

IPS FORUM ON PARENTS AND SCHOOLING

IPS Forum on Parents and Schooling Broader Aspirations, Persistent Stakes

By Melvin Tay and Teo Kay Key

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the Forum on Parents and Schooling on 29 September 2026 at the NUSS Kent Ridge Guild House. The forum brought together parents, educators, researchers, policymakers and community stakeholders to reflect on how parents' aspirations, attitudes and behaviours towards education have evolved over the past decade, and what these shifts might mean for Singapore's education system.

The forum opened with a presentation by Dr Mathew Mathews, Head of Social Lab and Principal Research Fellow at IPS, on findings from IPS' latest study of parents' attitudes towards education in Singapore. This was followed by a panel discussion titled "Parents and Schooling in 2026: Broader Aspirations, Persistent Stakes". The panel featured Dr Mathew; Dr Quah Saw Han, Principal Clinical Psychologist and Senior Assistant Director, Community Psychology Hub Ltd; Mrs Sher-li Torrey, Founder of Mums@Work Singapore; and Associate Professor Intan Azura Mokhtar, Associate Vice Provost (Community-Engaged Learning),

Singapore Institute of Technology. It was moderated by Professor Aaron Maniam, Deputy Director of IPS and Professor in Practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.



Caption for photo: (From L-R) Associate Professor Intan Azura Mokhtar, Mrs Sher-li Torrey, Dr Quah Saw Han, Dr Mathew Mathews, and Professor Aaron Maniam.

Following the panel discussion, participants took part in facilitated table discussions under the theme “Education Conversations: From Findings to Possibilities”, where they reflected on the survey findings and their implications for Singapore’s education landscape. The contents of these breakout discussions are not covered in this report. The forum subsequently reconvened for closing remarks by Mr David Neo, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Education.

Presentation of Survey Findings: Broader Aspirations, Persistent Stakes

Dr Mathew began by observing that many of the anxieties surrounding education today were not entirely new. Recalling a televised forum from 1996 involving then-Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and younger Singaporeans, he noted that questions about the economic value of education and how far young people should be stretched were already being debated three decades ago. What had changed was the broader environment in which parents were making these decisions, as well as the education system itself. Against this backdrop, the IPS study sought to move beyond individual experiences and provide a more systematic picture of how Singapore parents viewed schooling in 2026.

The survey covered about 1,500 Singapore citizen and permanent resident parents with at least one child attending a local Ministry of Education (MOE) primary school. Conducted between May and August 2026, it revisited several themes examined in an earlier IPS study

in 2016, including what parents wanted from education, how they chose schools, their use of tuition and enrichment, views on assessment and the different approaches parents took towards their children's education.

One of the study's central findings was that parents continued to place considerable value on outcomes extending beyond academic achievement, with this orientation strengthening in some respects since 2016. Good character, self-discipline, a passion for learning and social skills were highly valued, while parents also attached importance to teachers who cared about children's social and emotional development. Compared with 2016, more parents also accepted that children should be allowed to fail and learn from mistakes.

However, this broader conception of education had not displaced concerns about academic performance. Instead, the findings suggested that many parents were trying to pursue both. Parents continued to take academic standing into account when choosing secondary schools, even while placing considerable weight on whether a school suited their child and whether attending it was practical. "Fit" emerged as the most important broad consideration in secondary school choice, followed by practicality, while academic standing, opportunities and a sense of belonging remained relevant.

This coexistence of broader aspirations and academic concerns was also evident in parents' use of tuition and enrichment. Average reported monthly spending on tuition rose from \$318 in 2016 to \$677 in 2026, while average enrichment spending increased from \$125 to \$355. Nearly nine in 10 parents nevertheless agreed to some extent that children in Singapore spent too much time on tuition and enrichment. At the same time, around seven in 10 said they would spend more on these activities if they had greater resources, while about half reported feeling pressure because other parents were doing so.

Parents' self-reported stress had similarly risen. Nearly 88% reported having felt stressed about their children's education at least once in the previous year, compared with about 73% in 2016, while arguments between spouses over children's education had also become more common. Yet most parents continued to see value in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The largest group preferred to retain the PSLE while making it less high stakes, rather than abolishing it altogether.

