

Parents and schooling in 2026: broader aspirations, persistent stakes

IPS Forum on Parents and Schooling:
Findings from the Survey on Singapore's Education System

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Building on IPS' insights into parents' attitudes and perceptions of Singapore's education system in 2016, a survey was conducted earlier this year to refresh our understanding following major reforms over the past decade

Context

- PSLE Achievement Level (AL) scoring system rolled out in 2021
- Mid-year examinations phased out across primary and secondary schools by 2023
- Full Subject-based Banding (FSBB) rolled out in 2024
- Refreshed approach to support primary-school students with academic strengths and talents; Gifted Education Programme in its current form discontinued from 2027

Methodology

- 20–30-minute self-administered survey, completed either online or in person using CAPI
- Fieldwork conducted from May 2026 to Aug 2026
- n = 1,500 parents (SG Citizens/PRs, aged 21-65, with at least one child attending a local MOE primary school at point of response)
- Sampled households received mailed invitations addressed to a parent of a named child, followed by household visits where required
- Age, race, gender, housing type, and highest education level quotas for representativeness vis-à-vis primary school parent population; 2026 data weighted by housing type

Five key takeaways frame our discussion of how our education system should evolve over the coming years; we will deep-dive into each in turn

1

Parents increasingly value holistic development, but concerns about future prospects and academic pressures persist

2

Holistic fit matters in school choice; academic standing and opportunity remain salient

3

Parents criticise excessive tuition and enrichment, yet continue to invest

4

Parents want lower-stakes assessment, but still want to retain markers of merit and certainty

5

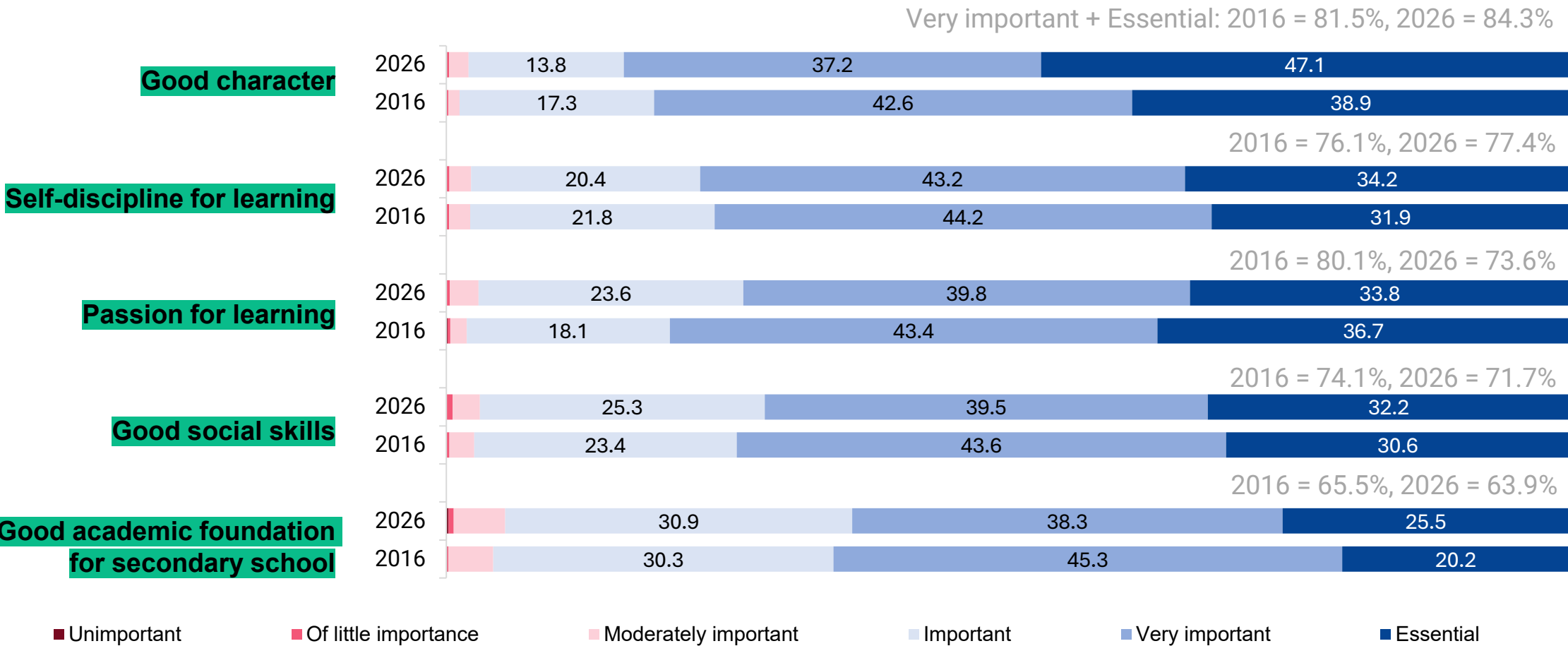
Achievement and holistic orientations can co-exist within the same parent, across various archetypes

...the core tension is that while parents believe in holistic growth for their children, this has not displaced academic aspirations

1 Parents increasingly value **holistic development**, but concerns about **future prospects** and **academic pressures** persist

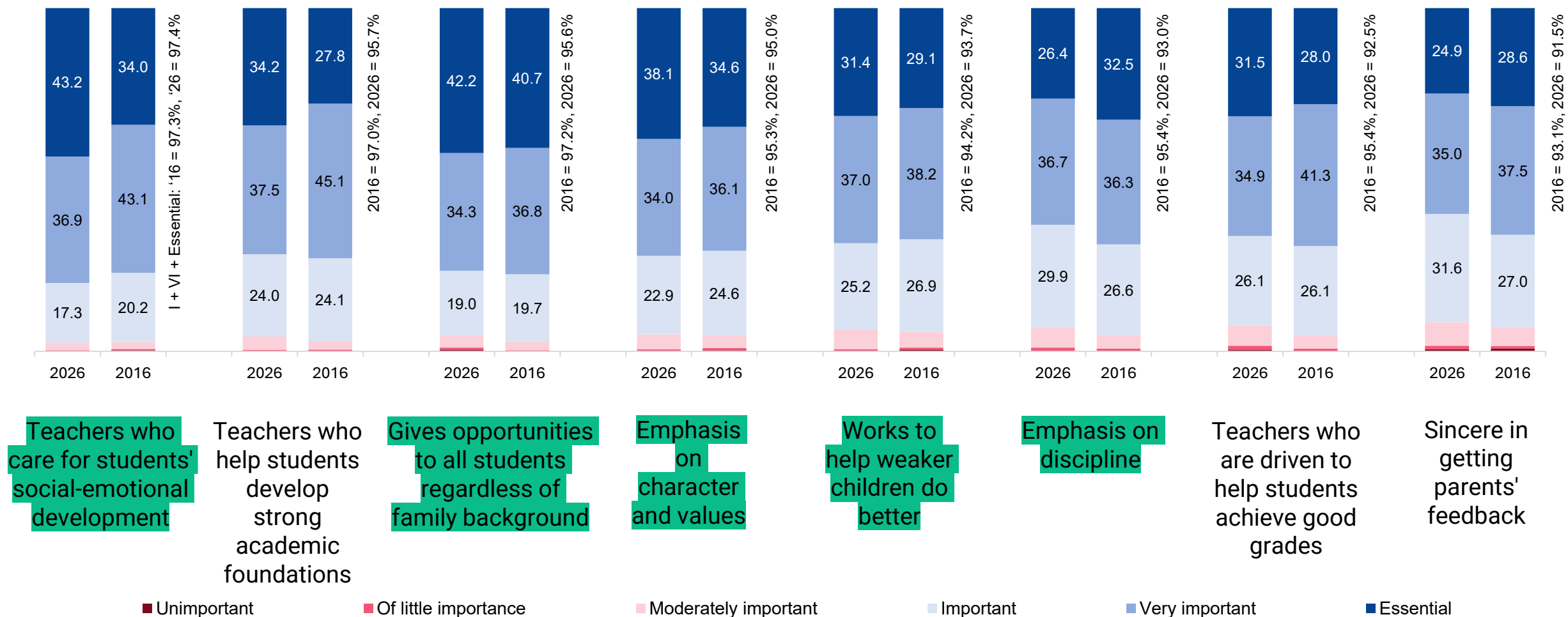
Most parents define a good primary school education in holistic terms such as character and self-discipline; this has been the case over the past decade

