

More 'I not Stupid' films' reflecting society's anxieties if we just focus on test scores: Chan Chun Sing

He pointed out that focusing on credentials and college qualifications will divide society and we should adopt a broader definition of success.

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"If our society continues to respect only those who have the highest test scores and the most impressive academic credentials, there will be many more 'I Not Stupid' films reflecting these concerns," said Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Education.

Chan was referring to the struggles of three students with weaker academic abilities in the film, noting that they were looked down upon and seen as "failures in life".

Speaking at the 35th anniversary conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Jun. 12, 2023, Chan said if people only focused on the schools people attended and how much they earned, there would be a deep fissure dividing society.

Focusing on credentials and qualifications will divide society

Chan noted that meritocracy — a system where people were rewarded based on their ability and hard work — has allowed Singapore to defy the odds and maximise the talents of its people to grow into the global city it is today.

However, he pointed out that in many other countries, a narrow definition of merit – based on credentials and college qualifications – has led to divisions in society.

Chan raised the example of Jack Neo's film 'I Not Stupid', which he heard will have a third film in the series soon.

He said the movie depicted the struggles of three students who did not do well academically, were looked down upon by their schoolmates, were not respected by society, and were seen as failures in life.

While the first film was released 20 years ago, Chan highlighted that the anxieties portrayed in the movie remain very real for many today.

"Meritocracy is needed to keep Singapore cohesive – to unite us, and not to divide us," Chan commented.

Broader definition of merit will make people more united

Chan pointed out that by embracing a broader definition of merit, Singaporeans will be more united.

He said that Singapore has been moving away from defining success by any single, static, and narrow metric, which are things such as PSLE results, grade point averages, or whether one holds a degree or diploma.

Chan emphasised that different kinds of work must be fairly rewarded and remunerated, including technical or service and community care roles.

To that end, he said work is being done to uplift the wages of lower-wage workers and investing more in the quality of vocational instruction.

Reminder that people are not sole masters of their own successes

Chan reminded us that even though meritocracy promises rewards for our talent, ability and hard work, people must not fall into the trap of "believing that we are the sole masters of our own successes".

He pointed out that many of us are "indebted to the support of those around us", such as parents, mentors and friends.

"But not everyone may have been so equally blessed," he highlighted.

Chan explained that even as a meritocratic society, everyone should "take care of one another" by recognising that individual success is due to "opportunities given to us by the system and the support and love of those around us."

He emphasised that people should give back so that others, too, will be uplifted and may seek different and better lives.

Meritocracy to keep Singapore relevant and attractive

Chan reiterated that meritocracy has been and will continue to be a core pillar of Singapore's survival and success.

He explained that a meritocratic system keeps Singapore relevant and attractive so that the best will want to compete for and connect with Singapore.

He pointed out that meritocracy is essential to keep Singapore competitive and relevant in a fragile global economic environment.

"While meritocracy has worked well for us for the last 50 years, meritocracy without continuous evolution will not be sufficient for the next 50 years," Chan said.

He added that meritocracy must be tempered by well-designed systems, which can evolve to meet the needs of the times and also encompass the right values, such as gratitude for what we received and compassion for those less advantaged.