Dr Mathew also presented three parent profiles identified through the study: Detached Realists, New-School Parents and Loving Lions. Loving Lions, who attached considerable importance to both academic achievement and their children's broader development while also believing strongly in parental involvement, reported the highest levels of stress. Dr Mathew suggested that this helped explain an apparent paradox in the findings: placing greater value on holistic development did not necessarily mean that parents felt less pressure. Some parents were effectively expanding the range of things they hoped their children would do well in.

He concluded by posing several questions for the discussion that followed: how children could be given room to develop different strengths without every pursuit becoming another arena for competition; what parents should reasonably be expected to provide and what they should be able to leave to schools; and what might give families confidence that worthwhile opportunities remained available to children regardless of background.

Panel Discussion: Parents and Schooling in 2026

Managing, Rather Than “Solving”, Educational Tensions

Professor Maniam framed the panel discussion using the concept of polarity management. He suggested that many of the tensions highlighted by the survey were not choices between a correct and incorrect option, but between two desirable objectives that had to be pursued together. Academic achievement and all-round development were one such polarity; parental support and children’s autonomy were another.

The challenge, he argued, was not to “solve” these tensions by permanently choosing one side, but to manage them over time while avoiding the dysfunctional extremes of either. Too great an emphasis on academic performance could crowd out other forms of development, but too little direction could leave children without sufficient grounding. Similarly, parental support could be valuable without becoming micromanagement. Professor Maniam added that parents themselves could change their approach over time and respond differently to different children. The task of continually navigating these competing considerations could itself be an important source of stress.

The panellists broadly agreed that this framing reflected their experience. Dr Quah was struck especially by the rise in parental stress and asked who was supporting parents so that they, in turn, could remain emotionally available to their children. Mrs Torrey similarly highlighted the coexistence of dissatisfaction with the pressures surrounding the PSLE and parents’ reluctance to dispense with it entirely. Associate Professor Intan noted that parents could move between different parenting approaches depending on the needs and personalities of individual children rather than fitting permanently into a single archetype.

Education Stress in a More Uncertain World

A major theme of the panel was that parental anxiety about education could not be understood solely by looking at schools or examinations. The panellists pointed to changes in the economy, the labour market and technology as part of the environment in which parents were deciding how best to prepare their children.

Associate Professor Intan argued that while academic preparation remained important, young people entering a rapidly changing workplace would increasingly need capabilities that extended beyond technical knowledge. Communication, the ability to engage with others, interpersonal skills and other “humanistic” capabilities would become more important amid artificial intelligence (AI) and technological disruption.

Mrs Torrey illustrated how concerns originating outside education could quickly become educational anxieties. At workshops on AI and careers for mothers, she found that participants frequently shifted from asking about their own employment prospects to asking what skills their children should acquire to remain competitive in an AI-driven future. The example, she said, showed how uncertainty about work could be transferred onto parents’ decisions about schooling.

Dr Quah stressed that education remained an important protective factor and channel for social mobility, which helped explain why parents attached such high stakes to it. From her

work as a clinical psychologist, including with children who had experienced adversity, she had seen how doing well educationally could improve long-term prospects. The difficulty was that this could also lead parents to feel that they had to do everything possible to prevent their children from being left behind.

Dr Mathew agreed that wider anxieties were often “latched onto” education because Singaporeans retained a strong belief in education as a pathway to advancement. Parental stress therefore reflected not simply what was happening within the school system, but a broader set of concerns about children’s future prospects.

Multiple Pathways, Failure and Definitions of Success

The discussion subsequently turned to what it meant to make education less high stakes. Dr Mathew suggested that parents were not necessarily asking for the PSLE to disappear. Rather, they wanted greater assurance that a single examination result or secondary school posting would not determine a child’s future. Multiple pathways therefore mattered because they reduced the extent to which one decision made at a young age was treated as destiny.

The panellists linked this to the importance of allowing children to experience failure. Associate Professor Intan argued that educational pathways were no longer as linear as they once appeared to be. Young people needed opportunities to try, fail, learn and adjust, rather than view failure as a permanent closing-off of possibilities. She added that parents could guide and facilitate their children’s development while still recognising that the eventual future belonged to the child.

Dr Quah emphasised the importance of the parent-child relationship in creating the emotional conditions for learning. High levels of anxiety could interfere with learning, while children benefited from having adults who could provide a sense of safety and help them regulate their emotions. This also meant that parents had to pay attention to their own emotional well-being if they were to serve as that source of stability.

