



singapore

Moving beyond competition, to what matters more

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BY JAKE GOH - 21 AUGUST

The coming changes to the education system announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at his National Day Rally are long-awaited and welcomed, particularly by participants of Our Singapore Conversation who had spoken passionately on these issues.

While some changes such as the extension of Edusave contributions and the reserving of 40 places for Primary 1 registration will be implemented in 2014, others will be spread over years, as they impact students, teachers, schools, parents and the community. The Ministry of Education (MOE) needs more time to work through the changes so that all stakeholders have enough time to adjust.

What kind of impact will the changes have and what are some possible challenges in implementation?

T-SCORES: PROBLEM OF A MOVING TARGET

The T-score ranks students while taking into account the difficulty level of the paper and the standards of each cohort, and students are posted to secondary schools based on how well they performed. As such, it is on one level fair and meritocratic. However, there are several disadvantages of T-scores.

We see students who are already in Band 1 for their subjects being sent for tuition just to maintain their grades or strive for better results, because parents have no idea what each cohort's standard may be. This is because the T-score is calculated based on a bell curve, meaning, if many people do well for a paper, there is a potential reduction of one's individual score and vice versa.

The T-score, in this sense, is a moving target. It results in over-preparation by parents and teachers who want to play safe.

It promotes competition and discourages collaboration, because there is only a certain number of people who can be awarded an A* — not everyone who scores 91 out of 100 on a paper might get one. As such, it is more important for a student to outperform his peers than for him

to help them do equally well.

The T-scores will be replaced with wider bands of grades, similar to the O and A-Levels, removing the fine distinction between points. But will the bell curve element remain? That, to me, is key. Will the new grading system bring about a mindset change among students, encouraging them to, instead of hoarding knowledge and resources, help each other to do well?

SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

One of the biggest challenges of using grade bands instead of aggregates of T-scores will be deciding which students to admit to a particular school, when many of them have the same grades.

Would it be, for instance, modelled after the points system of the Joint Admissions Exercise in the O-Levels, where various bonus points also come into play? Speculation is high, and the MOE can be expected to reveal more soon.

Regardless, it is safe to say competition for places at the top secondary schools will continue to be tough. In this regard, Mr Lee announced that Direct School Admissions would be broadened to include students with “special qualities”.

The main challenge would be setting the criteria. How do we objectively measure resilience, drive, character and leadership? Is a leader in a particular co-curricular activity (CCA) who won a medal better than another who is a leader in the same CCA but did not win anything?

Parents can expect more subjectivity in future when these changes are implemented. They should see that developing character, attitude and passion for learning is just as important as doing well academically. They should realise that the MOE is embarking on a student-centric, values-driven phase of education.

P1 REGISTRATION

A good start will be made in reserving at least 40 places in every school for Phase 2B and 2C; the MOE has clarified that these places will be on top of those that would be still available after Phase 2A. Still, more should be done to help lower-income families get into nearby primary schools, to help reduce their transport costs.

The long-term solution to this perennial annual anxiety for parents is for the MOE to make every school truly a good school — and more importantly, to make this be seen by all. Parents should be more involved in their child’s education instead of just relying on a “popular” school to ensure success. Some statistics from the MOE could help convince parents that all schools are capable of producing good students.

Overall, the changes are a step towards giving students more options and opportunities to realise their potential regardless of background. It will require everyone to work with the MOE to continuously build on and improve these policies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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