

**PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
SINGAPORE PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM**

**MATHEW MATHEWS  
LEONARD LIM  
and  
TENG SIAO SEE**

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**The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)** was established in 1988 to promote a greater awareness of policy issues and good governance. Today, IPS is a think-tank within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at the National University of Singapore. It seeks to cultivate clarity of thought, forward thinking and a big-picture perspective on issues of critical national interest through strategic deliberation and research. It adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analysis and takes the long-term view. It studies the attitudes and aspirations of Singaporeans which have an impact on policy development and the relevant areas of diplomacy and international affairs. The Institute bridges and engages the diverse stakeholders through its conferences and seminars, closed-door discussions, publications, and surveys on public perceptions of policy.

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SINGAPORE PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM**

**MATHEW MATHEWS<sup>1</sup>**

Senior Research Fellow  
Institute of Policy Studies

[Mathew.mathews@nus.edu.sg](mailto:Mathew.mathews@nus.edu.sg)

and

**LEONARD LIM**

Research Associate  
Institute of Policy Studies

and

**TENG SIAO SEE**

Research Scientist  
National Institute of Education

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1. Please direct your comments and queries to Mathew Mathews. The authors acknowledge the skilful research assistance of Zhang Jiayi, Shanthini Selvarajan, Christine Lim Li Ping and Chang Cheng Mun. Leong Wenshan provided her expertise in proofreading this paper.

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## **PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SINGAPORE PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM**

### **Abstract**

In 2016, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conducted a Survey on Parental Perceptions of Education with 1,500 citizen and PR parents to obtain a quantitative picture of sentiments towards Singapore's primary school system. The respondents' demographics mirrored the general population except for the gender ratio; we asked the parent predominantly responsible for making decisions relating to primary school education to complete the survey, and more women were represented.

Broadly, the results indicate that the vast majority of Singaporean parents are generally pleased with the local education system's structure, processes and outcomes. Parents appeared to be largely positive and satisfied about the facilities, support network and other features of the school their child was attending.

There has been public debate over the Ministry of Education (MOE) vision of "Every School a Good School", and some parents have expressed doubts over whether this is possible in Singapore's achievement-driven academic culture.

Considering that practically every primary school was represented in the survey, i.e., respondents had children in almost all of Singapore's primary schools — the results could be taken to indicate that the lived experiences of most parents regarding their child's education were not negative. This may be because parents, perhaps after an initial period of apprehension and anxiety over school placement and lingering concerns when the child first enrolls, do eventually come to appreciate their child's school.

An overwhelming majority of parents cited quality of teachers and an emphasis on character-building as either important, very important or essential factors in their choice of primary school. Less than 30 per cent of parents faced any challenges in enrolling their child in a school of their choice. More than three in four respondents did not undertake activities (such as volunteering) to actively secure a good school for their child. Despite this, about 73 per cent reported being able to get their child into a school of their choice. These results suggest that worries over parents' alumni connection and the unfair advantages this creates may be the concern of a smaller group than public discourse suggests.

Parents attributed the stress they felt from their child's education to various factors. The top reason was helping their child with tests or examinations. A majority of parents felt that more importance should be placed on character-

building in the curriculum, in line with MOE's recent emphasis on values-based education.

Parents were also asked for their views on various proposed policy changes. Interestingly, less than half of respondents (42.5 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that the PSLE should be postponed to a later age. This may suggest that while there is still no clear consensus on the issue, at this stage a slight majority still see a major national examination as a necessary checkpoint for their child's learning progress, and a means to gauge their academic aptitude relative to their peers.

Moving forward, many parents also agreed that the amount of homework in primary schools should be reduced.

In conclusion, the study's broad findings indicate that MOE's recent policies to fine-tune the education system are on the right track. Many parents, across school types, supported a heavier focus on character and values education, compared to the current level of emphasis, as well as reduction in the amount of homework.

We note some contradictions in the responses. Parents reported a desire for more emphasis on character-building and other holistic areas of education, and cited such softer aspects as a key factor driving school choice. However, many do continue to place substantial weight on academics, and report feeling stressed when they have to help their child with tests or exams. This may indicate that even though many parents identify with the need for a more balanced education system, other factors still wield considerable influence in shaping their behaviour when it comes to their child's education. These could include a sense of having to push their child to keep up with his peers when it comes to grades, driven by the underlying perception that academic performance is still a key ticket to good jobs. This then creates high levels of stress, both for the parents and the child.

In this regard, while MOE has taken substantial policy steps to reduce academic demands on schoolchildren, it is important to consider what needs to be done to change parents' mindsets. Some parents still see education as purely a rat race. Hopefully, this can shift to one where schools are seen as an environment for building softer skills such as collaboration, curiosity, perseverance and initiative. Rather than pure academic grades, these competencies will be key drivers of success in the innovation-driven economy of the present and future.



# **PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SINGAPORE PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

During the 2012 Budget debate, then Education Minister Heng Swee Keat identified six features of a good school. These were: studying and knowing the needs and interests of each student to help them grow; ensuring all students acquire strong fundamentals of literacy and numeracy; creating a positive environment for each student; having caring and competent teachers; having the support of parents and the communities; and caring for and providing opportunities to all students regardless of family circumstances.

He elaborated later: "Every School a Good School does not mean Every School the Same School, but it does mean Every School is Good in its Own Way, seeking to bring out the Best in Every Child."

The purpose was not to equalise schools, but rather to allow all schools to excel in different areas, and for parents to select schools based on children's different interests rather than using purely academic systems of measurement.

Anecdotally however, some segments of parents do not seem to have bought into the rhetoric. Media reports and forum discussions on websites such as [kiasuparents.com](http://kiasuparents.com) suggest that many parents still believe that reputable schools offer widespread advantages, ranging from teaching quality to curriculum.

Within this context and with the wider aim of obtaining a quantitative picture of sentiments towards the Singapore primary school system, IPS conducted a survey on Parental Perceptions of Education.

From an academic viewpoint, it is also worthwhile exploring Singapore parents' perspectives, seeing that research in other countries have uncovered at least three significant areas where these perceptions can have implications for the child and family.

First, parents' impressions of the school may influence their child's perceptions of that school (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Empirical work by Roeser and Eccles (1998) also found that student attitudes towards school are closely tied to their motivations, behaviour and academic performance. Parental perceptions may thus influence children's perceptions of the school climate, ultimately affecting students' academic achievements.

Second, parents' perceptions can influence whether and how families engage with the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). As Griffith's (1998) empirical analysis, based on a survey of 122 public elementary schools in the United States illustrates, positive perceptions of a school among parents are associated with higher levels of parent involvement in the education process. This has important consequences, given that family engagement with their child's learning is strongly associated with students' academic outcomes and well-being (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005).