2016/2026: You will know that your child has received a good primary school education if s/he comes out of school having acquired:



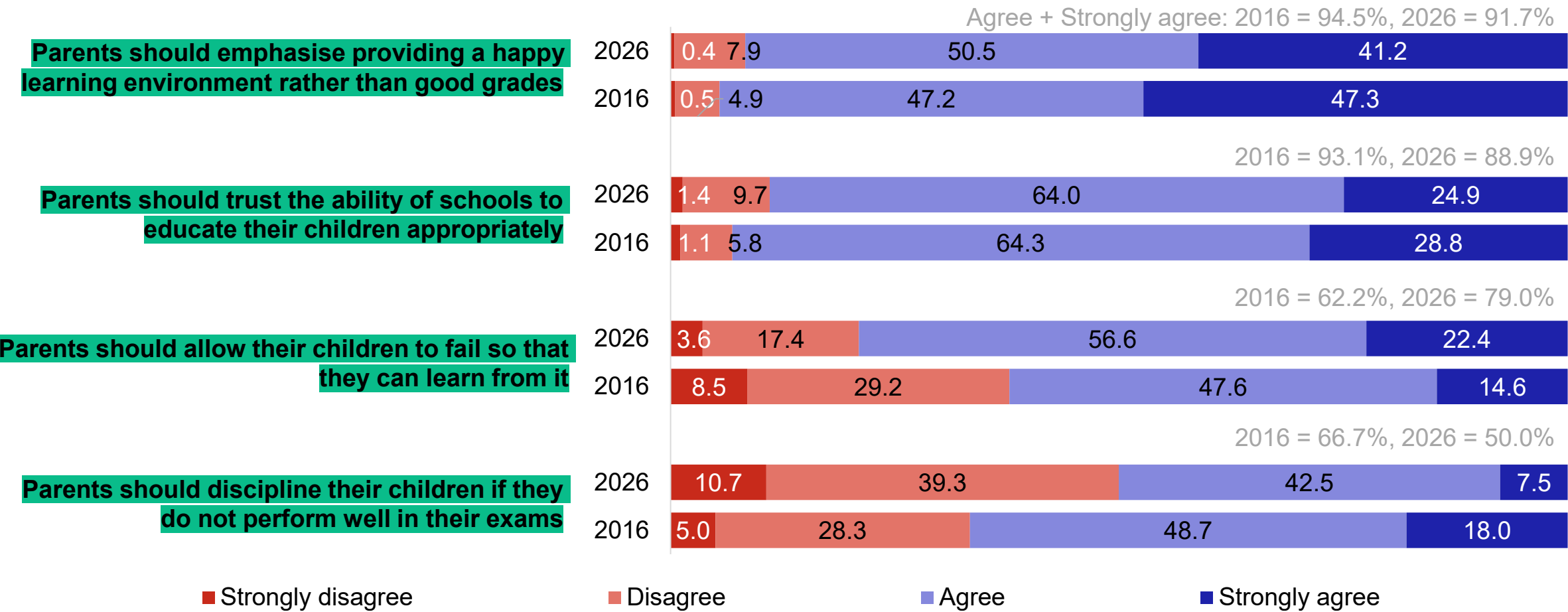
Holistic expectations also extend to what parents expect good schools to provide

2016/2026: In your opinion, how important are the following characteristics in determining a GOOD primary school?



Parents remain focused on emphasising happy learning environments and trusting schools to do their job, while allowing more space for autonomy and failure

2016/2026: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the role of parents in their children’s primary school education?



While perceptions of unnecessary child stress caused by the system have improved, parental stress and frequency of associated actions have instead significantly risen

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Singapore's education system?	Agree + Strongly Agree	
	2016	2026
Singapore's education system is highly competitive	97.7%	95.8%
On the whole, Singapore's education system is among the best in the world	90.3%	90.2%
Singapore's system causes unnecessary stress to children	76.3%	68.7% ▼

Please indicate how often the following has happened to you over the last one year.	At least once a year or more often (e.g., monthly, weekly)	
	2016	2026
My spouse and/or I felt stressed because of our child/ren's education.	73.1%	87.9% ▲
My spouse and/or I had to discipline our child/ren because of schoolwork.	78.1%	82.3% ▲
My spouse and I argued over the education of our child/ren.	42.8%	59.7% ▲

2 Parents prioritise **holistic fit** when choosing secondary schools; **academic standing** and **opportunity** remain salient

When choosing secondary schools, fit and practicality are the priorities for most parents; academic standing (or branding) and opportunity remain salient

- Respondents were asked in the 2026 survey about their decision-making process when choosing a secondary school for their children
- They were presented with a list of considerations when choosing a secondary school and then asked to rate the importance of each characteristic
- Based on factor analysis, we established five distinct categories that included most question items:

