



## **SINGAPORE** by Mui Kim The and Sook May Chia

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### *Overview*

Singapore, a tiny multi-cultural island city state populated with 5 million people, mainly Chinese, Malays and Indians, is a republic with a parliamentary system of government. A British colony for more than 140 years from 1819, Singapore gained independence in 1965 and has become one of the most prosperous countries in South East Asia. Its per capita Gross National Income stands at US \$37,220 (World Bank, 2009). The total expenditure for education is about 20 per cent of the country's annual budget, providing a modern infrastructure for education institutions, heavily subsidized education and high teacher's pay (Ministry of Finance, 2011), making education only second to its defense spending. Decisions on education matters (from the primary to university level) are made on a National Level by the Ministry of Education.

Education is a crucial concern for Singapore, because, although it is in a strategic location, it is very small and has no natural resources. In order to survive, Singapore needs foreign capital, technology and markets, and "brainpower" to work within the economic system, and to "nurture future-ready Singaporeans" (FY 2010 Committee of Supply Debate, 2010). Policies are initiated to nurture students in order that the

nation has future leaders to meet the challenges of an increasingly service- and knowledge-based economy (Teh & Stott, 2009). In addition to pushing for academic success, attention is also given to nurturing every student, and stretching his or her talents and ability – whether talent refers to the intellect, arts or sports (FY 2004 Committee of Supply Debate, 2004).

The landscape of education in Singapore has been dominated in recent years by calls for significant reforms. In 1997, the then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, launched a new vision for the education service, expressed as “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”, which brought to the fore a recognition that the old ways of preparing the young will not serve the future well. The pressure for reform has not abated and Singapore has experienced a plethora of initiatives and drives, all designed to steer education along a course that meets the needs of a changing society. In 2004, the new Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, urged education professionals to “Teach Less Learn More”, and the Minister for Education spelt out “Major Works in Progress” by focusing on two key areas – “Enabling our Teachers” and “Nurturing Students”, so that the nation could prepare its children for the future, break new ground and chart new directions for Singapore (Teh, 2008).

Education is state funded, and since independence in 1965, the government has been continually reviewing and revising its policies to facilitate the academic and vocational levels of the citizens of Singapore so as to keep a competitive advantage as the country grows in industry and economy. Singapore has developed its education system from a “survival economics, survival-driven” mode in the early 1960s to a “knowledge-based...ability driven” system in the 2000s, which is comparable to the top performers of member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008).

Under the current education policy, there are two overarching goals: first, expanding opportunities in education for all through a range of educational programs; second, moving the system towards developing core national values and skills to achieve broader educational outcomes. The changes and initiatives, regardless of whatever term is being used, always support recurring themes and objectives, such as providing a holistic education, high quality education, national education, catering to different needs and abilities, and expanding opportunities for all.

The medium of instruction in all schools in Singapore is the English language, because it is recognised as an important tool for economic survival. However, the government introduced compulsory learning of a second language (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Tamil) because of the pluralistic nature of society and to ensure the sustainability of the cultures of the various ethnic groups (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008). Despite being taught as a second language, Malay is the official national language of the country as it is the language of the indigenous inhabitants.

The ability driven education initiative, launched under the vision “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” is aimed at reminding the nation that, due to the lack of natural resources, “the future sustainability and wealth of the small city- state depends on the

capacity of its people to learn - and to learn continuously throughout their lives” (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008, p. 30). Although a national curriculum and examinations are still key features, there is flexibility for students leaving primary school to choose from a range of educational institutions that cater to their various strengths and interests. To this end, independent schools offering specialised curriculum in the Sports, Arts and Music, as well as Mathematics and Sciences have been established to focus on developing students’ specific talents and abilities to a higher level than that offered in mainstream state schools. For students who are suited to hands-on and practical learning and are unable to cope with the academic curriculum in the mainstream schools, alternative schools offering enhanced vocational programmes specially customised for their needs are available, (Ministry of Education, 2011b).

In the latest 2007 TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) ranking, Singapore was one of the highest performing countries, with students at fourth and eighth grade reaching or exceeding the Advanced International Benchmark for mathematics and science (TIMSS, 2007). The literacy level of primary and secondary education in Singapore is relatively high and the pass rate has seen continuous improvement from 1999 to 2008. In 1999, 96.2 per cent of all children taking the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), passed the examinations and by 2008, the pass rate had increased to 97.7 percent. For secondary education, in 1999, 76.3 per cent of all students taking the GCE ‘O’ levels attained at least 5 ‘O’ level passes and, by 2008, it had increased to 81.3 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2010).