Finally, many parents decide where to live and send their children to school in part based on their impressions of particular school features such as organisational processes, infrastructure and teacher quality. In the United States, 27 per cent of parents who took the 2007 National Household Education Survey reported that they moved to their current neighbourhood for the school of their choice (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010). Meanwhile, negative perceptions of the school are associated with parents' decisions to withdraw students from those schools (Bukhari & Randall, 2009).

One part of the survey also relates to parents' perceptions of the future education landscape. Studies have found that employers increasingly value soft rather than hard skills. Wats and Wats (2008) indicated that hard skills (that

is, technical skills) contribute only 15 per cent to one's success in the workplace, whereas 85 per cent of success is due to soft skills.

Other academics (Harris & Rogers, 2008) as well as global bodies such as the World Economic Forum (2015) have emphasised that to thrive in a rapidly evolving, technology-driven world, students must not only possess skills in languages, mathematics and the sciences, but also be adept at problem-solving, persistence, collaboration and have curiosity.

Singapore policymakers have stressed that the education system must evolve in this regard (see for instance Ng, 2017), and our study aims to provide a gauge of whether these official pronouncements resonate with parents.

To the best of our knowledge, this survey is also the first nationally representative and publicly available attempt to obtain parents' views on a wide range of issues related to the Singapore primary school system.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the main research themes and survey methodology. Section 3 provides a snapshot of respondents' demographics. Section 4 describes the various findings, with

tables and the accompanying survey question that was put to the respondent.

Section 5 concludes the paper.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

Among the research areas explored were:

- (i) Overall perceptions of the current education system
- (ii) Parents' conceptualisation of a "good school" and whether this corresponds with the state narrative
- (iii) Parents' strategies to get their children into desired primary schools
- (iv) Parents' assessment of the school their children are in
- (v) Parental stress due to child's education
- (vi) Perceptions of possible policy changes
- (vii) The future of the education landscape

The study was conducted from December 2015 to March 2016 and the bulk of the surveys, which took the form of door-to-door household interviews, occurred from January to March.

A customised listing of 3,000 randomly selected households that had a child between five and 14 years was first obtained from the Department of Statistics. Interviewers from a survey company that has conducted many national surveys, approached these selected household to enquire if there was a child attending primary school living there. Since it was not possible to obtain a listing that corresponded precisely to the ages of children enrolled in primary school (who would normally be between six to 12 years), substitution of households was allowed if there were no children of primary-school age living in the residence. Surveyors then followed a pre-defined method to select an alternate house. Eligible households were presented a survey form, which was to be completed by the parent who had the most involvement in their child's education. Completed surveys were to be returned to the surveyor who would present them with a small token for their participation in the study. This drop-off and pick-up method reduced the likelihood that the surveyor would influence how questions were asked in the question set, and reduced the possibility of respondents giving answers that were socially desirable for fear of how the surveyor would view him or her.

Altogether 1500 Singaporean or permanent resident (PR) parents with children in local primary schools completed a self-administered survey presented to them. Outright refusal to the survey was small (6.4%). The overall survey achieved a 68% response rate of eligible households. The representativeness of the survey is evident when considering that the parents surveyed reported

on the experiences of their children who were enrolled in practically every primary school in Singapore. About 180 primary schools were represented.

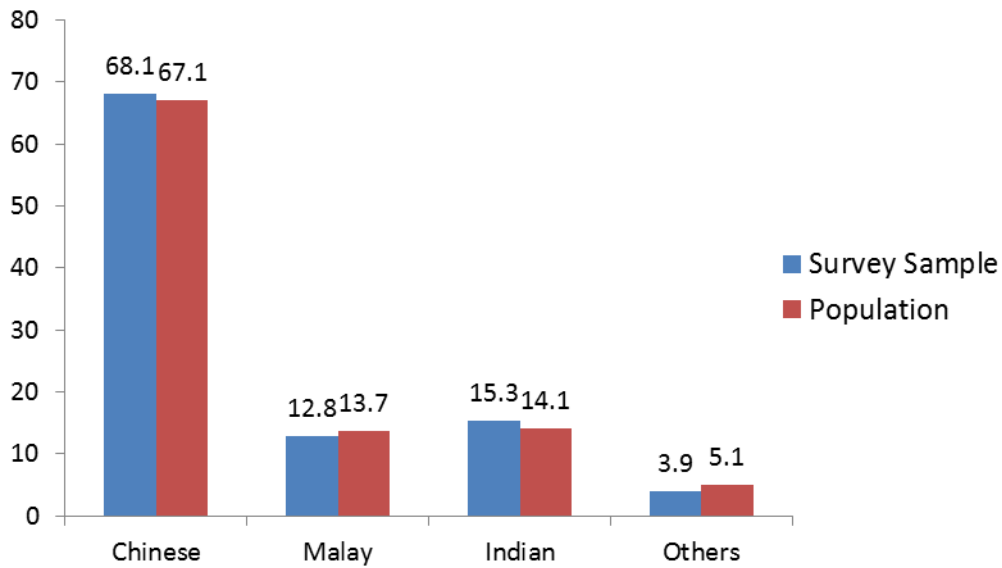
### **3. RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS**

The profile of the sample closely mirrored the general population, except for gender proportions. Among those surveyed, 64.9 per cent were female while 35.1 per cent were male. This differs from the general population, which has a more equal gender ratio. This skew occurs due to the survey methodology, where the parent who was predominantly responsible for making decisions relating to primary school education was asked to complete the survey. This inevitably leads to more females completing the survey, given their greater involvement in children's education in the early years.

Only Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents (PRs) were surveyed, and there were slightly more PRs in the sample than compared to the general population. In the survey, 78.3 per cent were citizens while the remaining 21.7 per cent were PRs. The corresponding proportions for the national population were 86.4 per cent and 13.6 per cent.

Racial representation was fairly close to that of the general population with children of primary school age or younger (see Figure 1).