Mrs Torrey reflected on the tendency for parents to treat children’s results as assessments of their own parenting. She said she tried to maintain a distinction between a parent’s successes and failures and those of the child. Doing so made it easier to see a result in relation to what the child was capable of, rather than against the parent’s own expectations or educational experiences.

Dr Mathew noted that the survey suggested greater acceptance of failure than a decade earlier but stressed that parents still needed confidence that setbacks would not result in a “hard end”. A system with credible alternative pathways could therefore help parents act on their stated belief that it was acceptable for children to make mistakes.

The discussion also touched on the distribution of caregiving responsibilities. Dr Mathew observed that the responsibility for children’s schooling continued to fall disproportionately on mothers in many families. Where one parent felt primarily responsible for steering a child’s educational development without sufficient support from a spouse, stress could be intensified. Dr Quah similarly spoke about the importance of parents working as a team and sharing responsibilities according to their children’s needs.

Tuition, Competition and the Search for an Edge

The panellists also considered the pressures surrounding tuition, enrichment and access to sought-after schools. Associate Professor Intan cautioned against treating tuition as either inherently necessary or inherently undesirable. In her own experience, whether additional help was useful depended on the needs of the particular child. She similarly argued that attending a “brand-name” school might open some doors, but did not determine how far a young person would ultimately progress. What mattered too were the skills students developed, the opportunities available to them and the confidence they gained.

This linked back to the survey finding on peer comparison. Dr Mathew noted that around half of respondents openly acknowledged feeling pressure because other parents were investing in additional educational support. This illustrated how difficult it could be for an individual family to opt out of competitive behaviour if it believed others would continue participating.

The discussion therefore highlighted a distinction between providing support because a child genuinely needed it and doing so simply because others appeared to be gaining an advantage. The wider problem was that parents could individually dislike an “arms race” while still making decisions that collectively sustained it.

Sharing Responsibility Across Government, Parents and Society

The question of responsibility ran throughout the discussion. Professor Maniam framed this as another polarity: public agencies had an important role in shaping the education environment, but parents also needed agency to make choices for their children. Too little intervention could leave structural pressures untouched, while attempting to regulate every parental decision could create new problems.

Dr Quah emphasised the importance of continuing conversations among parents, professionals, schools and policymakers. Given the uncertainties confronting families, she saw dialogue as a means of identifying what different actors could realistically do rather than looking for a single intervention that would remove stress altogether.

Mrs Torrey argued that some degree of competition was rooted in human behaviour rather than unique to Singapore’s education system. Drawing on her earlier experience teaching in rural Japan, she recalled that families competed to enter more sought-after schools even in communities very different from Singapore. This suggested that government policy could shape behaviour but could not eliminate parents’ desire to seek advantages for their children.

Associate Professor Intan likewise cautioned that outright restrictions might simply displace competition. If tuition were prohibited, for example, parents with the means and motivation to do so might find other ways of securing additional assistance. Similarly, a pathway such as Direct School Admission (DSA), intended to recognise a wider range of strengths, could itself become another space in which families invested resources to obtain an edge.

Dr Mathew nevertheless stressed that structures mattered. Earlier policy settings and structures had emerged from particular stages of Singapore’s development, and some behaviours could persist even as policies changed. Public policy therefore had a continuing role in ensuring that valuable developmental opportunities were not available only to families

able to purchase them, and in helping parents distinguish between meaningful support and claims about educational products or services that might not be well substantiated.

Taken together, the discussion suggested that neither government nor families could address educational pressure alone. Schools, employers, communities and wider social norms all contributed to how success was defined and how much weight families placed on particular educational outcomes.

Parent Support as a Source of Confidence

Parent Support Groups (PSGs) were discussed as one possible source of support between families. Dr Quah described PSGs as spaces where parents could form relationships, share difficulties and feel less alone, noting that such networks could remain important when children entered secondary school even though parental participation often declined at that stage.

Associate Professor Intan said PSGs could offer something different from advice delivered by experts or authorities because parents were engaging one another as peers. However, she cautioned that these groups should not inadvertently reproduce competitive pressures by becoming forums for exchanging recommendations about tuition and enrichment. Instead, the child's development should remain at the centre of the conversation.

