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Fine-tuning the Direct School Admission scheme



Preparations for the annual Direct School Admission (DSA) exercise for secondary schools have started again. The Singapore Sports School fired the first salvo with its [Open](#) House on March 29, followed closely by the NUS High School of Mathematics and Science on April 5 and the School of the Arts on April 12.

BY JAKE GOH - APRIL 11

Preparations for the annual Direct School Admission (DSA) exercise for secondary schools have started again. The Singapore Sports School fired the first salvo with its [Open](#) House on March 29, followed closely by the NUS High School of Mathematics and Science on April 5 and the School of the Arts on April 12.

The DSA is an admission exercise for participating secondary schools to select talented Primary 6 students before the release of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) [results](#). Students who excel in their co-curricular activities or studies can apply during the annual exercise typically held from June to August. Each year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) receives about 15,000 non-unique DSA applications, with some students submitting multiple applications. About 2,600 students are admitted to schools via the DSA annually.

The MOE introduced the scheme in 2004 to give selected schools the autonomy to admit students with a more diverse range of achievements and talents. So far, the scheme has achieved its aim, especially for the specialised independent schools where almost all the students have [entered](#) via the DSA, and the Integrated Programme schools, where up to half were admitted through the scheme. Some of these students would not qualify for these schools based on their PSLE scores. They include those who are outstanding in all subjects but one, typically Mother Tongue. Schools that take in students who eventually score more than 30 points below its cut-off point would have to ensure that these students can cope in class.

With the DSA scheme now into its 10th year, a pertinent question to ask is whether there are ways we can improve it.

ADDRESSING SHORTCOMINGS

Currently, there are no restrictions on the number of [applications](#) a student can submit. To increase the chances of admission, some parents and students submit applications to more than three schools. The trials and tests involved can only stress and tire out the students. The MOE should consider setting a limit to prevent students from burn-out before the PSLE.

However, the main flaw of the scheme lies in the [application](#) process and the use of Confirmed Offer (CO) and Waiting List (WL).

Currently, after the Selection Stage in end August, some students will receive COs from more than one school, resulting in many eligible applicants being put on the WL. Only when students with COs reject the offers can those on the WL get a place. There is no point in offering any student more than one CO when ultimately he or she will be posted to only one school.

This problem can be fixed easily by moving the Exercise School Preference Stage (currently in late October) to before the notification of outcomes of applications (currently in late August). There is no need for a student to know whether he has received a CO or WL before he indicates his school preference.

This is the principle used in the Secondary 1 Posting Exercise, where students select schools without knowing the cut-off points of their desired schools. Since the DSA exercise is based on merit, a student who chooses School A as his third choice will still get a place ahead of another student with a lower rank who indicates School A as his first choice.

The MOE website says that “an average of 50 per cent of those who opted for the schools (that) gave them a WL offer was successfully allocated a place in the school”. As I have explained, this comes after students with multiple COs turn down offers from other schools.

With my proposal, all students will receive not more than one CO from a school in his preference list. As such, it is very likely that up to 50 per cent of students who used to be put on WLs will receive COs instead, because they need not wait for students with more than one CO to reject the offers and free up the vacancies.

They also need not wait until the release of their PSLE results to know that they have secured a place in their desired DSA school, since the outcomes of their applications would be known by late September.

MAKING IT WORK

The ministry has shown that it is prepared to tweak the system to improve it. One loophole it had plugged earlier is to bar students with a confirmed posting from changing their choice of school after getting better-than-expected PSLE results. This ensures fairness and prevents students from using the DSA as a preliminary “back-up” before assessing their options after getting their PSLE results.

The DSA should be viewed as a way for secondary schools to select students based on a broader set of criteria than just PSLE results. Although the criteria should be objective, transparent and based on merit, there will be subjective components such as leadership potential and character traits.

Parents should not game the system by sending their children for special training such as sports coaching from as young as six years old. They should develop their children according to their strengths and interests and select a secondary school that can further develop that potential.

This is the essence of “every school a good school”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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