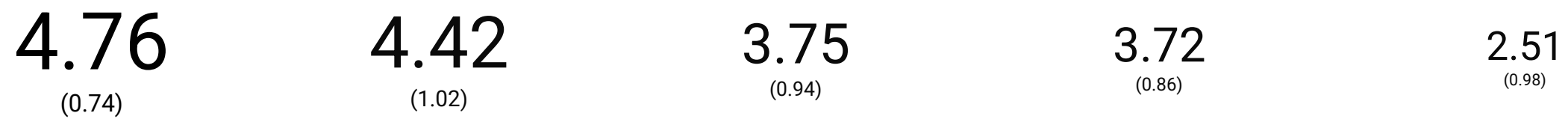
Category	Question Items
Fit: Is the developmental environment of the school appropriate for my child?	• Support for weaker students • Whether my child/ren personally wishes to attend that school • Emphasis on character and values • Emphasis on discipline
Practicality: Does attending this school fit well into my everyday life?	• Proximity to where my child/ren lives • Convenience of transport or commuting options to school (e.g., fewer transfers, less walking)
Standing: What does the school's 'brand' signal in terms of academic performance, selectivity and reputation?	• Past years' GCE O Level or N Level results of the secondary school • Competitive environment • The brand name of the school • Secondary schools' COP in previous years
Opportunity: What educational and developmental opportunities do the school make available?	• DSA Talent Areas offered by the school (e.g., arts, science, sports) • The secondary school's facilities/infrastructure • Availability of particular subject combinations or offerings • Availability of particular programmes (e.g., ALP, LLP) • Availability of Integrated Programme option • Availability of particular co-curricular activity (CCA) options • The school's track record in non-academic activities (e.g., in NSG)
Belonging: Do I have a familial, social, or institutional connection with this school?	• Whether the school is my/ spouse's /other parent's alma mater • Child/ren's sibling is already enrolled in the secondary school • Affiliation with a religious organisation or clan • Whether the secondary school is a single-sex or co-ed school

When choosing secondary schools, fit and practicality are the priorities for most parents; academic standing (or branding) and opportunity remain salient

To what extent are these considerations important to you when thinking about the ideal secondary school for your child/ren?;
1 = unimportant, 2 = of little importance, 3 = moderately important, 4 = important, 5 = very important, 6 = essential

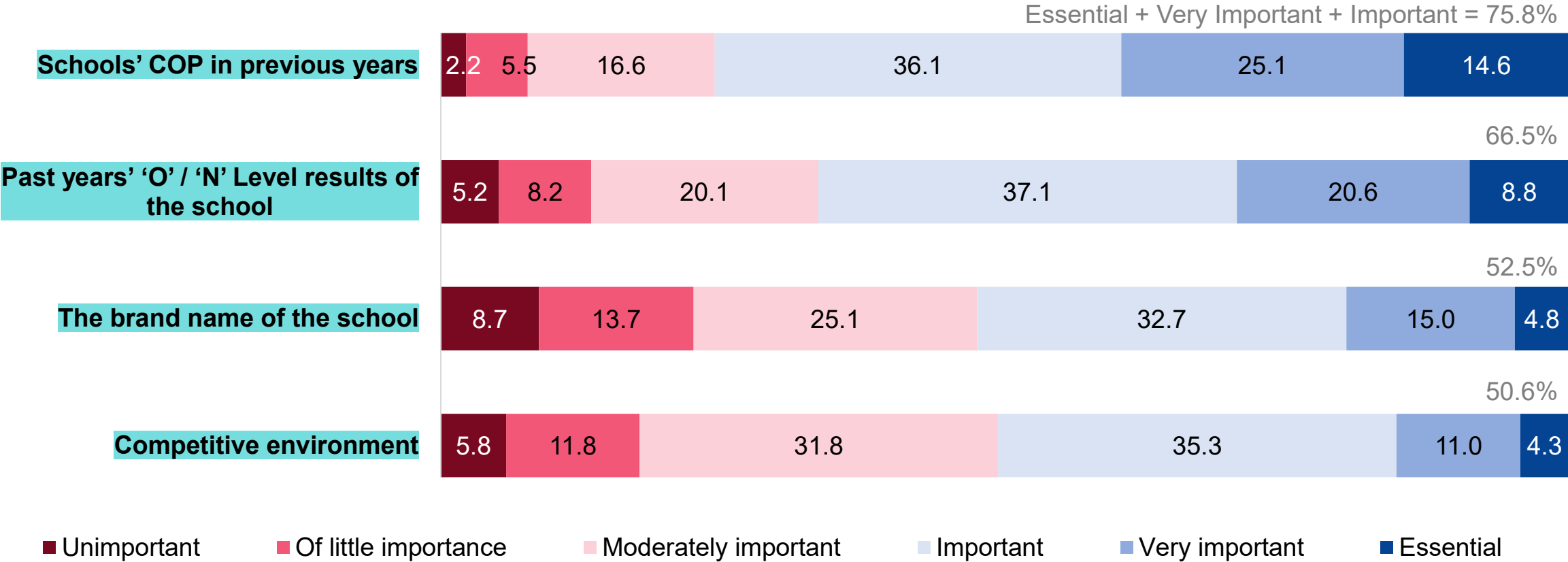
Fit	Practicality	Standing	Opportunity	Belonging
Is the developmental environment of the school appropriate for my child?	Does attending this school fit well into my everyday life?	What does the school's 'brand' signal in terms of academic performance, selectivity and reputation?	What educational and developmental opportunities do the school make available?	Do I have a familial, social, or institutional connection with this school?

Mean score across items in category (SD):



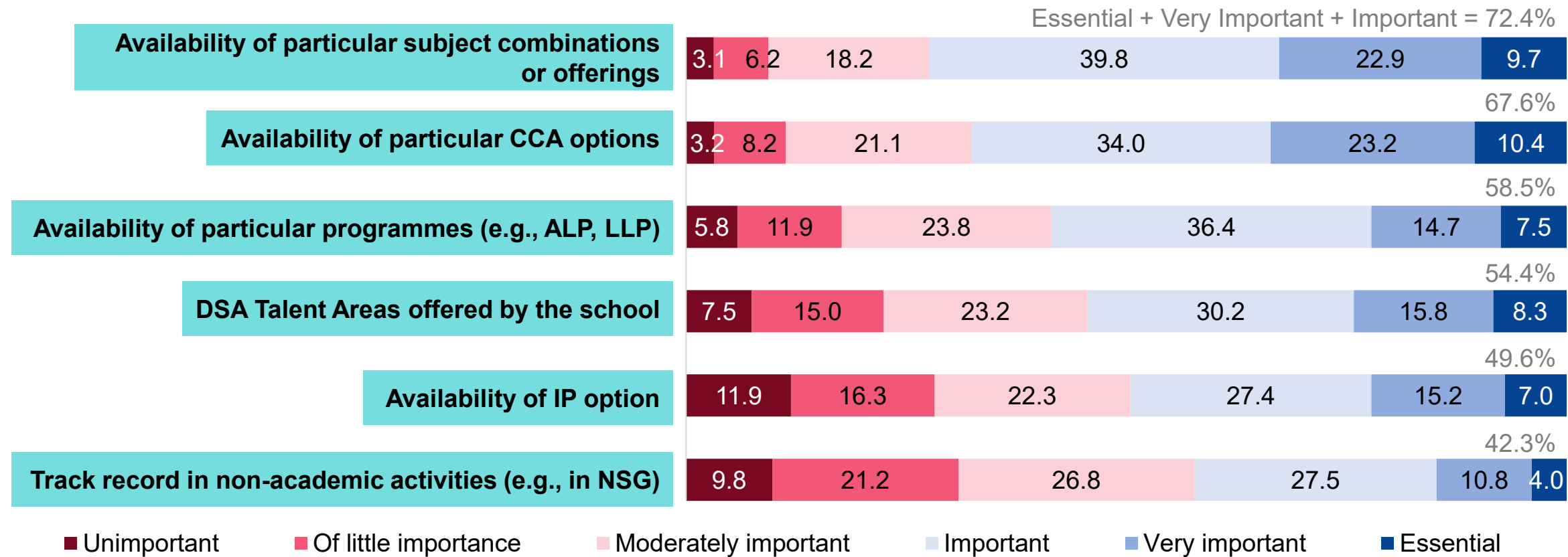
Among measures of academic standing, previous years' school cut-off points (COP) are the most salient to parents

