

THE WORKERS' PARTY YOUTH WING MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD ESSAY COMPETITION 2020

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ENSURING EQUALITY & FAIRNESS IN OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM By Rajeshpal Singh Sandhu

Abstract:

The phrase 'Every School Is a Good School' made headlines a few years ago. It attracted attention because of the widely known gulf between 'elite schools' and neighbourhood schools. Elite schools boast better resources and opportunities for their students that most neighbourhood schools cannot provide. These advantages exacerbate social-inequalities since elite schools are predominantly attended by the affluent¹ and there are barriers to entry for those seeking admission who may not have affiliation or influence. This paper proposes strategies from a policy-maker's view that address issues of disparities in the education system.

The challenge to address

This paper will focus on addressing the challenge of ensuring equality and fairness in our education system. It aims to highlight the significant advantages certain 'elite schools' provide, how these schools are disproportionately attended by children of the more educated and wealthy², how there are significant barriers to entry into these schools to those in lower socio-economic tiers and how they perpetuate social inequalities in Singapore. It will then offer policy approaches, assess them and outline strategies for implementation from the view of a political office holder.

The scope will be limited to primary and secondary schools which forms the core of formal education in Singapore while remaining cognizant of pre-school, tertiary and adult learning initiatives.

Current state

Children attending an 'elite school' as opposed to a 'neighbourhood school' are provided significant advantages. Below are some of the more noticeable advantages:

- **Advantage of affiliation:** Most elite schools have affiliations which would make it easier for the child entering an elite primary school to move into an affiliated elite secondary school and then an elite junior college. Juxtaposed against a child who did not attend a school with affiliations, this provides an unfair advantage in access to choice schools.

¹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/study-kids-from-affluent-families-more-likely-in-ip-gep-schools>

² <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/study-kids-from-affluent-families-more-likely-in-ip-gep-schools>

- **Advantage of resources:** Elite schools boast better facilities and support for their students. From student career counselors at a young age, to very well equipped and staffed science research facilities and to a plethora of leadership development programmes. Elite schools have much more to offer young learners than the average neighbourhood school.
- **Advantage of teacher-school ratio:** Further it seems that there is a larger proportion of teachers in government-aided/independent schools than in normal government schools. For example, although government-aided/independent/specialized secondary schools make up 33.6% of all secondary schools, the proportion of teachers in government-aided/independent/specialized secondary schools make up 48.7% of all secondary school teachers. This suggests a lower teacher to school/student ratio in government-aided/independent/specialized schools.³
- **Advantage of access:** Elite schools have a very engaged alumni which comprise many well connected and successful individuals. This provides great networks to youths that will greatly advantage them in all aspects of their onward careers. Furthermore, a large proportion of students in elite schools come from wealthier and more educated families, providing further networks and access to opportunities.

Entry into 'elite schools' is more difficult to those in lower socio-economic tiers which contributes to a widening of social inequalities as access to these schools remain favored to closed circles of affiliations, alumni and wealthier families. For example there is a concentration of 'elite schools' in the Bukit Timah belt which is predominantly a wealthy private-property neighbourhood hence creating a natural barrier to entry for those seeking admission to these schools as they may not be able to afford a house in that neighborhood.

The disparity between advantages in these schools and difficulty in access to elite schools is an important future challenge that must be tackled as it risks causing widening divisions between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. It risks perpetuating social class segregation and is an affront to Singapore's core values of meritocracy and fairness.

Recent policy efforts to address issues in Education

In recent years, the government has tried to address issues in education such as an over-importance given to examination performance and the need to have more pathways to diplomas and degrees that cater to the pace of learners. These policy measures include:

- removing school banding;
- reserving 40 places in Primary 1 cohort for non-affiliated children;
- emphasis on early childhood education and adult learning (SkillsFuture); and
- more pathways to diploma & degrees

While these measures do good in providing more opportunities and to somewhat lessen the importance on academic achievement, they do not address significantly issues concerning differences between elite and neighbourhood schools and access to these schools to all in a way

³ Education statistics digest, MOE 2019, pg 2-3.

that does not further entrench those already in an advantageous position. Hence more policy measures need to be constructed to address these.

