

Singapore parents generally satisfied with primary education system: IPS survey

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Most Singaporean parents are generally pleased with the local primary education system, according to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies released on Monday (Jul 17).

The think-tank conducted the survey over a three-month period last year, surveying 1,500 parents with children in about 180 primary schools. Researchers said to the best of their knowledge, the survey is 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.

According to the survey, more than 90 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Singapore's education system is among the best in the world. They also agreed that most primary schools provided a high-quality education.

More than 80 per cent also agreed that the primary schools their children go to are schools that are considered a "good school". Nearly 70 per cent said their children went to a school of their choice that is considered a good school by most people, while another 12.7 per cent said their child went to a school that was not their choice, but still considered a good school by most people.

Only 3.7 per cent said the school their child was in was not of their choice, and also not considered a good school by most people. And of the respondents in this category, nearly four in 10 of them still reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the school.

IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said the survey results indicated that most primary schools lived up to parents' expectations, regardless of whether the school was their choice.

"When we hear people mention anecdotally that the primary school system is extremely difficult to get in, where people have to queue up and do all kinds of things to get into a good school, it seems that in people's opinion, there's a rarity of good schools," said Dr Mathews, who was the study's principal investigator.

"But when we aggregate those results, we realise that's not true.

"Of course it goes against what we have sometimes in our small coffee shop conversations, but being able to aggregate something like data tells us that in fact for most people, the school their child goes to is actually a very good school."

Survey busts myth of "kiasu parents"

Nonetheless, the survey results showed that the majority of respondents – 77.3 per cent – did not do anything actively to secure a good primary school for their child. About 10 per cent moved nearer to the school of their choice, while 12.2 per cent volunteered in the school in order to ensure their child could be enrolled in an earlier phase.

While the annual Primary 1 registration exercise is one that often appears to be “riddled with anxiety”, the survey results indicated that only 27.9 per cent of respondents reported experiencing challenges.

Dr Mathews said the results “busted the myth” that Singaporean parents were going all out to secure a place in a primary school for their child.

The “kiasu parent” mentality may not in fact resonate with most Singaporeans, he added.

Character-building key to a “good school”: parents

The survey also asked respondents to identify key features of a “good school”. The features were split into two categories: Process, development and environment-focused features – comprising items that reflect the primary school’s environment and culture – and features which centred around results and achievements.

In the first category, almost all parents – 97.2 per cent of respondents – indicated that having teachers who cared about the socio-emotional development of students was an important feature of a good school. This was ranked higher than the school’s ability to help students develop a strong academic foundation, which saw 97 per cent saying this was a key feature of a good school.

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

Emerging tops among the results and achievement factors were a record of high PSLE scores (72.8 per cent) and students from the school going to reputable secondary schools (70.6 per cent). But researchers noted that despite notions that many parents’ Primary 1 enrollment choice for their child is highly influenced by whether the school has feeder links to particular secondary schools, an affiliation with a good secondary school ranked fourth on the list of results and achievement-centred features. Just over three in five parents felt this was an important feature.

Only 23.9 per cent of respondents felt that having lots of homework was important.

The survey also asked respondents about the factors they would consider when choosing a primary school for their child. An overwhelming majority – more than 90 per cent – indicated that the quality of teachers and emphasis on character building were important.

In contrast, researchers noted that factors related to a school’s external network were less important to parents. A school’s secondary school affiliation, alumni network and affiliation with clan or religious organisations ranked in the bottom five criteria in terms of the percentage of parents who considered these criteria important.

“Contradictions” in survey results

However, while parents reported a desire for more emphasis on character-building and holistic education, many do continue to place a “substantial weight” on academics, according to researchers. This, they pointed out, showed a contradiction in the responses.

For example, 63.3 per cent of parents indicated that primary schools should place more importance on the English language.

But in a separate question, 70.8 per cent of parents indicated that the number one cause for stress and anxiety from their child's education came from helping him or her with tests and examinations. Other top causes of stress included the concern that their child may lose out in the education system in the long run (63.4 per cent), and the fear of their child failing to obtain the grades that they are capable of (56.8 per cent).

According to researchers, 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," they said in the report.

Recent MOE policies "on the right track"

Respondents were also asked questions on the Ministry of Education's (MOE) various policy changes and how the education system can be improved. Nearly 94 per cent of parents indicated that the primary school curriculum should be made more manageable, while about two-thirds said the amount of homework should be reduced.

However, less than half 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," said researchers.

Researchers concluded that the study's broad findings indicate that MOE's recent policies to fine-tune the education system are "on the right track", as many parents supported a heavier focus on character and values education, as well as a reduction in the amount of homework.

Commenting on the findings, Dr Mathews noted the change in parents' attitudes. "The bulk of parents are no longer centred on 'the most important thing is to hothouse my kid and drive him to come up with all the As'," he said.

"Parents do know that education – at least at the primary level – is a lot more than that. It's about character, it's about values, and they do understand that many of those things would be what their kid needs in the long run."

But while MOE has taken "substantial policy steps" to reduce academic demands on schoolchildren, researchers also noted the importance of considering what needs to be done to change parents' mindsets.

"Some parents still see education as purely a rat race," they said. "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.”

IPS intends to hold a forum on the paper in the coming months to discuss the survey findings.