

# THE STRAITS TIMES

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Premium

## Move to boost diversity at top schools welcomed



Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said earlier this week that the enhancements are to put students' and parents' minds at ease, as some are worried about expenses. PHOTO: ST FILE

🕒 PUBLISHED DEC 29, 2018, 5:00 AM SGT

### Improved bursary scheme a good step but observers say more can be done, like preparing pupils for the challenge

Jolene Ang

The latest efforts to increase diversity at Singapore's top schools by making them affordable for all are a welcome signal, but more still needs to be done, said observers.

Under the enhanced Independent School Bursary (ISB) scheme, students from low-or middle-income families will, from next April, generally pay lower fees than they are charged now at independent schools.

Children from families in the lowest income tier can also qualify for a new \$800 annual Uplift scholarship for out-of-pocket expenses.

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said earlier this week that the enhancements are to put students' and parents' minds at ease, as some are worried about expenses.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan, a former Raffles Institution (RI) boy, said the enhanced scheme is a welcome signal that cost concerns would not get in the way of a student attending an independent school.

Marine Parade GRC MP and FairPrice chief executive Seah Kian Peng, 57, also told The Straits Times: "Education is the best thing that can help the lower-income group break out of the poverty cycle."

ADVERTISING



Mr Seah was an RI student in the 1970s. His three siblings - two older sisters and one younger brother - also attended Raffles Girls' School and RI during that time.

They lived in a three-room flat in Mattar Road and their father, a printing firm line worker was the family's sole breadwinner. Their mother was a housewife. Had such a scheme been in place then, the Seah family would have benefited greatly.

Mr Seah added that primary schools could help the new initiative by reaching out to the eligible pupils and their parents.

As National University of Singapore economics lecturer Kelvin Seah explained, children from poor families may not be aware of the differences between an independent school and a government one - in terms of curriculum, environment, and resources - and thus "may not recognise the value in applying to such schools".

Associate Professor Tan added that the new scheme alone might not ensure that the top schools would become sufficiently diverse.

After all, many independent schools already have financial assistance schemes of their own.

RI gives subsidies for school trips, as well as scholarships, worth \$1,000 to \$3,000 a year, to students on financial assistance.

Still, he said, the Ministry of Education's (MOE) nationwide scheme, will have the necessary reach.

## REACHING OUT TO SHARE THE BENEFITS

**Aside from cost, there are other factors that parents from lower-income families would normally consider for their child's choice of secondary school. These include distance from home, whether there are friends from the same primary school applying for admission into RI, and the academic demands of studying in an independent school.**

**We hope to ride on the new and enhanced schemes as well as RI's Raffles Scholarships to reach out to academically strong pupils in primary schools, to share about the benefits of studying in an IS (independent school) and the learning support our teachers provide.**

**We believe that with regular and sustained outreach, we will be able to encourage more academically strong primary pupils from lower-income families to work hard and aspire to study in RI.**

RAFFLES INSTITUTION PRINCIPAL FREDERICK YEO

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But he also cautioned that it was not a silver bullet. "If the students don't qualify for admission in the first place, then the MOE's financial aid cannot be taken advantage of," said Prof Tan. Factors beyond academics may also be at play.

# Enhanced fee subsidies for independent schools

Income criteria	Fee subsidy	
	Current	Revised
Monthly gross household income (GHI) $\leq$ \$2,750; or per capita income (PCI) $\leq$ \$690	100%	100% (no change)
Monthly GHI \$2,751–\$4,000; or PCI \$691–\$1,000	90%	Students will pay equivalent of GGAS (government and government-aided schools) fees* (equivalent to about 90-94% subsidy)
Monthly GHI \$4,001–\$6,900; or PCI \$1,001–\$1,725	70%	Students will pay equivalent of 1.5 x GGAS fees (equivalent to about 85-91% subsidy)
Monthly GHI \$6,901–\$9,000; or PCI \$1,726–\$2,250	33%	33% (no change)

NOTE: \*Except NUS High School Year 5 and 6 students who will continue to receive 90% fee subsidy as they are already paying lower than GGAS fee.

Source: MOE STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

He suggested a concerted effort, including counselling, to prepare these pupils psychologically for the challenge of top schools. "The objective is for the students to not impose any glass ceiling on themselves in terms of the schools they can work towards gaining admission to."

However the bigger challenge, he said, is whether these students feel welcomed in these schools, and whether society encourages them to "shoot for the stars".

Education Minister Ong had revealed that 7.5 per cent of students living in one-to three-room Housing Board flats placed in the top 20 per cent in PSLE.

"These students are eligible for the popular secondary schools with the most stringent entry criteria, and we should ensure that they can enter these schools if they want to," Mr Ong had said.



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The MOE said about 14 per cent of students across the eight independent schools and two specialised independent schools received bursaries this year.

Putra Zayan Mohd, who just completed his first year at RI, is the only son of a full-time Grab driver and a housewife. The family lives in a three-room flat in Tampines.

He received a 100 per cent school fees subsidy from the MOE this year, under the ISB scheme.

Putra also received a \$3,000 scholarship from the school this year to help cover expenses.

His mother, Madam Srilah Esnain, 51, said Putra has been scoring decent grades even though he has not had any private tuition.

However, she added: "Everyone in RI is so clever, so it can be a little tough. He has to work harder."

Added Prof Tan: "Money has never really been the issue in keeping our schools diverse." What mattered most, he said, was for schools to create an environment in which it did not matter whether a student was well-off or not.

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