

## **Pupils' personal growth, not grades, top factor for a good school, say parents**

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A nationwide survey has found that parents' idea of a good school is one where teachers care about their students' social-emotional development and that places an emphasis on character-building and discipline.

This was the response from an overwhelming majority of those polled by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to find out parents' perceptions of the Singapore primary-school system.

Those who regard a good school as one that produces top scorers and has its students entering reputable secondary schools still form a big proportion of the respondents, but they are fewer than the first group.

The study, conducted from December 2015 to March last year, took in the views of some 1,500 parents who are Singaporean citizens or permanent residents, with children studying at about 180 primary schools here.

Most of the parents surveyed (97.2 per cent) stated that having teachers who cared about the socio-emotional development of students is an important, very important or essential feature of a good school.

The majority also considered the quality of teachers in the school (94.1 per cent) and its emphasis on character-building (94 per cent) as important, very important or essential factors when it came to picking a primary school for their child.

More than 95 per cent agreed that it was important for a good school to help students develop a strong academic foundation, give opportunities to all students regardless of family background and have an emphasis on discipline.

Those who indicated that it was important, very important or essential for a good school to have students with high Primary School Leaving Examination scores and who go to reputable secondary schools formed more than 70 per cent of the respondents.

More than 60 per cent looked at factors such as whether a school is affiliated to a good secondary school as an important, very important or essential consideration.

Only about 24 per cent of respondents associated good schools with those that gave a lot of homework.

Busting the myth that Singapore parents are "kiasu" or competitive, the study found that about 77 per cent of respondents said they did not do anything to actively secure a place in a good school for their children.

Most parents (close to 74 per cent) said their child managed to get into their school of choice.

Another finding showed that parents' alumni connections and the advantage this might offer in the primary school enrolment exercise may be "the concern of a smaller group than what the visibility of the public discourse suggests".

Parents ranked alumni network, parental and community support, affiliation with a good secondary school and affiliation with a clan or religious organisation as the bottom five criteria considered to be important, very important or essential.

"We hear people mention how it's so difficult to get into the schools, or do all kinds of things to get into a good school, and it seemed like there is a rarity of good schools," said IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, 43, who led the study. "But when we aggregate those results, we realise that's not true. Many Singaporeans feel the school their child goes to is a good school."

Addressing the debate over the Ministry of Education's (MOE) vision "Every school a good school", and parents' doubts about whether this would be possible in Singapore's achievement-driven culture, the study concluded that respondents showed high levels of satisfaction with the educational system.

"This finding challenges common perceptions that there's a major gap between the prestigious and neighbourhood school," the IPS report said.

"Parents, perhaps after an initial period of apprehension and anxiety over school placement and lingering concerns when the child first enrolls, do eventually come to appreciate their child's school."

In response to the report, the MOE said it was "heartened" that parents "are increasingly supportive of schools' efforts to provide a holistic education for their children".

"We're encouraged that they themselves are putting more emphasis on character development and considering broader factors when choosing schools for their children," a spokesperson said.

The ministry has taken steps over the years to move away from an overemphasis on academic results by, for example, not naming the top PSLE scorers and doing away with school rankings. Last year, it announced changes to the PSLE scoring system as another way to take the heat off the constant focus on academic results.

"We're hopeful that with the support and partnership of parents, such efforts will contribute to the balanced and well-rounded development of our children," the spokesperson added.

Still, more than 70 per cent of the IPS respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were anxious about having to help their child with numerous school tests or examinations in school — their top source of stress.

More parents (43.8 per cent) also feel that more emphasis should be placed on teaching IT skills, versus the 22.3 per cent who supported a greater emphasis on arts and music education.