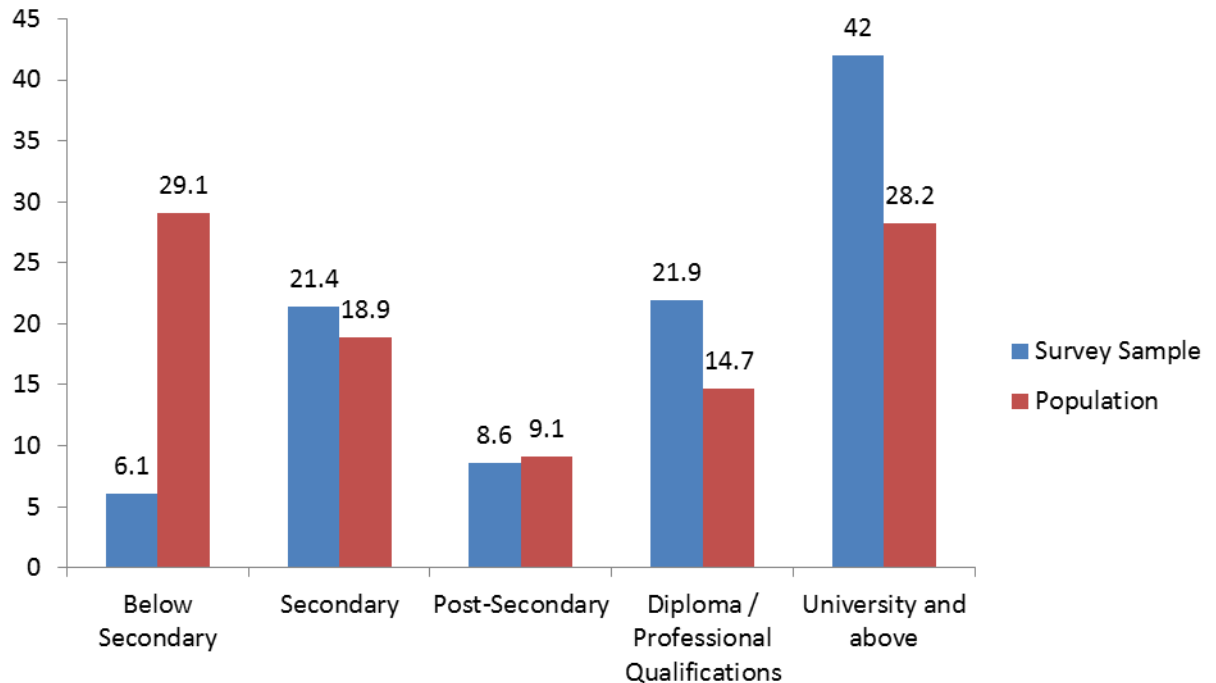
**Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents and General Population by Race**



The age range for respondents was also typical for parents with primary school-going children, with a median age of 42.0. This in turn had an effect on the educational level of the sample, where respondents were on average more educated than the general population (see Figure 2). About 28 per cent of respondents had secondary education or less, while 42 per cent of respondents had obtained at least a Bachelor's degree.

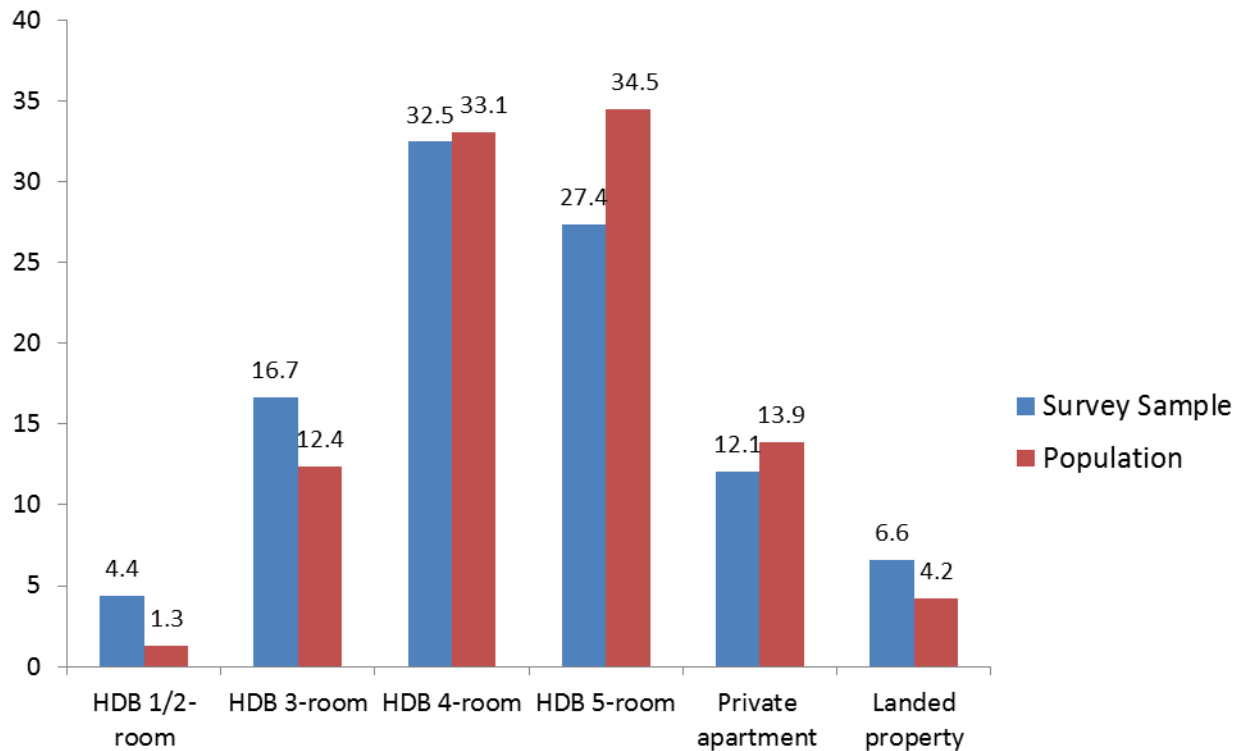


**Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents and General Population by Educational Level**



The distribution of housing type for respondents reflected that of the general population for households with the youngest child of primary school age or lower (see Figure 3). Some 4.4 per cent of respondents lived in one- to two-room HDB flats; about 50 per cent lived in three- to four-room HDB flats; and 27.4 per cent lived in five-room HDB flats. Nearly 19 per cent of respondents lived in private housing, with 12.1 per cent living in private apartments or condominiums, and 6.6 per cent in landed property.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents and General Population  
by Housing Type**



Most respondents had two or more children while 16.6 per cent had only one child.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Parents' Overall Perception of Education System

This section seeks to understand the general perceptions parents have of the education system in Singapore.

A majority of respondents held the view that Singapore's education system is of good quality. Over 90 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that Singapore's education system is among the best in the world, and that most primary schools provide high-quality education (see Table 1). As to whether the education system nurtures socially responsible citizens, 81.8 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. Also, just over three-quarters of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that Singapore's education system helps people secure a well-paying or good job in future.

