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## S'pore charity takes new approach to help children from poor families achieve their dreams



(Clockwise from left) =Dreams charity board members Christina Lien, Lynn Yeow-De Vito, Sharon Tay and Laura Poh, and chairman Stanley Tan. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



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**SINGAPORE** - A new charity is pioneering a novel approach to helping children from the poorest families here do well in school and lift their families out of poverty.

=Dreams (Singapore), a charity registered in April 2021, is setting up a boarding facility for these children to live in.

At the =Dreams campus, the students will get a host of support - from help with their studies, resources to pursue their interests and mentors to guide them.

Mr Stanley Tan, the man behind the initiative, said the aim is to place the children in an environment that helps them focus on their studies and give them the support they need to reach their potential of achieving tertiary education.

Mr Tan, who is =Dreams (Singapore) chairman and also chairman of the South Central Community Family Service Centre (FSC), said: "We recognise that the environment the children are in play a large role in their success, even in the belief that they could do well.

"Rich families pay a lot of money to send their children to boarding schools with their focus on the child's educational development. The boarding school is a tried and tested model for those who have, so why wouldn't such a model work with those who don't?"

For many families living in highly subsidised Housing Board rental flats, the home environment is often cramped and noisy, which is uncondusive for studying, said Mr Rajesh Varghese, chief transformation officer at South Central Community FSC.

From a survey the FSC did in 2020, an average of four to six people live in a two-room rental flat, he said.

Mr Rajesh said the FSC matches children as young as in Primary 3 with a learning mentor, among other assistance rendered, to help them pass their Primary School Leaving Examination. A learning mentor is a volunteer who will help the child with his studies on a regular basis.

But the FSC has found that many of these children may not be that motivated to study and may sometimes skip the lessons arranged for them.

Mr Rajesh said there are multiple factors behind their lack of motivation to do well in school. They often lack parental supervision as their parents are busy working or one parent could be absent due to reasons such as divorce or imprisonment.

Mrs Christina Tang-Lien, a former school counsellor and board member of =Dreams (Singapore), said that many of these children lose interest in their studies when they find they cannot catch up with their lessons.

Mr Tan said that, over time, they settle for less and achieve less as well. The veteran volunteer in the social service sector added that the =Dreams programme is an idea conceived from the work done at the FSC.

He noted that he and his colleagues are seeing the second or third generation in some families continuing to live in rental flats.

Hence, out-of-the-box interventions are needed to try to lift these families out of poverty, Mr Tan said.



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=Dreams, as the name implies, wants to give the children living in rental flats an equal opportunity to dream and to achieve their dreams.

The charity plans to start its programme in January 2023 with 80 children aged between 12 and 14. The children can stay in the programme for up to six years, and the plan is to take in 240 students eventually.

The children will live in the =Dreams campus on weekdays, commuting to and from their respective schools. They will return to their homes on weekends.

On campus after school, they will be given tuition and enrichment classes to help them with their studies and give them exposure to different areas of interest, such as in sports and the arts, among other things.

The =Dreams campus will be located at the former Geylang Serai Community Club in Haig Road.





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Mr Tan said that it will cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000 a year to place a child in the programme, but no child who is selected would be denied a place due to their parents' financial means.

Successful applicants will be given a full scholarship that covers the cost of the programme, food and lodging at the =Dreams campus, he said.

The project is currently funded by donations, such as from individuals and foundations.

Associate Professor Jason Tan of the Policy, Curriculum and Leadership Department at the National Institute of Education noted that today's parents, compared with one generation ago, play a much larger and more critical role in their child's educational success.

Parents strategise a lot more, for example, by tapping their social networks to navigate the education landscape, and also send their children to tuition and enrichment classes to help them get a leg up.

Prof Tan said: "So what are the implications of this for children living in rental flats whose parents cannot provide them with financial and social capital? I think =Dreams is trying to address these socio-economic imbalances.

"I think by providing an environment that is more regulated and with active mentoring, =Dreams is exposing these children to possibilities they may not have previously contemplated."

To find out more about =Dreams, go to [its website](#).

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