

MOE to engage S'poreans on PSLE, DSA and school choice: David Neo

Focus will be on transition from primary to secondary school, where pressure is highest

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The PSLE, Direct School Admission (DSA) and other pressure points in Singapore's education system will come under closer scrutiny as the Ministry of Education (MOE) looks at ways to ease the "arms race" surrounding school.

Second Minister for Education David Neo said on Sept 29 that the next phase of engagements with Singaporeans by MOE will focus on the transition from primary to secondary school, where pressure on young students is often most acute.

The conversations will delve into the parts of the system that most fuel competition and anxiety, said Neo, and where thoughtful changes could give children more room to grow.

Speaking at the close of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Forum on Parents and Schooling, Neo said three topics have surfaced repeatedly since the Education Conversations began: the PSLE, DSA and how to strengthen schools across the system.

The Education Conversations,

which began in April and will continue into 2027, are held by MOE to gather views and ideas on education policies.

Neo's comments come as a new study by IPS on parents' attitudes towards education found that more of them are feeling stressed and anxious about their children's futures and whether they will fall behind in the long run.

The study, conducted from May to August, surveyed 1,500 Singaporean and permanent resident parents aged 21 to 65 who had at least one child attending a local primary school.

Speaking at the National University of Singapore Society's Kent Ridge Guild House, Neo said MOE wants to build a system that gives parents the confidence to place less emphasis on achievement and more on holistic development, knowing that doing so will still prepare their children for long-term success.

"Let me be clear: We are not against striving. Nor are we talking about dropping standards," he said. "But healthy striving is different from endlessly chasing the last mark."

The aim, he added, is not to remove all competition, stress or



Speaking at the IPS Forum on Parents and Schooling, Second Minister for Education David Neo said MOE wants to build a system that gives parents the confidence to place less emphasis on achievement and more on holistic development, knowing that doing so will still prepare their children for long-term success. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

disappointment from education. "That would not be realistic, nor would it prepare our children well for life," he said.

Other countries that have reduced or removed major examinations have found that pressure does not simply disappear, but re-emerges in other ways, Neo noted.

Instead, the aim is to ensure that competition does not become so all-consuming that it crowds out other qualities children need to

flourish.

But the IPS study and the Education Conversations "tell us that we need to go further", Neo said.

Many parents want to raise well-rounded children without having to optimise every decision for the next academic milestone, he added.

The IPS findings reflect this tension, he added. While parents want a more holistic education for their children, parental stress has

risen and families are spending more time and money on tuition and enrichment.

"Most parents are not asking for this race. They are saying that they cannot be sure their children can afford to sit it out," Neo said.

Even parents who want to step back may still take part in the competition because they hope to give their children the best chance of succeeding, he added.

"The result is an unhealthy

'arms race' that few want, but many feel compelled to be part of."

PSLE AND TRADE-OFFS

Turning to the PSLE, Neo said the ministry had heard many suggestions to reduce the stakes of the examination, including removing it, postponing it or making it optional.

Some have suggested adjusting the scoring bands or changing how students are posted to secondary schools.

While each idea addresses a concern, it could also create new pressures, Neo said.

For instance, if secondary school posting were no longer based mainly on PSLE results, alternatives could include balloting or proximity or a through-train model.

But more balloting could increase uncertainty and anxiety, while relying on proximity could worsen social mixing by grouping students according to where they live, he said.

A through-train model, meanwhile, could shift competition to Primary 1 admission and reduce students' ability to choose a secondary school that suits their interests and needs.

"These trade-offs are not reasons to avoid change. They are reasons to be clear-eyed about our aims and about both the intended as well as unintended effects," Neo said.

DSA A SECOND FRONT IN THE 'ARMS RACE'

The DSA is another major concern, he said. "For some families, DSA has become a second front in the 'arms race', adding to the anxiety."

Children may find themselves preparing for the PSLE while also

building a DSA portfolio in the hope of getting into a preferred school.

Some parents worry that better-resourced families can afford specialised training that others cannot. At the same time, others have benefited from a pathway that recognises talents and strengths beyond academic grades.

As with the PSLE, suggestions have included scaling back the DSA or removing it altogether. Others have proposed focusing more on aptitude and interest, rather than skills that can be intensively coached.

But each option comes with trade-offs, Neo said. Narrowing the DSA too much could send the message that examination performance is the only form of merit that counts, while broadening it without care could create more areas in which families feel they have to invest to compete.

Placing greater emphasis on aptitude could also make assessments more subjective and potentially be seen as unfair, said Neo.

Removing the DSA entirely could shift pressure back to the PSLE and reinforce the idea that academic results matter most.

"So the goal is not more or less DSA. It is to reconnect talent recognition with genuine development," Neo said.

CHOOSING A SCHOOL NEED NOT FEEL LIKE CHOOSING A DESTINY

The third area the MOE is looking at is strengthening confidence in schools across the system, amid persistent perceptions that some schools are "good" while others are less desirable.

"We want parents to trust that schools across the system can help their children thrive, and to choose more by fit than by reputation," Neo said.

This includes looking at how schools' different strengths can be made better known, and how parents can be encouraged to look beyond prestige and popularity in making school choices.

"If families trust that schools across the system can help their child thrive, any single posting outcome will carry less weight," Neo said, acknowledging that parents will still have preferences and schools are different in history, culture and programmes.

But "choosing one school over another need not feel like choosing a destiny", he said.

Calling on Singaporeans to contribute to the ongoing series of conversations, Neo said education changes alone cannot lower the stakes entirely. Lasting change also depends on employers, institutions and society recognising multiple pathways and different strengths, he said.

"There are no easy answers. That is why we are consulting widely, rather than rushing to a single solution," he said.

Earlier in the day, a panel discussion moderated by IPS deputy director Aaron Maniam examined the findings of the IPS survey on parents' attitudes towards education.

On the panel was IPS principal research fellow Mathew Mathews, one of three researchers behind the study; Community Psychology Hub principal clinical psychologist Quah Saw Han; Mums@Work Singapore founder Sher-li Torrey; and Singapore Institute of Technology associate vice-provost Intan Mokhtar.

The panellists spoke about how parental stress has persisted even with broadened aspirations and how they had navigated their own children's education.

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