2026: To what extent are these considerations important to you when thinking about the ideal secondary school for your child/ren?, *question items pertaining to school standing*



Beyond academic standing, parents also look to concrete subject and CCA offerings when assessing school opportunities

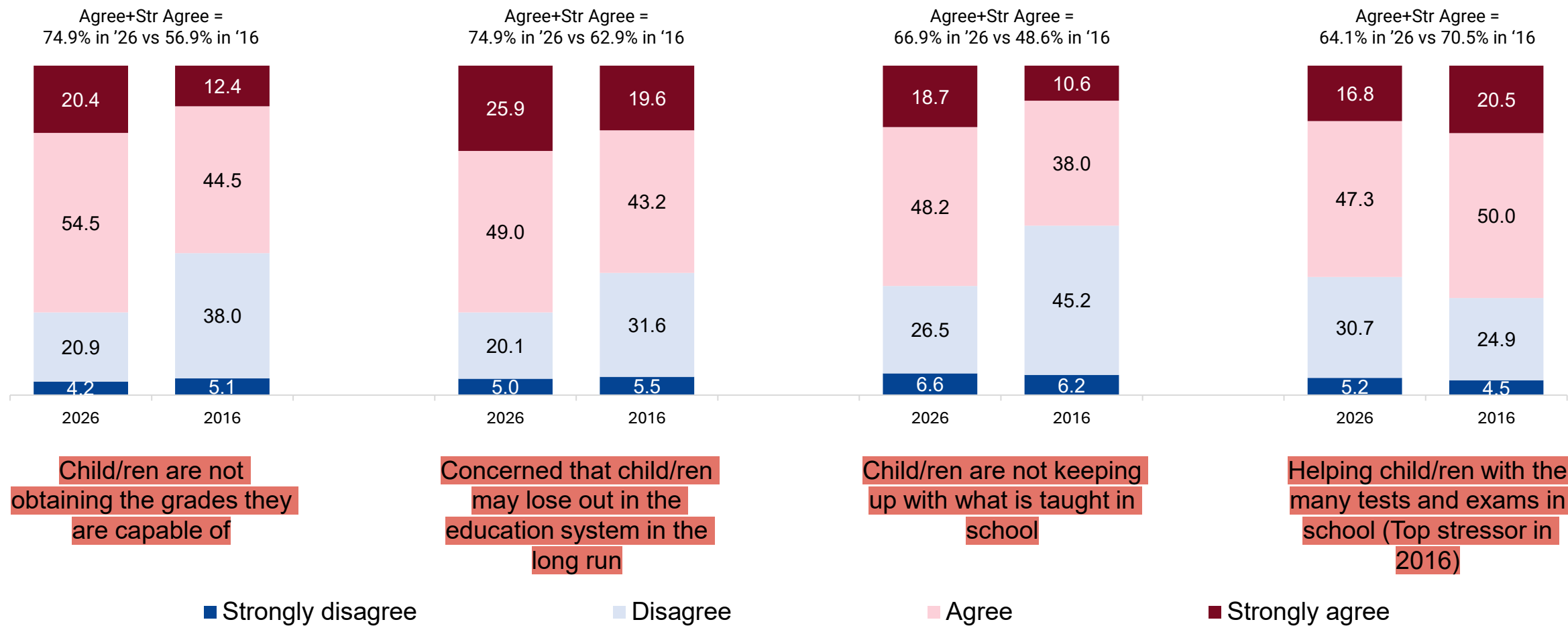
2026: To what extent are these considerations important to you when thinking about the ideal secondary school for your child/ren?, *question items pertaining to opportunities in schools excl. facilities/ infrastructure*



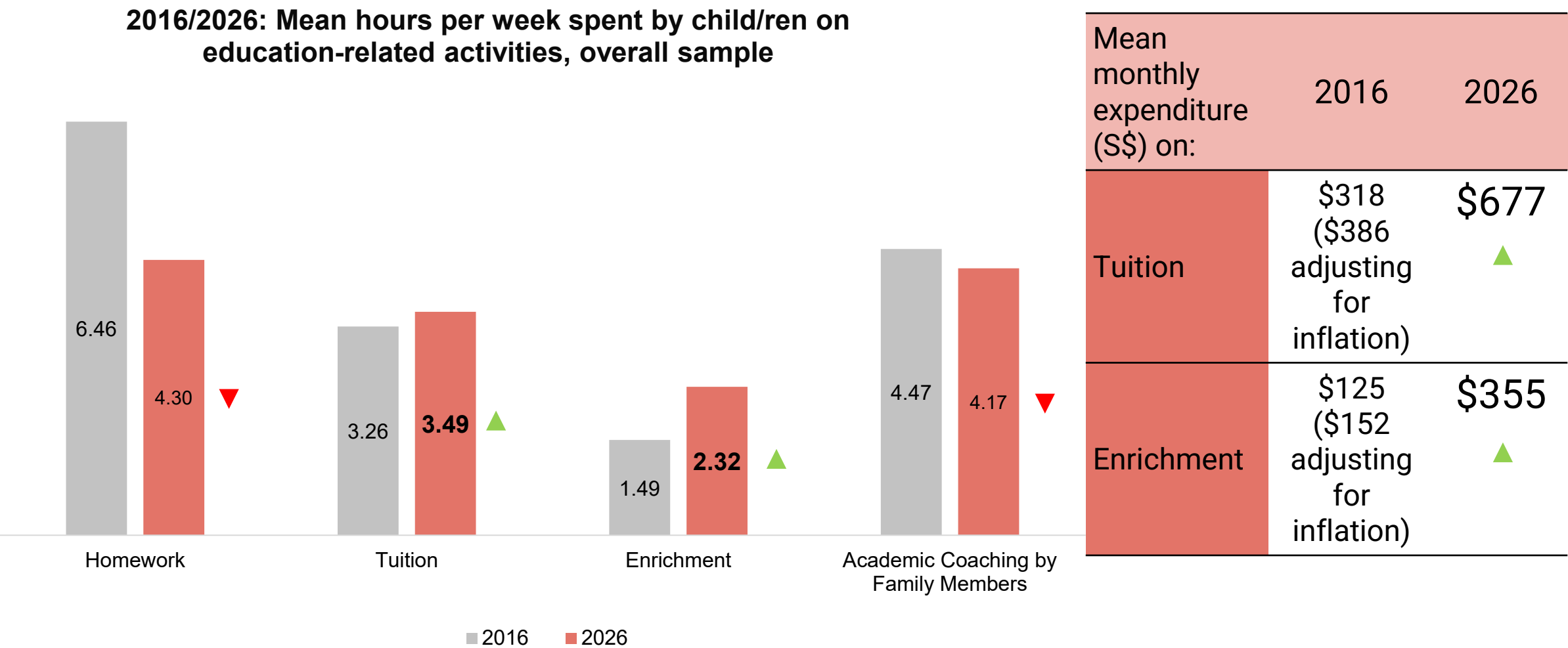
3 Parents criticise
excessive **tuition and
enrichment**, yet
continue to invest