**Table 1: Parental Perceptions of Overall Education System**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree
On the whole, Singapore's educational system is among the best in the world.	90.8%	23.9%	66.9%
Most primary schools in Singapore provide a high quality education.	90.4%	20.5%	69.9%
Singapore's education system provides equal opportunity for children from different socio-economic backgrounds.	81.8%	15.2%	66.6%
Singapore's education system nurtures socially responsible citizens.	81.8%	13.8%	68.0%
Singapore's education system caters to students of different style and pace of learning.	80.9%	13.8%	67.1%
Singapore's education system helps people secure a well-paying/ good job in future.	76.5%	16.1%	60.4%

Note: The survey question was "To what extent do you agree with the following statements about Singapore's education system?"

More than four in five respondents also felt positively about the inclusivity of the education system. Exactly 81.8 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the education system provides equal opportunity for children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Also, 80.9 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that the education system caters to students of different style and pace of learning.

Broadly, the results indicate that the vast majority of Singaporean parents are generally pleased with the local education system's structure, processes and outcomes.

#### **4.2 What Makes A “Good School”?**

Respondents were asked to indicate the factors that were important or essential in what they perceived to be a good school. These factors could be broadly divided into Process-Development-Environment (PDE) focused factors and Results-Achievement (RA) centred factors.

PDE contained items that reflected the school environment and culture. These included teachers who cared about their students' social-emotional development, good school facilities, and an emphasis on discipline and character. It also considered features such as sincerity of the school in obtaining parental feedback.

On the other hand, RA contained items that perceived a good school as one that produced top scorers, or gave a lot of homework and organised many enrichment classes.

Respondents were largely in consensus on PDE features of a good school (see Table 2), where 97.2 per cent of respondents indicated that having teachers who cared about the socio-emotional development of students was either an important, very important, or essential feature. In addition, more than 95 per cent agreed that helping students develop a strong academic foundation, giving opportunities to all students regardless of family background, the ability to bring in expertise to appropriately help students, and an emphasis on discipline were, at the very least, important features of a good school.

**Table 2: Process/Development/Environment Focused Features of Good Schools (Top)**

	Essential/ Very important / Important (%)	Essential (%)	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Moderately Important (%)	Of little importance (%)	Unimportant (%)
Teachers who care for the students' social-emotional development	97.2%	32.1%	43.6%	21.5%	2.0%	0.5%	0.3%
Helps students develop strong academic foundation	97.0%	27.0%	45.2%	24.8%	2.4%	0.4%	0.2%
Opportunities for all students regardless of family background	97.0%	39.1%	37.0%	20.9%	2.6%	0.2%	0.3%
Ability to bring in expertise to appropriately help students	96.2%	31.0%	38.2%	27.0%	3.1%	0.6%	0.2%
Teachers are driven to help students achieve good grades	95.7%	27.2%	41.3%	27.2%	3.4%	0.6%	0.3%
Emphasis on discipline	95.2%	31.0%	36.6%	27.6%	4.0%	0.7%	0.1%
Emphasis on character and values	94.9%	32.8%	36.1%	26.0%	4.1%	0.7%	0.3%
Works to help weaker children do better	94.6%	28.4%	38.7%	27.5%	4.5%	0.6%	0.4%
Good school facilities	94.1%	23.0%	37.5%	33.6%	5.1%	0.5%	0.3%
Sincere in getting parents' feedback	92.9%	27.6%	37.1%	28.2%	5.3%	1.0%	0.7%

Note: The survey question was "Different people have different thoughts about what makes a good primary school. A good school need not be a brand name school. As long as a school has certain characteristics, people may consider it a good school. In your opinion, how important are the following characteristics in determining a GOOD primary school?"

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by Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim and Teng Siao See

Parents also highly ranked an emphasis on character and values, as well as working to help weaker children do better. Over 94 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these were features of a good school.

Interestingly, nearly 40 per cent of respondents reported that it was essential for good schools to provide opportunity for all students regardless of their family background. This was the PDE variable with the highest percentage of respondents listing it as an essential feature of a good school.

This highlights the general aspiration among respondents that the Singapore school system should ensure a level playing field, and be an engine for social mobility and progress.

There were more variations in items that reflected RA features, although these were still seen by the majority as important (see Table 3). More than 70 per cents of respondents indicated that a record of high PSLE scores as well as students going into reputable secondary schools were either important, very important or essential. A competitive environment ranked third in the RA list; 62.4 per cent agreed or strongly agreed it was important, very important or essential).

**Table 3: Results/Achievement Centred Features of Good Schools**

	Essential/ Very important / Important (%)	Essential (%)	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Moderately Important (%)	Of little importance (%)	Unimportant (%)
A record of high PSLE scores	72.8%	10.3%	23.6%	38.9%	19.6%	5.1%	2.6%
Students from the school going into reputable secondary schools	70.6%	8.7%	22.9%	39.0%	19.5%	7.0%	3.0%
Competitive environment	62.4%	5.8%	17.3%	39.3%	26.4%	8.0%	3.3%
Affiliation with a good secondary school	61.8%	7.4%	16.7%	37.7%	20.7%	11.3%	6.3%
Strong alumni	55.6%	8.5%	14.8%	32.3%	24.5%	13.2%	6.8%
CCAs that have a record of winning awards	47.4%	5.0%	11.5%	30.9%	32.2%	13.3%	7.1%
Many enrichment classes	40.2%	4.4%	8.7%	27.1%	38.7%	14.9%	6.1%
Lots of homework	23.9%	2.3%	4.3%	17.3%	42.4%	22.7%	11.0%

Note: The survey question was "Different people have different thoughts about what makes a good primary school. A good school need not be a brand name school. As long as a school has certain characteristics, people may consider it a good school. In your opinion, how important are the following characteristics in determining a GOOD primary school?"

Despite notions that many parents' Primary 1 enrolment choice for their child is highly influenced by whether the school has feeder links to particular secondary schools, a school's affiliation with a good secondary school ranked fourth on the list of RA features. Just over three in five parents felt this was either an important, very important, or essential feature.



Another finding worth highlighting is that only 23.9 per cent of respondents considered having lots of homework as either important, very important or essential.

