

Chan Chun Sing: Exclusive networks will fracture society, alumni of 'illustrious schools' should help others

Chan encouraged alumni to go beyond their alma mater.

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Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing encourages alumni of "illustrious schools" to not only "go back and help" their own schools but also "go beyond", such as by serving on boards and/or school advisory committees.

On alumni and social networks

The Education Minister was responding to questions from the participants at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) 35th anniversary conference held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre on Jun. 12, 2023

This includes issues about alumni and social networks raised by fellow panel members Daniel Goh and Jason Tan on a panel on "revisiting meritocracy".

Goh is an associate professor and associate provost from National University of Singapore (NUS), while Tan is an associate professor from the National Institute of Education (NIE).

Alumni encouraged to help schools within cluster

On sharing social capital with other people, Chan highlighted that people have a "natural tendency" to be "drawn to [our alma mater's] community", but he felt that Singapore could do it differently.

Chan explained that while he understands that many alumni would like to help their respective schools — which he thinks is not wrong — he felt that everyone could go beyond that by not just giving back to their alma mater.

To achieve that goal of "helping people share their social capital and social networks", Chan said the Ministry of Education (MOE) is not going to leave it to chance.

"In Singapore, we never leave things to chance," Chan said.

Fostering social network between schools

Chan explained that one method is by clustering schools together, allowing alumni to go beyond helping just their alma mater.

He suggested that suggesting that schools can be paired or clustered to work together, instead of against each other, to build their social networks and share their social capital.

"In fact, I have appealed to some of the alumni of illustrious schools to go and serve on boards or school advisory committees beyond their own," Chan said.

"Not just to give them ideas, but to help them to open up and give them new opportunities," he added.

Goh, a former Workers' Party Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP), had earlier highlighted how alumni admissions which locks priority admissions, as one sticky issue that can "foster a new middle class aristocracy".

Goh noted that while alumni admissions is "limited to primary schools here", "primary schools are crucial for the establishing equitable baselines for meritocracy".

Networks cannot be exclusive and closed

Chan said all of these suggestions go toward finding a new balance for Singapore, which is necessary for the society as it matures.

While he acknowledged that the alumni and community networks contributed to the building blocks of Singapore's society as a young nation, he said these networks might fracture society if it continues being an exclusive closed circle.

"So we need to continuously find that balance," Chan said. "These are part of the design of how our policies can make sure that we can keep the social capital and social networks shared and not exclusive so can we tackle the excesses of any one particular system."

Chan ended off with an appeal to Singaporeans.

"There is nothing wrong with meritocracy, if you keep looking on the right-hand side of the bell curve and seeing someone else do better than us, if that inspires all of us to work harder, try a bit more, it is alright.

But let us always remember, there are some of us left behind on the left side of the bell curve, that we can all reach out and help and that it's incumbent upon us."