

PI registration: Schools should be distinctive, but not exclusive

Access to popular schools should not become a channel for protecting and passing on social advantage.

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The latest changes to Primary 1 registration are meant to widen access to some popular schools. But they should also prompt a harder question: What exactly are we trying to preserve when families feel strongly about particular primary schools?

From the 2027 exercise, most primary schools will reserve 60 places for Phase 2C – the open phase for all students, regardless of whether or not they have a prior connection to the school – up from 40 places.

Twelve schools in neighbourhoods with relatively little public housing will also split their Phase 2C places between applicants living within 2km and those beyond 2km.

The Ministry of Education has said these moves seek to broaden access to our schools and enable greater mixing among students from different backgrounds.

This is a worthwhile direction, and it invites us to distinguish between what is genuinely worth preserving in a school and the advantages that may have accumulated around access to it.

WHAT IS WORTH PRESERVING

Some schools have religious roots, while others carry strong linguistic or cultural traditions, or histories shaped by particular communities. Families may value these identities because they connect children to a faith, language, heritage or community across generations.

Alumni ties can matter too: Familiar rituals, school stories, remembered teachers and even unique school uniforms or the school song can give families continuity. Communities that built and sustained these schools

rightly take pride in what they created.

There is nothing inherently problematic about wanting a child to share a school tradition that matters to one's family. The difficulty arises when such attachment becomes intertwined with the belief that access to a particular school also confers educational or social advantage.

The practical question is how far that attachment should translate into priority for a scarce place.

ARE SOME PRIMARY SCHOOLS REALLY 'BETTER'?

Our earlier research offers some reasons to question how stark the perceived divide really is, though it rests on parents' assessments of their children's schools rather than an objective comparison of school quality.

An Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey conducted in 2016 involved 1,500 parents whose children were enrolled in nearly every primary school in Singapore. Some 88.5 per cent agreed that their child's school had good facilities, while more than nine in 10 said teachers provided good support and cared about students' socio-emotional development.

Parents whose children attended schools commonly perceived as more prestigious did not report substantially better teachers, facilities or attention to student development than parents in other schools.

The clearer difference was in competitiveness. Some parents may believe that placing a child among high-achieving students will spur effort and ambition, but this should not become an argument that a strong learning culture necessarily depends on concentrating similarly well-resourced families in the same school.



There is nothing inherently problematic about wanting a child to share a school tradition that matters to one's family, say the writers. The difficulty arises when such attachment becomes intertwined with the belief that access to a particular school also confers educational or social advantage. PHOTO: ST FILE

WHEN ADVANTAGE COMPOUNDS

Parents will always try to give their children advantages through tuition, enrichment, exposure, or choices about where to live. Public policy should not eliminate all such differences.

The concern arises when these advantages reinforce one another. Housing resources affect where a family can live; location affects school access; and a school may then become more sought after because of the families already represented there, the expectations surrounding its brand name or its networks.

A public institution can then unintentionally pass advantage across generations.

The new framework recognises one part of this dynamic. Home-school distance remains sensible, but proximity is not socially neutral when housing around some schools is mostly private. That is the rationale for the two-track scheme for 12 schools where public housing makes up less than 40 per cent of dwelling units within 2km.

Families who deliberately chose homes in close proximity to these schools may understandably feel that an expectation attached to proximity has shifted. That concern should not be dismissed, but access to a public school should not depend heavily on whether a family can afford nearby housing.

SCHOOLS AS COMMON SPACES

Schools are also among the few places where children encounter social difference early and routinely.

The 2024 IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language found that 42.7 per cent of respondents expressed some preference for doing activities with people of similar income levels, up from 35.9 per cent in 2018. The share saying they found it difficult to mix with people from another income bracket rose from 33.8 per cent to 37.6 per cent.

A majority of respondents still disagreed with both statements, so the data does not show Singaporeans retreating into class

enclaves. Even so, the direction is worth noticing: The risk is not only hostility across class lines, but also that people's lives simply stop intersecting.

In the same survey, 91.6 per cent agreed that it was good for children to play with others from a variety of backgrounds, and more than nine in 10 across every income group agreed with this.

Primary school is one of the few institutions where this can happen naturally. Children meet classmates who live in different kinds of homes, celebrate different occasions and have parents in different occupations.

The value of these encounters lies partly in how ordinary they are: Children play, disagree, share food, work on projects and become friends. Through them, they come to know a Singapore larger than the social circle into which they happened to be born.

ACCESS ALONE WILL NOT BE ENOUGH

We should not overstate what the changes can achieve.

Living more than 2km from a school does not make a family disadvantaged; for instance, better-resourced families are typically better able to manage longer commutes with private vehicles.

A different admissions rule therefore does not automatically produce socio-economic diversity, because the real test is whether these schools become more socially varied over time.

Nor is diversity of intake the same as integration.

Research by economist Raj Chetty and colleagues in the US distinguishes between exposure to people from different socio-economic backgrounds and whether friendships actually form across those lines; both mattered substantially for cross-class connectedness.

That distinction matters in schools too, where enrichment, outings, parent-organised activities and informal expectations can still shape whether children participate on equal footing.

As more families without prior ties enter these schools, they can participate in the schools' traditions and, over time, become part of those alumni communities. After all, traditions endure not simply by being inherited, but also by being shared.

WHAT 60 PLACES COULD CHANGE

The question, ultimately, is whether schools with proud histories, strong traditions and distinctive cultures can share them more broadly with new families without losing what makes them distinctive or becoming proxies for protected social advantage.

Twenty additional reserved places for most schools and a two track-scheme for 12 schools will not transform a school's composition overnight, nor should we expect them to.

Their significance is incremental: They create more opportunities for families without prior ties and those from different backgrounds to enter these school communities.

If those families participate fully and find the schools remain just as strong, perceptions may gradually change.

Parents may become less convinced that a particular school must be secured at almost any cost; alumni may see that preserving a tradition is compatible with sharing it more widely; and schools can remain distinctive even as their communities reflect a broader cross-section of society.

If that happens, those 60 reserved places may matter for much more than the number itself.

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