting still sends a powerful signal to families about school environment, peer group, programmes and future opportunity.

Through-train pathways ask a sharper question: should some children be able to continue to secondary school without sitting the PSLE at all? Mr Chan explained the trade-off clearly in Parliament at his ministry's budget debate in 2025. Removing PSLE alone may not reduce stress if competition simply shifts earlier to PI registration, or later to the O and A levels. Such pathways may still deserve serious consideration, but they raise hard questions on selection criteria, late bloomers, and social mixing.

So, the issue is not simply whether Singapore keeps or removes one high-stakes exam. It is whether reforms can give families confidence that children can still be stretched, grow strongly and keep good future options open beyond the most sought-after schools and routes.

That weighing cannot be MOE's responsibility alone. It belongs to all of us.

Arms races rarely end because one party steps back. They end when enough people trust that others are also prepared to change. In education, that means parents, schools, employers, community groups and students talk not only about what MOE should do, but also what each is prepared to stop doing, start doing, or value differently.

Citizens, employers, students, parents and non-parents should be asked, and should ask one another, what they prefer, what they can live with, and what they are prepared to give up.

FROM FEEDBACK TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

The next step, then, is shared action. The Conversations should ask more than what MOE should do next. They should ask what the rest of us are prepared to do.

First, MOE could convene Singapore's first students' panel on the future of education, involving upper-primary, secondary, post-secondary and special education students from diverse backgrounds. Unlike a

focus group, it should not simply ask students for reactions.

Students would examine balanced evidence, question resource persons, hear from peers with different experiences, deliberate on trade-offs, and produce a short report setting out where they agree, where they differ, and what they wish society better understood. If the Education Conversations are about students' futures, they should be held with students, not only for them.

Second, add a call-to-action phase. The Conversations should invite each segment of society to make a tangible difference.

Every Primary 5 child and parent could be encouraged to visit at least five secondary schools, including some they would not otherwise consider. Like the National Day Parade National Education Show, this would create a common rite of exposure: families could see different school cultures, programmes, student journeys and forms of excellence for themselves, instead of relying only on reputation and recommendations.

Alumni networks could support clusters of schools, not only their own alma mater, so that

mentoring, donations and opportunities do not accumulate only where they are already strongest. Employers, community groups and industry partners can widen students' exposure through mentoring, partnerships, internships, service opportunities and school-based projects.

The true test of the Education Conversations is not whether they produce policy recommendations, but visible commitments from society that endure.

MOE can adjust admissions, reduce assessments and widen pathways. Yet education culture is shaped in quieter places: at dining tables, in WhatsApp chats, at alumni gatherings, and in how we speak about "good" schools. That is where the education arms race often finds new life.

If we want children to have room to grow, adults must help create that room.

That is how the Education Conversations can become more than another consultation. They can become a step toward the We First society we say we want to build.

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