

Education system aims to uplift all, by starting from young

Linette Lai

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Singapore wants to have an education system for life, rather than one that front-loads learning when a person is young, or treats education like a "conveyor belt for the job market".

Outlining these fundamental shifts in the country's education model, Education Minister Lawrence Wong pointed to the SkillsFuture movement, which allows people multiple entry points to reskill, upgrade and improve at various ages.

He added that the Government intervenes early in order to preserve social mobility.

At present, Singapore is making substantial investments in pre-school education to ensure children of all income groups can benefit from quality programmes, he said in a speech on Monday (Jan 25) at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference.

It is also looking further upstream, at the prenatal stage, where the well-being of a pregnant mother can have lasting effects on a child's development.

"Early intervention is effective and we are going all out to do more on this front," added Mr Wong, who became Education Minister after the general election last July.

He added that he has been making it a point to visit schools with a larger proportion of children from lower-income families or disadvantaged backgrounds.

These schools are getting more resources so that these children can get more support, Mr Wong said. This includes learning in smaller classes and exposing students to a variety of programmes - such as learning journeys and public speaking - in order to nurture soft skills.

More allied educators, counsellors and welfare officers are also being deployed, especially for students with special needs, he added.

"We want to ensure we continue to uplift these students and help them achieve their full potential."

Beyond such policies, a broader mindset change is needed, he said, noting that societies today place too much of a premium on cognitive abilities, and do not sufficiently value those engaging in other forms of work.

"As a result, merit has become narrowly defined by academic and cognitive abilities," Mr Wong said. "But in fact, there's a wide range of abilities and aptitudes needed for societies to thrive - we need the craft skills of artisans and technicians; the creativity and imagination of artists; and the human touch of those doing care jobs."

He noted that the pandemic has again thrown the spotlight on this imbalance, and that the country has to ensure that remuneration is fair for essential workers.

This is why Singapore is rolling out the progressive wage model across various sectors, and reviewing polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education pathways to ensure that graduates get better jobs with higher pay and good career progression.

"If we attach more value in terms of prestige and income to people who excel across a wide range of fields and not just cognitively, incomes will naturally spread out more evenly across society," he said. "And we will go a long way in advancing our cause towards a fairer and more equal society."