Parents' stress has shifted away from tests and schoolwork towards concerns about children falling behind or not reaching their potential

2016/2026: Do you feel stressed or anxious over your child/ren's education due to the following factors?

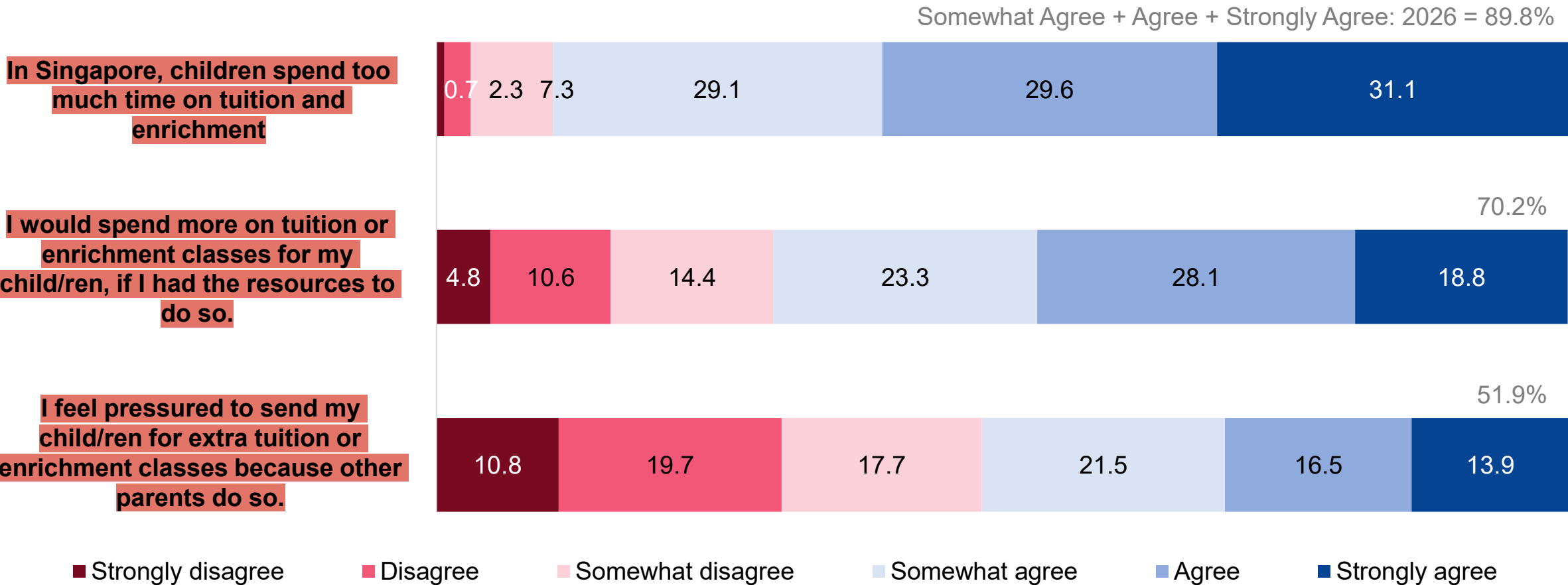


In the same vein, children now spend less time on homework, but more time on tuition and enrichment with a corresponding surge in private spending



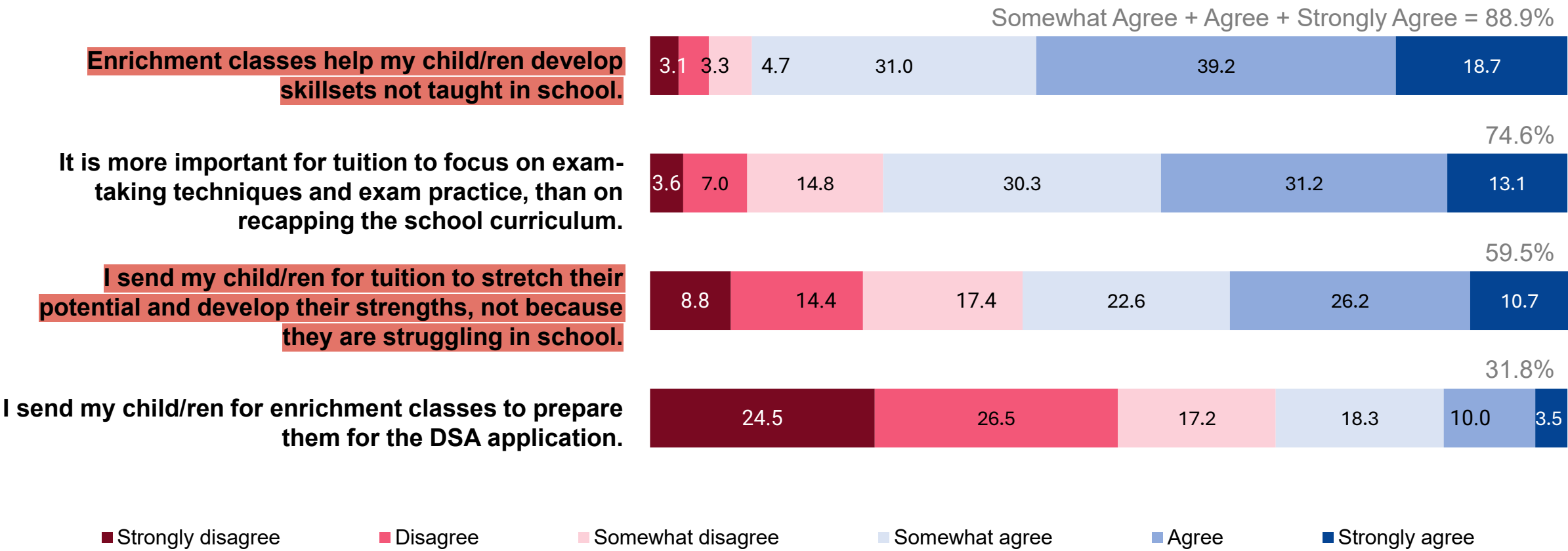
While most parents acknowledge that the tuition and enrichment load is heavy, many would still spend more and around half report peer pressure

2026: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about tuition and enrichment?