Policy approaches moving forward, considerations and assessment

Broadly there are three different policy approaches that can be taken to address the challenge of ensuring fairness and equality in our education system:

1. Wait & see

This approach involves allowing sufficient time to allow the recent policy adjustment of reserving 40 places in Primary 1 for non-affiliated children to take into effect and hoping it significantly brings in a wider spectrum of children into the elite schools as opposed to the current disproportionate representation of affiliated and advantaged backgrounds.

2. Rebalancing measures

This involves further adjustments to reduce barriers to entry into elite schools and providing disproportionately higher resources and talent into neighbourhood schools to effect a rebalancing.

3. Reclaim all elite independent/government-aided schools into public schools

This is a drastic approach to reset the system by taking into the public school system all elite schools and eliminating all issues of access and advantages.

In assessing the three different policy approaches, it is important to use the following considerations:

- Likelihood of addressing issues of unequal access and advantages sufficiently;
- Limit damage on affected schools which may have built up effective systems and support for its students; and
- Public willingness to support chosen policy approach and potential backlash/difficulty in enacting policy;

Based on the above considerations, it is clear that an approach of 'rebalancing measures' is most desirable. The subsequent sections of this paper will detail the measures within this policy approach.

Rebalancing measures: Proposed strategies to address challenge

The following strategies are proposed to effectively reduce issues of unequal access to 'elite schools' and increase the quality of neighbourhood schools to rebalance advantages:

1. Removal of affiliations & widening of school radius for admissions

By removing the system of affiliation in its entirety we can ensure fairness and true aspiration to meritocracy in our education system where the child's own merits will determine access to choice schools and not which family he/she belongs to. The argument that affiliation helps nurture a school culture around families is less important as compared to the need to ensure our system remains open to all and social mobility to those who work for it is unimpeded. Furthermore for certain elite schools that are situated in predominantly private-property neighborhoods, it is proposed that the radius to the schools be sufficiently widened to increase the proportion of families in public housing to better reflect the national average for school admissions.

2. Prioritize talent flow into schools with more challenging demographics

It is proposed to identify the best teachers in the service on an ongoing basis and ensure that they are posted to schools which have a disproportionate student population from disadvantageous backgrounds. These core of best teachers should be recognized and rewarded further to galvanize the teaching workforce around the need to reduce inequalities in Singapore by giving more attention to those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. This reverses an important trend observed by academics around the world on how elite schools over time tend to attract better teachers as compared to neighbourhood schools and help perpetuate the divide between elite and neighbourhood schools.⁴

3. Increase teacher-student ratio into schools with more challenging demographics

Related to the preceding strategy, it is important to reduce the class size significantly in schools with students from more disadvantaged backgrounds so that greater teacher-time can be given to them. Furthermore, additional resources such as counsellors should be deployed to such schools.

4. Include a new mandatory 'inequality measure' for each school to abide by

The Ministry of Education should identify a basket of measures that can serve as proxy measures of inequality and ensure schools do not veer either side of the national average. The measures could include median income of households, educational level of parents and housing type.

5. Set up an independent education watchdog/think-tank

To ensure that the school system remains free from unequal opportunity and closed circles, it is recommended that an independent organization (not under MOE) be set up with seed funding from the government. The purpose of this organization is to track and monitor disparities across the education system and serve as an independent think-tank for education policy.

6. Release of more relevant statistics by school-level

To support the work of the independent organization and to allow citizens to scrutinize the school system better, it is recommended that school-level statistics be also shared annually or bi-annually.

Conclusion

Education must remain a lever for social mobility and a tool to reduce inequalities. In a society where families with resources can already provide advantages to their children with significant private tuition, we cannot allow a fragmented education system that perpetuates social inequalities to children that can last their whole lifetimes or even generations. With the above-mentioned strategies, we will come closer to the dream where 'every school is a good school'. Until then, that remains a dream.

⁴ Asma Benhenda, Tous des Bons Profs, Figure 10, Figure 13.