### **4.3 Criteria For School Selection**

These qualities that parents associate with good schools would translate into criteria that were used to select a school for their child. When asked how important various considerations were in making their decision, an overwhelming majority indicated that the quality of teachers (94.1 per cent) and an emphasis on character-building (94 per cent) were either important, very important or essential factors (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Parents' Considerations in Picking a Primary School for Their Child (Top)**

	Essential/ Very important / Important (%)	Essential (%)	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Moderately Important (%)	Of little importance (%)	Unimportant (%)
Quality of teachers	94.1%	19.8%	42.5%	31.8%	4.8%	0.7%	0.4%
Emphasis on character building	94.0%	30.0%	37.4%	26.5%	4.5%	0.9%	0.6%
Proximity to where child lives	88.2%	22.0%	36.3%	30.0%	8.4%	2.0%	1.3%
Support for weaker students	87.6%	21.0%	36.0%	30.6%	8.2%	2.8%	1.3%
School facilities/infrastructure	83.9%	13.2%	28.6%	42.1%	12.8%	2.1%	1.1%
Schools students go to after PSLE	71.1%	9.0%	25.5%	36.6%	18.6%	6.7%	3.6%
Range and performance of CCAs	67.0%	8.1%	19.6%	39.2%	22.9%	7.0%	3.2%

Note: The survey question was "Which of these considerations were important for you when you chose a PRIMARY SCHOOL for your child?"

Tangible qualities of schools also mattered. Parents considered the schools' proximity to where the child lives and school facilities to be important, very important or essential, at 88.2 per cent and 83.9 per cent, respectively.

Support for weaker students, as well as the probability of admission, were factors that were essential, very important or important for more than eight in 10 of the parents. Other considerations, which around seven in 10 respondents listed as either essential, very important or important included the schools the

students go to after PSLE, and the range and performance of co-curricular activities (CCAs) on offer.

In contrast, factors related to a school's external network were less important (see Table 5). Alumni network, parental and community support; affiliation with a good secondary school; and affiliation with a clan or religious organisation ranked in the bottom five criteria.

**Table 5: Parents' Considerations When Picking a Primary School for Their Child (Lower)**

	Essential/ Very important / Important (%)	Essential (%)	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Moderately Important (%)	Of little importance (%)	Unimportant (%)
Alumni, parental and community support	61.9%	7.8%	17.3%	36.9%	23.0%	9.6%	5.4%
Competitive environment	61.7%	5.5%	18.3%	37.8%	26.8%	7.9%	3.6%
Affiliation with a good secondary school	56.4%	7.0%	18.6%	30.7%	20.8%	14.5%	8.3%
Parent's alma mater	42.2%	4.6%	11.2%	26.4%	23.0%	18.1%	16.6%
Affiliation with a religious organisation or clan which you support/respect	33.4%	5.3%	9.2%	18.9%	22.4%	19.9%	24.3%

Note: The survey question was "Which of these considerations were important for you when you chose a PRIMARY SCHOOL for your child?"

#### **4.4 School Choice — Challenges in Enrolment, and Parents' Strategies for Enrolment**

Respondents were asked whether they encountered any difficulty enrolling their child in a school of their choice during the annual Primary 1 registration exercise, an exercise often seen to be riddled with anxiety.

Only 27.9 per cent of respondents reported that they had experienced challenges. Among this smaller group, 61.1 per cent felt that applications for their school of choice was overwhelming, 36 per cent found that places for children who had no alumni connections were limited, and another 32.7 per cent reported that there were few “good” schools in the vicinity of their home (see Table 6). Note that the proportions listed in Table 6 are for the group that did face challenges, i.e., 27.9 per cent of the total sample.

**Table 6: Challenges Faced by Parents**

Challenge faced	% of respondents
Application for the school was simply overwhelming	61.1%
Limited openings for those without alumni connections	36.0%
Few “good” schools in the vicinity of the home	32.7%
No time or suitable voluntary work to establish connection with the desired school	17.7%
Did not have adequate information	8.8%
Applied too late to the school	6.0%

Note: The survey question asked first was “Were there any challenges when attempting to enrol your child into your school of choice?” If the answer was “yes”, then the respondent was asked, “What were these challenges?”

A great majority of all respondents (77.3 per cent) indicated that they had not done anything to actively secure a good school for their child. About 10 per cent of other respondents had moved nearer to the school of their choice, while 12.2 per cent had volunteered in the school in order to ensure that their child could be enrolled in an earlier phase.

Respondents were asked to indicate potential positive outcomes of their child attending a reputable primary school out of a list of 10 items. The items included outcomes such as having better teachers, reducing the need for private tuition and having more hardworking peers.

The number of outcomes selected by each parent was then converted into a scale — a higher number would indicate that the respondent felt reputable schools would offer a superior experience. Among the respondents, 39.3 per cent who selected all 10 outcomes were more likely to have actively done something to secure a good school for their child, compared to 9.6 per cent of those who selected zero positive outcomes.

#### 4.5 Parents' Satisfaction With School Choice

Despite the majority of respondents not actively doing anything to secure a good school for their child, most respondents (73.6 per cent) were able to enrol their child in a school of their choice (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Parents' Satisfaction and School Choice**

	% of respondents
A school of the respondent's choice and considered a good school by most people	69.0%
A school of the respondent's choice but not considered a good school by most people	14.6%
Not a school of the respondent's choice but still considered a good school by most people	12.7%
Not a school of the respondent's choice and not considered a good school by most people	3.7%

Note: The survey question was "In your opinion, the primary school your child is currently studying in is: (Please tick the most appropriate option)".

Among respondents whose children were not attending a school of their choice, more (12.7 per cent) felt their child's school was considered a good school by most people, compared to those who did not feel that their child's school was considered a good school (3.7 per cent).

For respondents whose children were enrolled in a school of their choice, which they felt was considered a good school, 90.9 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied (see Table 8).

**Table 8: Cross-Tabulation of Satisfaction With Child's Current School With School Choice and Perception**

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Mildly satisfied	Mildly dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
A school of the respondent's choice, considered a good school by most people	38.8%	52.1%	6.9%	1.4%	0.3%	0.5%
A school of the respondent's choice, not considered a good school by most people	16.4%	53.0%	25.6%	2.7%	1.4%	0.9%
Not a school of the respondent's choice, still considered a good school by most people	13.7%	57.9%	20.5%	5.8%	2.1%	0.0%

Not a school of the respondent's choice, not considered a good school by most people	5.4%	33.9%	33.9%	14.3%	3.6%	8.9%
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At least two in three parents were very satisfied or satisfied even if the school of their choice was not considered a good school by most people.

Also, even if the child was not in a school of their choice and it was not considered a good school, nearly four in 10 respondents still reported that they were very satisfied or satisfied. Of the respondents in this category, only 12.5 per cent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their child's school.

#### **4.6 Parents' Satisfaction With School Features**

Parents appeared to be largely positive about the school their child was attending. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed that certain features were present in the school. About 20 variables were tested. These were grouped into three categories — school network and infrastructure, attention to child's development, and competitiveness and rigour.



In terms of school network and infrastructure features, 88.5 per cent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the school had good facilities, and 86.2 per cent thought the schools were sincere in getting parents' feedback (see Table 9).

