



A better way to allocate school places

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09 MAY

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One of the key causes of this stress is how students' aggregate scores are used to allocate places in secondary school. A student with a higher aggregate will be posted to one of his six choices before the next student is considered. This is an objective and meritocratic system.

However, it results in a skewed allocation where top students congregate in a few schools. Take the example of two Integrated Programme (IP) schools: The aggregate range of those posted to Nanyang Girls' High School (NYGH) this year is 265 to 280, while that for Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS) is 251 to 260. The top student posted to SCGS is five points away from the last student in NYGH.

It is no surprise that the top students in the top schools go on to perform well in the O- or A-Levels. This results in the perception that some schools are better than others, breeding elitism. Parents push their primary school children to prepare beyond what is required, to get into these schools. A related consequence is the unfair misconception that teachers in the less popular schools are not as good.

There have been many suggestions on replacing or tweaking the PSLE. Let's look at some of them. Firstly, if we do away with PSLE, how do we allocate students to secondary schools in an objective and meritocratic way?

Option 1: Have popular schools administer their own entrance exams and interviews. The advantage is that only students who want to get in need to take exams; the rest can proceed to secondary schools via a through-train system. The downside of this approach is that parents may make their child sit for several entrance exams to increase their chances of getting into a top school, resulting in even more stress. We already see this happening with the Direct School Admissions (DSA) exercise.

Option 2: If we make all schools through-train from primary to secondary, the current top schools will need to be partnered with a primary school. This will result in parents scrambling for a Pri 1 place in these partner schools, intensifying the competition at that level.

OTHER WAYS OF ALLOCATING?

If the PSLE is retained, what are some options for tweaking the system for allocating places?

Option A: Prioritise a student's choice of secondary school ahead of his aggregate score. The problem is that a student may end up not getting into any of his choices, even with a high aggregate score (being beaten to his first choice by others with a higher aggregate, or to his second-through-sixth choices by those who put it as their first choice). This is not meritocratic.

Option B: Use raw scores and grades which can be translated into a point system like the O-Levels, instead of aggregate score. The good thing is that every student would know his true standard and everyone getting more than 90 marks would receive an A*. But when there are too many people with the same grades vying for a limited number of vacancies, how do schools determine who to accept? By balloting?

There are many more ways of tweaking the PSLE, but all are not so straightforward since changing one part of the system will affect another part of it.

Let me suggest a simple tweak to the system to balance out the allocation of students.

SPREADING THE COHORT

The MOE could consider allocating secondary school places by school and by class, instead of by school only. This is to ameliorate the skewed allocation of top students in a few "elite" schools.

Let's say IP schools A to F have six classes of 30 places each. For simplicity's sake, let's assume the top 220 students all opted for the same schools A to F as their six choices, in the same order of preference. Under the current system, the top 180 students would be posted to school A before the next 40 go to school B, leaving schools C to F without any top students.

With the new approach, the first 30 students with the highest aggregate scores would be posted to school A, class 1; the next 30 students posted to school B, class 1 and so on — until we come back around to school A, class 2; school B, class 2, etc.

Of course, this illustration is oversimplified since the top students will not all choose the same schools in the same order. But the principle still works: Among those who select school A as their first choice, the 30 students with the highest scores get into class 1 (the same would be true of schools B through F). The 31st student to select school A (or B, C, etc) then gets posted to his or her second-choice school.

Based on the total number of IP school places available after the DSA exercise, the MOE could determine the number of students who will be guaranteed a place in IP schools and inform them accordingly in their eligibility letter.

As not all students who qualify for IP schools will opt for them, the next 1 per cent of students on the list can be told to try for an IP school, though they should also indicate Express school options.

CONSEQUENCES

By spreading out the top pupils across the IP schools, each will have its fair share of top and very good students. A student with a score of 250 would stand an equal chance of getting into a top school as another with a score of 270. Cut-off scores would also become irrelevant.

If this approach could be extended across all secondary schools, then the gaps in students' academic standards across schools would be narrowed, and the schools would be differentiated predominantly by their niche programmes.

For students, it means there is no guarantee of getting into their first-choice school, even if they have a high aggregate score — unless they are the top 30.

And since this is a remote possibility, the effect could be to reduce the pressure on the vast majority of students, except those consciously striving at the very top.

Is this still a meritocratic system, since students with very high aggregate scores may not end up with their first two choices?

Certainly. These students still get priority consideration in their posting choices, relative to others, and they will get one of their preferences.

A trial study could be conducted with past cohorts' PSLE data and choices of schools to assess the effects of such a tweak.

It may not solve all the stress-related issues of the PSLE, but it goes some way to doing so, and it is necessary to reinforce the idea that all schools are good schools — especially if we achieve a good academic mix of students in every one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Educator Jake Goh holds a degree in computer science from NUS and another in psychology from Murdoch University. He attended the Ministry of Education's session of Our Singapore Conversation on April 17.