## *The structure of schooling*

Basic education has three levels: Primary education, secondary education and post-secondary education. The first serves children aged between seven to twelve, requiring 6 years of compulsory education with a broad-based mainstream curriculum. Some primary schools might offer niche programmes in areas such as aesthetics, sports and gifted education. After 6 years of compulsory education and exit examination conducted at national level (i.e. the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) ), students are channeled to 4 years of schooling in secondary schools. Students with penchants for the Arts, Sports or Mathematics and Sciences are able to opt for schools with specialised curriculum (known as specialised independent schools). These specialised independent schools prepare students for university education by either bypassing the intermediate national examinations at the end of the secondary school year, or by offering the International Baccalaureate programme for those wishing to widen their opportunities for university education overseas. Mainstream secondary schools, on the other hand, are expected to follow the common curriculum which gears students towards the national examination (i.e. GCE ‘O’ level examination) conducted at the end of the 4 years in secondary schools.

In all schools, regardless of whether they are mainstream schools or schools with independent status, a medium of instruction policy was enforced in order to enable students to study both the English language and their own mother tongues, alongside a

common curriculum which prepares them for the national examination. Children whose mother tongues are not classified under Malay, Chinese and Tamil are able to opt out of the second language programme.

Furthermore, every school is required to follow the National Education framework set out by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to develop in their students' core values and sense of national identity.

The education system also offers alternative routes for those who failed their primary school national examinations and are not able to meet the minimal requirements for entry into the secondary school. Such students are offered a place at schools offering enhanced vocational programmes, focusing on vocational skills. Students graduating from these schools could proceed to Institute of Technical Education for post-secondary technical training largely geared towards the needs of the Singapore industry.

In terms of funding, the Singapore government is the sole financier of education in Singapore. Funding is determined by the number of students enrolled in the school and is based on a per-capita formula identical across all schools. As with mainstream schools, independent schools receive government subsidies, which are calculated according to the average unit cost incurred amongst the schools.

While the government subsidizes special schools and pre-schools, which is largely community-run or set up by religious organizations, there is little interference in terms of curriculum and delivery, as well as fees charged to parents. However, these remain affordable as the schools tend to abide by the general guidelines on recommended fees. There are also 'for-profit' pre-schools and special schools set up by private enterprises. The government does not determine the fees to be charged at these schools, but allows the fees to be determined by the market forces.

In recent years, more top-tier secondary schools in the mainstream have sought to convert to independent status in exchange for more autonomy in teaching and curriculum arrangements, staff deployment and examination. As indicated above, independent schools offering the integrated programme allow students to bypass the need to sit for the GCE 'O' level examination for direct entry to the university via the International Baccalaureate route. However, any new initiatives by the schools still needs to be guided by the broader education policy of bilingualism and national education mentioned above. By repositioning itself to support the privatization of state-funded sector schools and diversifying the education landscape, Singapore hopes to become a Southeast Asian regional hub for educational services.

## *The legal framework*

### *The constitution*

Under the Singapore constitution, all persons are equal before the law and entitled to

the equal protection of the law (Article 12(1) of the Constitution of Singapore). Article 16 ensures that in the area of education there is no discrimination against any citizen of Singapore on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth in the administration of any educational institution maintained by a public authority. Article 16 also prohibits discrimination in the providing of funds in the form of public authority financial aid for the maintenance or education of pupils or students in any educational institution (whether or not it is maintained by a public authority and whether it is within or outside Singapore). Since Singapore is a multicultural society, each religious group can request permission to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and provide instruction in its own religion. For this reason, there are Christian schools, such as Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian institutions, Islamic religious schools, and a Buddhist primary school. These schools can apply for financial aid from the government under the Education (Grant-in-Aid) Regulations. Schools in receipt of “grant-in-aid” from the government are known as aided schools and they are subject to the various conditions stipulated in the regulations. One of these conditions is that schools may not refuse any person admission to study in the school on the grounds of religion or race (Teh & Stott, 2009).

With such an array of religions and denominations, coupled with considerable ethnic diversity, there is always the potential for social schism, but one of the government’s strategies in education, designed to limit the possibility of social division, has been the choice of language. As mentioned above, English is the common language of the country, as it is seen as an international language that will link Singapore to the rest of the world’s economies. But English has also served as a unifying force for the different ethnic groups and cultures (Teh & Stott, 2009).

## Legislation

The government of Singapore is the principal provider of education at primary and secondary levels. The Education Act was first enacted in 1957 and it governs the registers of schools, managers and teachers, and sets out conditions for teacher registration. Regulations, in the form of subsidiary legislation, are made under the Education Act to regulate issues such as school management, school staff, qualification of teachers, school premises and equipment, playgrounds, lavatories, school health, workshops, laboratories, discipline, money, and school accounts and syllabi.