**Table 9: Features Related to School Network and Infrastructure in Child's School**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Good school facilities	88.5%	17.8%	70.8%	10.5%	1.0%
School is sincere in getting parents' feedback	86.2%	19.9%	66.4%	11.6%	2.2%
Has good parental and community support	86.1%	16.7%	69.4%	12.8%	1.0%
Frequent parent and school contact	81.3%	18.8%	62.5%	16.2%	2.5%
A good range of CCAs available	75.3%	10.5%	64.8%	22.4%	2.3%
The school is able to bring in expertise to appropriately develop students, e.g. top coaches	74.7%	14.3%	60.4%	22.9%	2.4%
CCAs that have a record of winning awards	66.5%	8.2%	58.2%	30.3%	3.2%

Note: The survey question was "Now that your child is in this school, how strongly do you agree that the following characteristics are found in the school that your oldest child has enrolled in?"

An overwhelming majority were also in agreement that the school provided good parental and community support, and there was frequent contact between the school and parents. Just over 75 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that

the school had a good range of CCAs available, suggesting that MOE's efforts to encourage schools to develop expertise in niche areas such as dance or robotics has borne fruit.

For features related to child development, 93 per cent of respondents agreed that the school placed an emphasis on discipline (see Table 10). Parents also were of the opinion that the quality of teaching was high, with 92.7 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to claims that teachers were driven to help students achieve good grades, and provided good support to the child. More than 90 per cent also agreed or strongly agreed that teaching methods were good, and that there was an emphasis on character and values.

**Table 10: Features Showing Attention to Child's Development in Child's School**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Emphasis on discipline	93.1%	25.9%	67.2%	6.4%	0.5%
Teachers driven to help students achieve good grades	92.7%	23.9%	68.8%	7.0%	0.3%
Teachers who provide good support to child	92.7%	27.2%	65.5%	6.8%	0.5%
Emphasis on character and values	91.5%	25.7%	65.8%	7.8%	0.7%
Teachers who care for the students' social-emotional development	91.0%	25.2%	65.8%	8.5%	0.5%

Teaching methods which are good for child	90.9%	17.5%	73.4%	8.2%	0.9%
Caters to individual student's needs interests and strengths	82.3%	17.5%	64.8%	16.0%	1.7%

Note: The survey question was "Now that your child is in this school, how strongly do you agree that the following characteristics are found in the school that your oldest child has enrolled in?"

Parents on the whole also agreed that the schools their children were enrolled in had features that showed attention to their children's development, as 82.3 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the school catered to individual students' needs, interests and strengths.

Finally, for features relating to competitiveness and rigour, more than 76 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their child's current school had a competitive environment (see Table 11). Nearly 75 per cent felt the same way about the school having a track record of its students going on to reputable secondary schools.

**Table 11: Features Showing Competitiveness and Rigour  
in Child's School**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Competitive environment	76.1%	9.9%	66.3%	22.4%	1.5%
Students from the school going into reputable secondary schools	74.9%	11.1%	63.8%	22.8%	2.3%
Many enrichment classes	51.8%	6.5%	45.3%	44.7%	3.5%
Lots of homework	49.1%	7.1%	42.0%	47.1%	3.9%

Note: The survey question was "Now that your child is in this school, how strongly do you agree that the following characteristics are found in the school that your oldest child has enrolled in?"

#### 4.7 Parental Stress

Respondents were also asked about stress factors that they faced as a result of their child's education. Parents experienced more incidences of stress as a result of their schoolwork, with 36.1 per cent stating that they had to discipline their child once a month or even more regularly due to school work, and 27.7 per cent observing that their child exhibited signs of anxiety over school and/or homework monthly or more regularly (see Table 12).

**Table 12: Incidence of Parent/Child-Related Concerns/Activities**

	Weekly or more / Monthly (%)	Weekly or more (%)	Monthly (%)	Once in 2 months (%)	Once or twice (%)	Never (%)
Respondent had to discipline child because of school work	36.1%	24.5%	11.7%	10.7%	31.6%	21.6%
Respondent felt stressed because of child's education	30.2%	18.4%	11.8%	9.4%	33.6%	26.9%
Child exhibited signs of anxiety over school and/or homework	27.7%	15.8%	11.9%	8.7%	35.5%	28.1%
Child had to sacrifice sleep to finish his/her homework/school-related activities	19.7%	11.8%	8.0%	8.5%	28.1%	43.7%
Respondent or spouse approached the teachers to discuss child's performance	11.8%	3.6%	8.2%	12.5%	49.4%	26.4%
Child told respondent that he/she was not happy with his/her teachers	10.0%	4.7%	5.3%	6.0%	29.3%	54.7%
Respondent or spouse volunteered in child's school	9.4%	6.0%	3.4%	5.7%	18.4%	66.5%
Respondent and spouse argued over the education of children	8.4%	3.8%	4.6%	6.9%	27.0%	57.7%
Child said or did something that is inappropriate which he/she learnt in school	8.1%	3.4%	4.6%	6.8%	28.7%	56.4%

Note: The survey question was: "Please indicate how often the following has happened to you over the last one year."

Parents attributed the stress that they felt from their child's education to a number of factors, though it is noteworthy that at least a third of respondents reported not feeling stressed or anxious about various scenarios that were put to them (see Table 13).

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**Table 13: Causes of Stress or Anxiety in Parents**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Helping child with tests and examinations in school	70.8%	20.0%	50.8%	24.8%	4.4%
Helping child with school work and ferrying him/he to and from school as well as tuition and/or enrichment classes	66.7%	19.0%	47.7%	28.3%	5.0%
Concern that child may lose out in the education system in the long run	63.4%	19.3%	44.1%	30.9%	5.6%
Parent not knowing how to assist child with his/her studies because syllabus is too challenging	58.7%	18.4%	40.4%	35.6%	5.6%
Child not obtaining the grades he/she is capable of	56.8%	12.4%	44.4%	38.1%	5.0%
Huge amount of school work and projects	50.8%	10.7%	40.1%	44.2%	5.0%
Child not keeping up with what is taught in school	49.6%	10.7%	39.0%	44.3%	6.0%
Child exhibiting behaviour which he/she learnt in school that parent disapproves of	39.6%	7.1%	32.5%	49.3%	11.1%

Note: The survey question was "Do you feel stressed or anxious over your child's education due to the following factors?"

About 70 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were stressed or anxious from having to help their child with the numerous tests or examinations in school. Also, two-thirds of respondents agreed or strongly

agreed that they were stressed because they had to juggle helping their child with school work as well as ferrying the child to and from school, and tuition or enrichment classes.