Many parents also view tuition and enrichment not just as academic remediation but also channels for opportunity-building and potential-stretching

2026: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about tuition and enrichment?

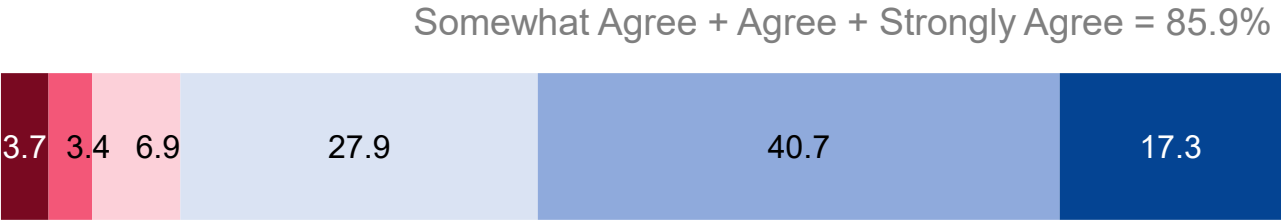


4 Parents want **lower-stakes** assessment, but still want to retain markers of **merit** and **certainty**

While a large majority of parents still see PSLE as legitimate and useful...

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about PSLE and the secondary school posting exercise?

The PSLE is still an important milestone for children to learn how to set goals and work hard



A national standardised exam like the PSLE is still necessary to assess students fairly



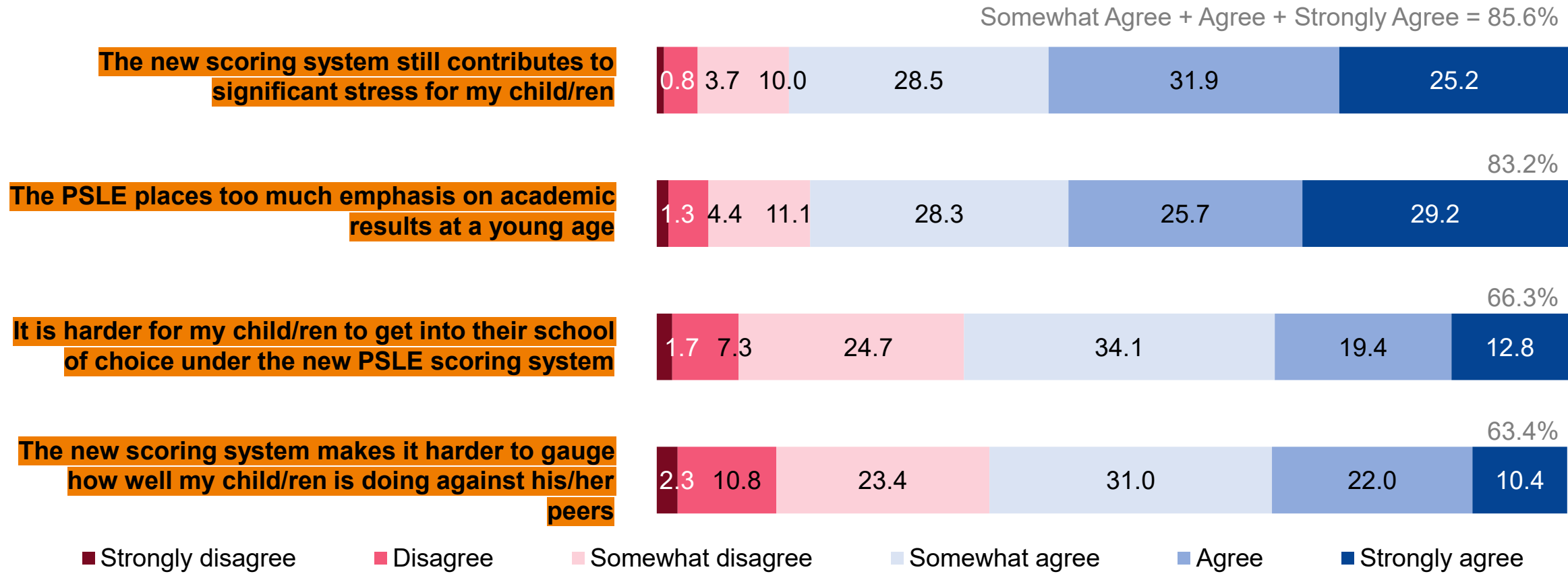
The PSLE helps ensure students are academically prepared for secondary school



Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Agree Strongly agree

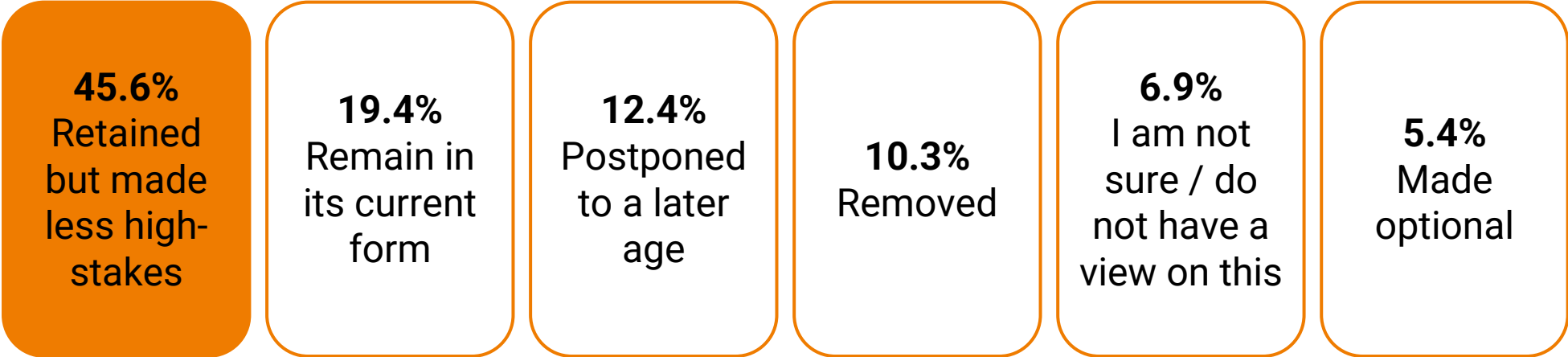
...many remain concerned about stress, academic pressure and the implications of the current scoring system for school choice

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about PSLE and the secondary school posting exercise?

