

Singapore

## Levelling the playing field key in drive for better education system: MPs, NMPs



2

Education should not be based on a “one size fits all” approach, but rather, it should allow for equal opportunities for students across the board, said several Members of Parliament (MPs) as well as Nominated MPs on Wednesday (Jul 11). Wendy Wong reports.

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SINGAPORE: Education should not be based on a “one size fits all” approach, but rather, it should allow for equal opportunities for students across the board, said several Members of Parliament (MPs) as well as Nominated MPs on Wednesday (Jul 11).

A total of 13 MPs and NMPs discussed the motion: “Education for Our Future” in Parliament, which calls on the Government to partner with the people to ensure accessible, inclusive and lifelong education for all learners.

Five NMPs – Mahdev Mohan, Kuik Shiao-Yin, Ganesh Rajaram, Kok Heng Leun and Azmoon Ahmad – had proposed the motion.

Those who spoke on the motion stressed the need to consider different education systems, rather than sticking to the tried and tested approach which might not benefit every student.

NMP Azmoon said: “I regard our current education system as a ‘one size fits all’ approach, with minor tweaks here and there to cater for the incidentals which are away from the mainstream.

“We should be bold enough to take the step forward to consider multiple education systems and strategies with different approaches to serve the varying individual needs – a holistic system where every dream and aspirations are met.”

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Giving the illustration of a child from a lower-income family who could start off at a disadvantage, Mr Azmoon said that decision makers have to “go beyond lip service about levelling the playing field”.

“These are the very real circumstances that our students are going through and something needs to be done to help them,” he said.

One suggestion raised was to encourage more top schools in Singapore to focus on more than just their own cohort, in order to move away from the stereotype that such schools are only for “bright students from wealthy backgrounds” noted NMP Mahdev.

Giving the example of his alma mater Raffles Institution, Mr Mahdev pointed to how the school has established a scholarship and mentorship programme to provide financial support and role models for primary five and six students.

 “Might I ask the Ministry to invite other top secondary schools to also account (for) what they are doing to ensure that social mobility is not frustrated and that elite groups of Singaporeans and foreigners in these schools that do emerge do not only look out for their own?” he asked.

### **MORE FOCUS ON SPORTS EDUCATION**

Describing sports, and football in particular, as a “social leveler platform”, NMP Ganesh suggested offering a common basic curriculum to introduce popular sports to all children.

“Sports in our schools should be a meeting place for friendship, fellowship and the pure enjoyment of sport – regardless of your family and financial background. It is one of the few places in a child’s schooling life where he or she is not judged by their academic prowess, and we should do all we can to return to this spirit,” he said.

Mr Ganesh also called for a further scrutiny of the Direct School Admission (DSA) system. He pointed to the emergence of “DSA coaches” who tailor programmes specifically for children to guarantee a place in the school of their choice as an example of how some take advantage of the system.

“We need to ask ourselves if this is what the DSA scheme is intended to be, and if this ‘gaming’ of the system is acceptable,” he said. “Is this what sports is about? Do we want to encourage such behaviour and, worse, reward it, by giving these children places in our top schools?”

“To me, values such as integrity and fair play are as important, if not more, than one’s ability as an athlete. By including these other criteria in the DSA selection process, the Ministry would send a strong signal to the teachers, coaches, parents and children about the kind of young Singaporeans it hopes to nurture. And it will also create a more level playing field as these values cannot be paid for.”

MP for Nee Soon GRC Henry Kwek suggested that sports was a good way for youths to bridge the social divides. He urged the MOE to strengthen its collaboration with the Ministry for Culture, Community and Youth’s (MCCY) ActiveSG programme to encourage social mixing through sports.

“MOE and MCCY can collaborate by growing ActiveSG’s Sports Academy and Clubs to absorb more students from all schools, and give them CCA points under the LEAD framework. At the same time, MOE can also invite Sports Academy to send teams to join various inter-school sports teams,” said Mr Kwek.

### **SLAUGHTERING “THE SACRED COW” OF PSLE?**

NMP Kok revived the debate about abolishing the PSLE from the education system, in order to allow more focus on deep learning and interaction among young students.

Sharing the story of a mother who noticed that her son was beginning to feel academic pressure in kindergarten and later lost his sense of curiosity when he was in primary three, Mr Kok asked: “Is PSLE really necessary?”

Amid a push to overhaul the PSLE system, as well as eradicate competition and stress among students and parents, MOE announced that from 2021 (</news/singapore/students-to-be-graded-on-achievement-levels-in-psle-from-2021-7912318>), students taking the exams will be graded with Achievement Levels of 1 to 8 in each of their four subjects.

But Mr Kok stressed that the topic still warranted consideration, asking that MOE consider slaughtering this “sacred cow”.

“If young students have to prepare for a major examination after an initial six years of study, does it impede their ability to learn deeply, discover and investigate?,” he asked.

“I think we need to fundamentally agree on what is important in the education of our young people. Is it deep learning and interaction? If so, can we rethink the current system to make time for this aspect, rather than rush them through national education that determines their path of education at so tender an age,” he said.

However, fellow NMP Kuik said she was “of two minds” on whether to abolish the exam.

“It is hardly a silver bullet solution and abolishing it will definitely generate many new problems and fail to resolve some old ones,” she said.

She pointed out that scrapping PSLE will set off a chain reaction of “uncomfortable changes” such as how primary school teachers will be compelled to design and deliver a curriculum that is no longer about preparing children for a standardised exam.

“MOE would have to devise a whole new way to assess the quality of teaching in primary schools without data from PSLE results,” added Ms Kuik.

MP Darryl David, who stressed that he was not advocating scrapping the PSLE, suggested that MOE consider how it can make the exam “about a demonstration of other skill sets and capabilities, other than the ability to “cram-and-deliver”.

“Perhaps the element of coursework or continuous assessment could be introduced as part of one’s PSLE grade, such that the eventual PSLE score is a more holistic reflection of a young adult’s capabilities and abilities,” said the Ang Mo Kio GRC MP.



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