Just over 63 per cent were stressed, as they were concerned that their child might lose out in the education system in the long run. Interestingly, almost 60 per cent of the respondents felt stressed, as they did not know how to assist their child with the challenging syllabus.

About one in two parents were anxious as they felt their child was not keeping up with what was being taught, or obtaining the grades he or she was capable of. Also, slightly over half felt stressed over the huge amount of homework and projects their child had to undertake.

#### **4.8 Level of Emphasis on Different Curricula**

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought that the current level of emphasis given to three curriculum types — core academic subjects, holistic subjects, and character-building/civic values teaching — was sufficient. They were also asked if more or less importance should be accorded to that particular curriculum or whether the current emphasis was sufficient.

Academic subjects include the English language, Mathematics, Mother Tongue language as well as Science. A majority of parents (63.3 per cent) feel that more importance should be accorded to the English language by schools (see Table 14). For the other three subjects, most of them were evenly split between indicating that these subjects need more emphasis and that the current level of emphasis was just about right.

**Table 14: Perceptions of Importance Accorded to Academic Subjects**

	More Importance	Just About Right	Less Importance
English language	63.3%	36.3%	0.4%
Mathematics	52.4%	45.6%	2.0%
Mother Tongue language	47.0%	47.8%	5.2%
Science	41.9%	55.6%	2.5%

Note: The survey question was "Parents sometimes feel that the school curriculum for their children should address some areas more and some areas less. In primary schools, which of the following should be given more importance, and which ones should be given less?"

Holistic areas include Singapore's History, IT, Physical Education, Arts and Music education as well as current affairs, all of which are not examinable subjects. Most schools integrate these into their programme to provide an all-rounded education. In comparison to perceptions of academic subjects, a majority felt that the current level of emphasis schools have on holistic curriculum is just right and does not require greater prioritisation, with 43.8 per cent indicating that more importance should be given to teaching IT skills,



relative to 22.3 per cent who felt this way about arts and music education (see Table 15).

**Table 15: Perceptions of Emphasis on Holistic Subjects**

	More Importance	Just About Right	Less Importance
Singapore's history	31.4%	61.9%	6.6%
Current affairs	39.0%	53.7%	7.3%
IT skills	43.8%	50.3%	5.8%
Physical education	36.4%	60.2%	3.4%
Art/Music education	22.3%	66.8%	10.8%

Note: The survey question was "Parents sometimes feel that the school curriculum for their children should address some areas more and some areas less. In primary schools, which of the following should be given more importance, and which ones should be given less?"

In line with MOE's emphasis on values-based education, the survey also sought to discern if parents felt that school curricula should have more emphasis on character-building. In the study, civic values curriculum was represented by moral education, traditional family values and racial and religious harmony. The majority of parents felt that more importance should be accorded to this curriculum, with moral education ranking the highest at 65.2 per cent, traditional family values at just over 60 per cent, and racial and religious harmony at 50.3 per cent (see Table 16).

**Table 16: Perceptions of Emphasis on Character-Building Curriculum**

	More Importance (%)	Just about right (%)	Less Importance (%)
Moral education	65.2%	33.3%	1.5%
Traditional family values	60.3%	37.4%	2.3%
Respect for people in authority	53.9%	43.7%	2.4%
Racial and religious harmony	50.3%	47.5%	2.2%

Note: The survey question was "Parents sometimes feel that the school curriculum for their children should address some areas more and some areas less. In primary schools, which of the following should be given more importance, and which ones should be given less?"

#### 4.9 Perceptions of Proposed Policy Solutions

The study also investigated parental perceptions of proposed solutions to improve the education system and to ensure all schools embody features of a good school. Policy changes were divided into two categories: those related to academic changes (such as reducing class sizes and homework) and those focused on school equalisation (such as distributing the best teachers to all schools and standardising textbooks and worksheets across all primary schools).

In the first category (see Table 17), most parents agreed that the primary school curriculum should be made more manageable (93.7 per cent) as well as that primary school class sizes should be reduced to ensure all students receive adequate attention (87.7 per cent).

**Table 17: Perceptions of Academic Policy Changes**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Make the primary school curriculum more manageable	93.7%	30.8%	62.9%	5.8%	0.5%
Reduce primary school class sizes so that each child gets more educational support in school	87.7%	39.8%	47.9%	11.2%	1.1%
Reduce the amount of homework in primary school	67.4%	20.5%	46.9%	29.9%	2.8%
Scrap SAP schools, autonomous schools and independent schools	51.8%	15.1%	36.7%	43.0%	5.2%
Postpone high stakes exams such as PSLE to a later age	42.5%	16.3%	26.3%	45.8%	11.7%

Note: The survey question was "Below are some policy suggestions parents have regarding the education system. To what extent do you agree with each one?"

About two-thirds of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the amount of homework in primary schools should be reduced. However, there was relatively less support for scrapping SAP/independent/autonomous schools.

Interestingly, less than half of respondents (42.5 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that the PSLE should be postponed to a later age. This may suggest that while there is still no clear consensus on the issue, at this stage a slight majority still see a major national examination as a necessary checkpoint for

their child's learning progress, and a means to gauge their academic aptitude relative to peers.

For changes related to school equalisation, 95.5 per cent of them strongly agreed or agreed that government funding should be increased to neighbourhood schools (see Table 18). Over 92 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that the best teachers should be distributed to all primary schools, while 86.1 per cent felt similarly about standardising learning materials.

**Table 18: Perceptions of Policies to Equalise Schools**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Increase government funding to neighbourhood primary schools.	95.5%	41.2%	54.3%	4.2%	0.3%
Distribute the best teachers to all primary schools.	92.2%	43.9%	48.3%	6.6%	1.2%
Give more emphasis to non-academic aspects of education such as character and values education.	92.0%	35.6%	56.4%	7.6%	0.4%
Give more recognition to volunteers to help in neighbourhood primary schools.	91.6%	26.3%	65.3%	7.4%	1.0%
Standardise learning materials in all primary schools (e.g., textbooks, worksheets, etc.)	86.1%	30.9%	55.1%	12.8%	1.1%

Note: The survey question was "Below are some policy suggestions parents have regarding the education system. To what extent do you agree with each one?"

The findings suggest that parents do support some form of redistribution, and there should be efforts to give children of all backgrounds a fair chance at success. This speaks well of Singaporeans and suggests that meritocracy and equality of opportunity are values that they continue to subscribe to strongly.