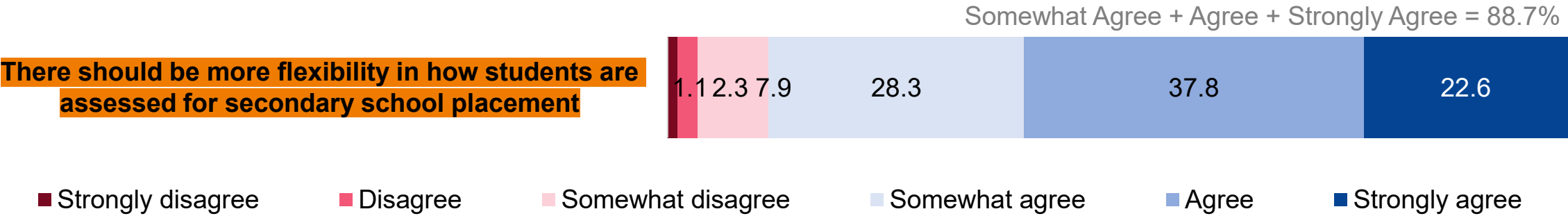


These concerns translate into support for PSLE reform rather than removal, with most favouring lower stakes and greater flexibility

Please select the statement that best describes your view on the PSLE:

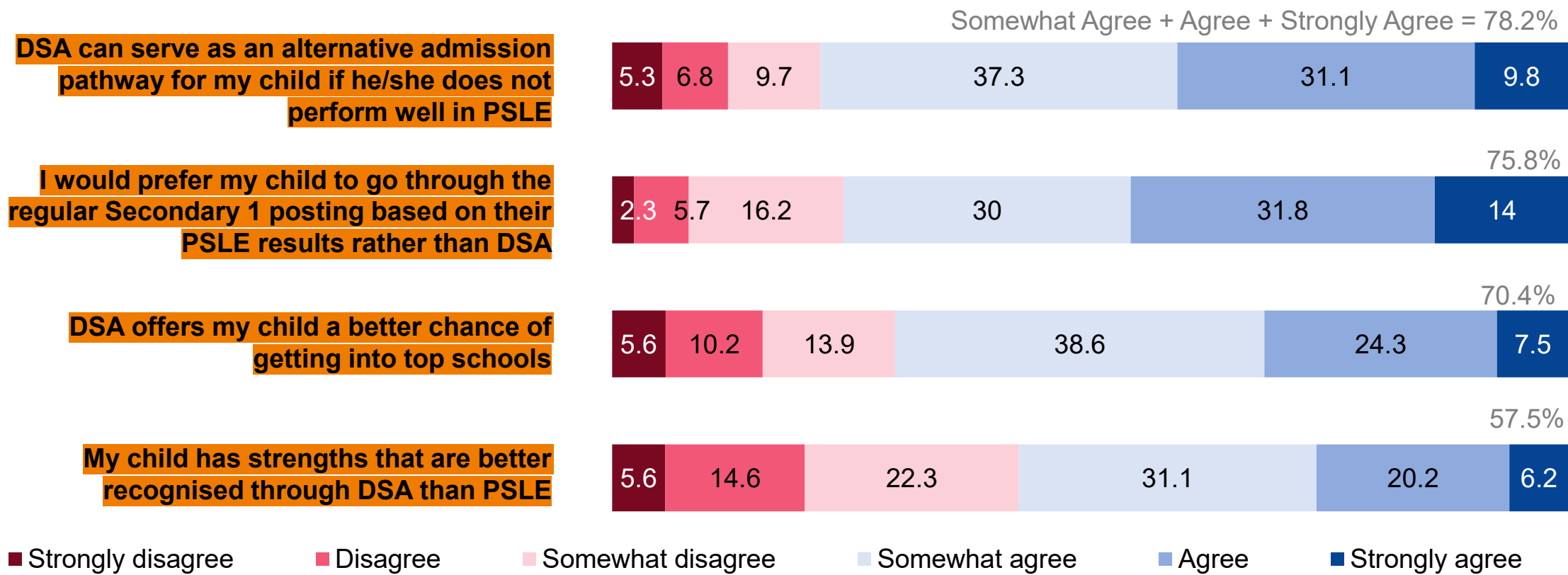


To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about PSLE and the secondary school posting exercise?



While DSA offers a broader route to recognising strengths, most parents also see it as a pathway to top schools while still preferring PSLE-based posting overall

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about DSA?



5 Achievement and holistic orientations can co-exist within the same parent, across various archetypes

Three archetypes show the different ways parents contend with achievement, holistic development, stress, and involvement...

- A K-means statistical clustering exercise was conducted using responses to question items on parental mindsets and stress across **four different dimensions**, to identify main parental archetypes in Singapore
- IPS used the same clustering approach in 2026 as in 2016 to group parents by their mindsets and stressors towards education and identify salient archetypes

Dimensions	Description
Achievement orientation (AO)	Valuing results, competition, and academic success
Process development orientation (PO)	Valuing character, passion and socio-emotional development
Parental stress (PS)	Stress, pressure and anxiety felt by parents over child’s education
Ideals of parental involvement (PII)	What parents should do to support children in the pursuit of achievement or process development ideals

...and explain why parents respond differently to the same education system



**Detached
Realists**



**New-School
Parents**



**Loving
Lions**

The three archetypes remain distinct, with only modest shifts in their relative shares since 2016



Dimensions / Descriptors	Old-School Parents (2016) → Detached Realists (2026)		New-School Parents		Loving Lions	
Share of sample	28.6% (2016)	24.9% (2026)	33.9% (2016)	34.3% (2026)	37.5% (2016)	40.8% (2026)
Achievement orientation (AO)	Medium	Low	Low	Below average	High	High
Process development orientation (PO)	Low	Low	High	Medium / above average	High	High
Parental stress (PS)	Medium	Below average	Medium	Low	High	High
Ideals of parental involvement (PII)	High	Below average	Low	Low	High	High