Mrs Torrey added that PSGs could do more to reach parents who were less visible or less inclined to participate. Some parents, particularly as their children grew older, might feel isolated or perceive parent networks themselves as competitive. More deliberate outreach could help make such groups genuine sources of support rather than another arena for comparison.

Reasons for Optimism

Professor Maniam closed the panel by asking what gave each panellist hope.

Dr Quah pointed to moments when children began to understand their own strengths and develop a path for themselves. Mrs Torrey said the very willingness to hold open conversations about education was encouraging, particularly where the system remained receptive to feedback and capable of evolving.

Associate Professor Intan similarly drew hope from Singapore's relatively compact and connected society, which made it possible for institutions to respond and adapt. She also stressed that each generation should be allowed to form its own aspirations rather than having the educational experiences of earlier generations imposed upon it.

Dr Mathew concluded by noting that, despite the anxieties evident in the survey, parents continued to express strong confidence in Singapore's education system. This combination of trust, investment and a sense of agency provided a foundation on which further change could be built.

Breakout Discussions: From Findings to Possibilities

Following the panel, participants moved into facilitated small-group discussions to reflect on the findings and consider what might help parents and children navigate educational choices with greater confidence. Across the tables, participants discussed the pressures created by school choice, tuition and enrichment, assessment and educational pathways, social comparison and differing family resources. They also considered how parents could be better supported to understand their children's needs and the range of pathways available to them, and how schools could give greater confidence that meaningful opportunities existed across the system.

The table discussions were conducted under the Chatham House Rule to encourage candid exchange. This report therefore does not reproduce individual table discussions or attribute participants' contributions; the breakout insights will instead inform IPS' broader synthesis of the forum and its continuing work on the study.



Caption for photo: Mr David Neo, with breakout discussion participants.

Closing Remarks: Building Confidence in Many Paths to Success

Mr David Neo, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Education, delivered the forum's closing remarks. The full text of his speech, "Building Confidence in Many Paths to Success", is available on the Ministry of Education's website [here](#).

Mr Neo said the IPS findings captured a central tension facing parents: they wanted their children to receive a broad and holistic education, but many continued to invest significant time and resources in tuition and enrichment because they were unsure whether their children

could afford not to do so. The result was an “arms race” that relatively few parents actively wanted but many felt compelled to join.

He articulated that these pressures were reinforced by a familiar chain of assumptions linking examination performance to entry into a “good” school, then to a “good” university course, job, income and ultimately a “good life”. Such narratives could make every educational decision appear disproportionately consequential. Addressing them would therefore require change beyond the education system alone, including how employers and society valued skills, experience and different forms of contribution.

Within education, Mr Neo said the aim was not to eliminate striving, competition, stress or disappointment. Rather, it was to prevent the pursuit of marginal academic gains from crowding out curiosity, character, relationships and a lasting love for learning. He pointed to earlier changes including the PSLE Achievement Level scoring system, Full Subject-Based Banding, the removal of mid-year examinations and the expansion of aptitude-based and applied pathways as efforts to create more flexibility and reduce the consequences attached to any single educational milestone.

Looking ahead, he said the next phase of the Education Conversations would pay particular attention to the transition from primary to secondary school. Three areas had surfaced repeatedly: the PSLE, DSA and the broader question of how schools across the system could be strengthened.

On the PSLE, Mr Neo noted that parents continued to value a national examination for assessing learning and preparing students for secondary school, while much of the pressure arose from its role in secondary school posting. Possible changes therefore had to be considered alongside their trade-offs and potential to shift competition elsewhere.

Similarly, the challenge for DSA was to preserve a pathway that recognised genuine aptitude and strengths beyond examination results without turning every interest into an admissions strategy. For schools more generally, the objective was to strengthen parents’ confidence that good teaching, meaningful opportunities and credible pathways existed across the system, so that choosing one school over another would not feel like choosing a child’s destiny.

Mr Neo concluded that the education system could give parents greater confidence to act on their aspirations for holistic development, but lasting change would depend on society as a whole recognising multiple pathways and valuing different strengths and contributions. He invited Singaporeans to continue contributing their experiences and ideas as the next phase of the Education Conversations proceeded.

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[Melvin Tay](#) and [Teo Kay Key](#) co-organised the IPS Forum on Parents and Schooling.

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