#### **4.10 Perceptions of Future Education Landscape**

The study also examined perceptions of the potential education landscape in future, after the government unveiled plans to gradually raise cohort participation rates in publicly-funded universities from 27 per cent in 2012 to 40 per cent by 2020, and opened new tertiary institutions such as the Singapore Institute of Technology. Nearly 70 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that there would be more spaces in local universities that their child could enrol in (see Table 19).

**Table 19: Perceptions of future university education landscape**

	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
There will be many more places in local universities which he/she can enrol in	68.2%	8.7%	59.4%	26.1%	5.7%
Doing a degree full-time at a university will help secure better job opportunities compared to doing a part-time degree at the same university while working full-time	65.9%	16.0%	49.9%	30.2%	4.0%
The criteria for university admission will be based less on academic results but on other qualities such as CCA involvement	51.6%	6.1%	45.5%	41.8%	6.6%
Employers will prefer those who have skills for the job rather than paper qualifications	47.0%	10.8%	36.2%	39.6%	13.4%
There will not be much difference to their future potential whether they go on to university or instead join the workforce and obtain work-ready skills through schemes like SkillsFuture	36.5%	4.0%	32.5%	41.6%	21.9%
Going overseas for a university education will help secure better job options for my child compared to studying at local universities	34.7%	7.7%	27.0%	56.4%	8.9%

Note: The survey question was "This question is regarding the future of education. How much do you agree with the following statements about educational prospects of your primary school children by the time he/she is eligible for further education?"

Amid the push for Singaporeans to embrace lifelong learning, and the introduction of the SkillsFuture programme, the study also sought parents' views on whether they felt that tertiary qualifications would still be important for their children in the future. Among them, 47 per cent agreed or strongly agreed

that employers would prefer those who have skills for the job rather than paper qualifications.

However, most parents still believed that university qualifications would be more important, compared to joining the workforce and acquiring skills through schemes like SkillsFuture. Only 36.5 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the claim that there would not be much difference for their child's future potential whether he or she went to university, or instead joined the workforce and obtained work-ready skills. This suggests that many still cling to the traditional Singaporean mindset that the pre-requisite for a successful career entails getting a first degree.

More parents (51.6 per cent) expect that university admission in the future would be based less on academic results and more on CCA involvement. Only a third of parents agreed or strongly agreed with the claim that getting an overseas degree would secure better job opportunities compared to a Singapore university education, a sentiment possibly shaped by the recent rise in world rankings by the more established local universities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There has been public debate over the Ministry of Education's vision of "Every School a Good School", and some segments of parents have expressed doubts over whether this is possible in Singapore's achievement-driven academic culture.

Against this backdrop, however, survey respondents, irrespective of the school their child was enrolled in, showed high levels of satisfaction both at the aggregate level, as well as with many features of these schools.

Collectively, respondents had children in practically every primary school in Singapore. Thus, it is possible to assume that parental satisfaction extended across school types — the great majority of parents were satisfied with their child's school, regardless of whether it was deemed as a prestigious school or a typical neighbourhood school. This was particularly evident when parents assessed their child's teachers' qualities, where the overwhelming majority of parents reported satisfaction. This finding challenges common perceptions that there is a major gap between the prestigious and neighbourhood school.

The survey thus indicates that the lived experiences of most parents with regard to their child's school were not negative. Parents, perhaps after an initial period



of apprehension and anxiety over school placement and lingering concerns when the child first enrolls, do eventually come to appreciate their child's school.

In terms of parental perceptions of features of a good school, the respondents appeared to value Process-Development-Environment (PDE) focused features much more than Results-Achievement (RA) centred features, as traits a good school should have.

All the PDE features received over 90 per cent of the respondents' endorsement for the combined categories of important, very important and essential. Although lower percentages of respondents saw RA characteristics as important, very important or essential, a record of high PSLE scores and students moving on to reputable secondary schools were the two highest-ranking RA characteristics associated with a good school. Only 23.9 per cent associated a lot of homework with good schools, suggesting parents did not find this a crucial indicator for a good school.

It is also worth highlighting three other findings, which challenged common perceptions. First, worries over parents' alumni connections and the unfair advantage this may create in the primary school enrolment exercise have been expressed from time to time in the mainstream press and social media.

However, the study's results suggest this may be the concern of a smaller group than what public discourse suggests.

Over half of respondents thought having strong alumni was important, very important or essential to good schools. However, the parent's alumni links ranked 14th of the 15 criteria that respondents listed as essential, very important, or important. Similarly, 36 per cent of respondents thought limited openings in certain schools were a challenge to them if they did not have alumni connections.

A second finding that also seems to have busted a myth is that in spite of the general perception of local parents being "kiasu", an overwhelming 77.3 per cent of respondents claimed they did not do anything to actively secure a good school.

In fact, most parents (73.6 per cent) claimed that they managed to get their child into their school of choice. Among the rest, 12.7 per cent reported that while not getting their school of choice, they still managed to enrol their child in a school that was considered a good school by most people.

Finally, less than half of respondents (42.5 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that the PSLE should be postponed to a later age. This may suggest that while there is still no clear consensus on the issue, at this stage a slight majority still see a major national examination as a necessary checkpoint for their child's learning progress, and a means to gauge their academic aptitude relative to peers.

The study's broad findings indicate that MOE's recent policies to fine-tune the education system are generally on the right track. Many respondents supported a heavier emphasis on character and values education compared to the current level of focus. There was also significant approval for a reduction in the amount of homework. The recent investments to build up the research capabilities of tertiary institutions also seem to have elevated the standing of local universities relative to foreign ones among Singapore parents.

We note some contradictions in the responses. Parents report desiring more emphasis on character-building and other holistic areas of education, and cited such softer aspects as a key factor driving school choice. However, many do continue to place substantial weight on academics, and report feeling stressed when they have to help their child with tests or exams. This may indicate that even though many parents identify with the need for a more balanced education system, other factors still wield considerable influence in shaping their

behaviour when it comes to their child's education. These could include a sense of having to push their child to keep up with his peers when it comes to grades, driven by the underlying perception that academic performance is still a key ticket to good jobs. This then creates high levels of stress, both for the parents and the child.

In this regard, while MOE has taken substantial policy steps to reduce academic demands on schoolchildren, it is important to consider what needs to be done to change parents' mindsets. Some parents still see education as purely a rat race. Hopefully, this can shift to one where schools are seen as an environment for building softer skills such as collaboration, curiosity, perseverance and initiative. Rather than pure academic grades, these competencies will be key drivers of success in the innovation-driven economy of the present and future.

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**Institute of Policy Studies**  
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy  
National University of Singapore  
1C Cluny Road House 5  
Singapore 259599

Tel: (65) 6516 8388 Fax: (65) 6777 0700  
Web: [www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips](http://www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips)  
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