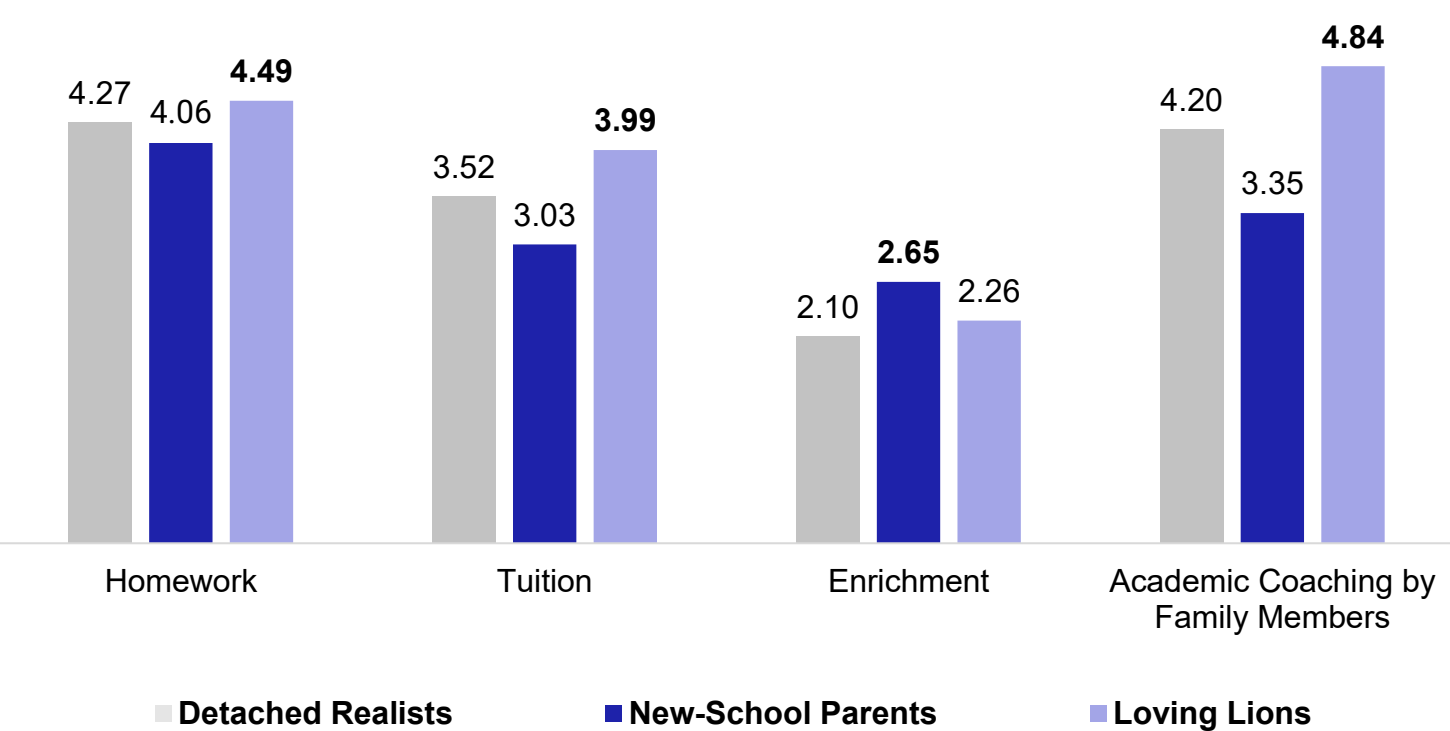
Detached Realists are more pragmatic; New-School Parents more holistic; while Loving Lions want both achievement and holistic development



Dimensions / Descriptors	Detached Realists	New-School Parents	Loving Lions
Characteristics	• Low or below-average across all dimensions • Sees education pragmatically: not heavily stressed, detached in valuing educational aspects • Corresponds to a less involved parenting type seeing education as maintenance work; providing resources or support without a strong value stance	• Above average on process development, below average on achievement orientation • Low stress and low on parental involvement • These resemble the 2016 “New-school Parents” typology (value holistic development and character, de-emphasise exam pressures)	• Highest on all dimensions • Reflects parents who want it all: academic success and holistic growth, but feel the most pressure • Mirrors the 2016 “Loving Lion Parents” typology almost exactly

Children of Loving Lions spend more time on homework, tuition and family coaching, while New-School Parents invest most heavily in enrichment

2026: Mean hours spent by child/ren on education-related activities, by parental archetype



2026 Mean monthly expenditure (S\$) on:	Detached Realists	New-School Parents	Loving Lions
Tuition	\$632	\$673	\$743
Enrichment	\$279	\$433	\$341

New-School Parents are the least stressed, while Loving Lions are the most stressed among the three archetypes



Detached Realists



New-School Parents



Loving Lions

Mean parental stress score

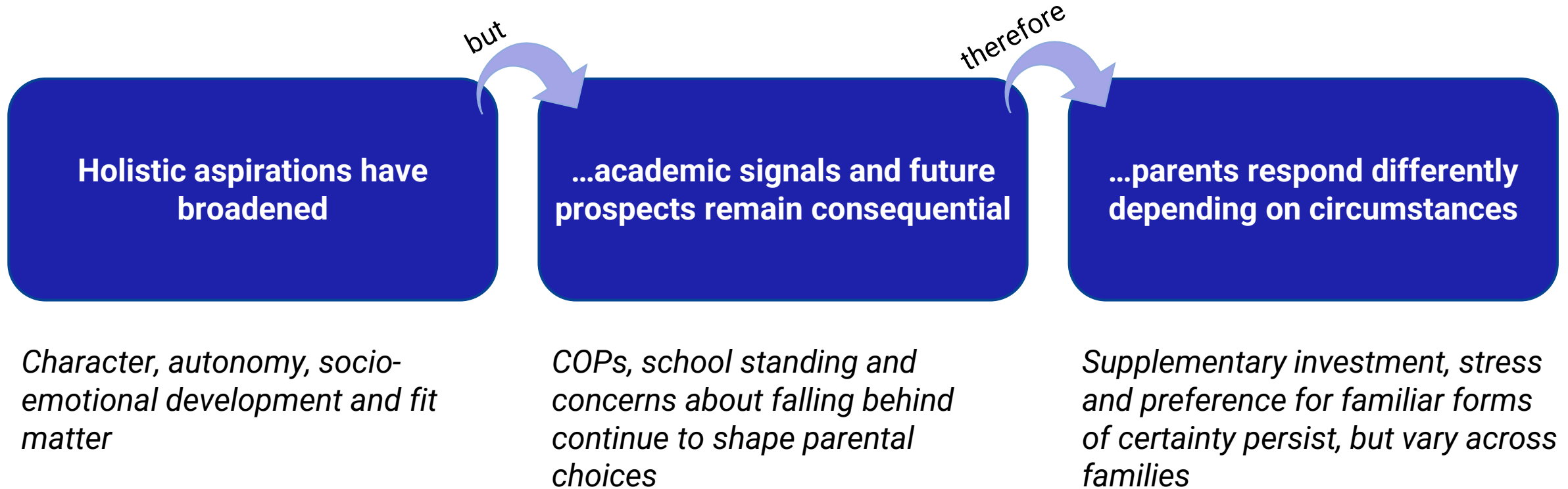
(1 = no instance of stress due to child/ren's education in the past year thru 6 = weekly or more often)

2.82

2.55

3.25

In sum, parents increasingly value holistic development, but this has not displaced academic aspirations or wider competitive pressures



Reducing educational pressure therefore involves more than changing any single examination or pathway: it also requires clear opportunities, confidence in different routes to success, and continuing mindset change

The next conversation is therefore not whether parents want a more holistic education, but what would give them confidence to pursue it

How do we broaden success without driving the excessive competition?

What should parents, schools and the system each be responsible for?

What would give parents greater confidence that all students have meaningful opportunities to develop academically and beyond classroom, regardless of background?