Other relevant legislation includes the *School Boards Incorporation Act (Cap. 284A, 1990)*, which governs issues such as the establishment and management of schools, whether government, private or government-aided; and the *Public Service (Disciplinary Proceedings) Regulations* under the *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (1965)*, which provides directions for disciplinary actions for teacher misconduct. Teachers who are public servants appointed by the Public Service Commission cannot be dismissed or disciplined without adherence to the *Public Service (Disciplinary Proceedings) Regulations*. For non-public servants, the terms of their contract with the school apply.



The Education (Grant-In-Aid) Regulations mentioned above play an important role in the Education Act as they enable the government to render grants to autonomous and independent schools. These schools can apply for aid where the conditions stated in the regulations are satisfied. The conditions regulate *inter alia* admission policies, curriculum, examinations, school buildings and facilities, and school terms and holidays. One way to ensure consistency and a good standard of teaching across the nation is to exercise control over teachers. Thus, schools covered under the Education (Grant-in-Aid) Regulations are also required to obtain the Ministry of Education's approval for teachers they are employing so as to ensure the quality of their teachers and hence the delivery of education in those establishments. This arguably gives considerable control of education to the government, and there is little latitude, even for schools with strong historical ties to particular religious affiliations.

Compulsory education was introduced in Singapore in January 2003 under the Compulsory Education Act (CEA), but it covers only 6 years of primary education. A child of compulsory school age refers to a child above the age of 6 years who has not yet attained the age of 15 years. Under the CEA, it is a criminal offence if parents fail to enroll their Singapore - born children in government schools offering primary education (i.e. national primary schools offering public education) and to ensure their regular attendance in these schools. The Act ensures that Singapore citizens will at least acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as core values and common educational experience and national identity in their first 6 years of primary education. The Act, however, exempts children with special needs and those attending religious schools run by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. However, such designated schools, as with other mainstream schools, have to prepare their Singapore students for the national primary school leaving examination.

## *Homeschooling*

Children who are home-schooled or who attend full-time religious institutions can be exempted from the CEA, but parents must apply for exemption from the Ministry of Education and satisfy the relevant criteria in the CEA. One of the criteria when giving exemption for regular attendance in schools is the requirement to sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). For example, the first batch of Madrasah students (i.e. students from Islamic religious educational institutions under the purview of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)) sat for the PSLE in 2008 and 98 per cent qualified to progress to secondary school (Jamil, 2010). This occurred as a result of a conscious effort by MUIS to adopt initiatives from the Ministry of Education such as information technology and national education, and to ensure that Madrasah teachers are appropriately trained at the National Institute of Education with critical pedagogical skills (Jamil, 2010).

Only a small number of parents in Singapore choose to home school their children. The exact number is not known but as of 5 November 2010, the number of homeschoolers in Asia (namely Macau, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong

Kong and Jakarta, Indonesia) enrolled with Teach-Asia is 300 (HSLDA, 2011). Teach-Asia is an organisation based in Singapore that provides Accelerated Christian Education materials and services to schools and home schools in Asia (Teach-Asia, 2011).

To be granted exemption from compulsory education, these parents have to furnish information on their home-based curriculum, which must demonstrate that the two key objectives of compulsory education are being met, in the absence of mainstream schooling. These objectives are to give their children:

- A common core of knowledge which will provide a strong foundation for further education and training to prepare them for a knowledge-based economy; and
- A common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion. (Ministry of Education, 2011c).

Where children are exempted from compulsory education, a certificate is issued to indicate the same. The application requirements for exemption include information on the curriculum and educational outcomes of the home-schooling programme, and how the child will receive instruction in National Education. (Ministry of Education, 2011d).

### *School choice not limited by family income*

The policy of free universal education was implemented immediately after independence in 1965. The schooling system is dominated by government schools both at the primary and secondary level, so that education is affordable to the masses. As recent as 2007, the then Education Minister, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, reiterated the need for equal opportunities (Hoe Y.N., 2007) and this goal has remained an important feature in government policies. Not only does the education system seek to provide equal opportunity for all Singaporeans regardless of their family background, but it also aims to provide education that is of high quality, affordable and accessible to them (FY 2011 Committee of Supply Debate, 2011).

General education is fully subsidized by the government. Singapore citizens in government and government aided schools need not pay school fees at the primary schools, while at the secondary school level, they pay only S\$5 per month. (Secondary schools with independent status are allowed to charge higher school fees.) Miscellaneous fees, however, are collected and retained by the school to defray the costs of teaching resources used by the students. For children from impoverished families, the amounts are waived under the MOE Financial Assistance Scheme. Schools are generally well funded by the government, thus freeing them from the dependence on school fees paid by students. Various funding schemes by the government to support students from lower income families are also made available for them to continue their studies. For students aspiring to study at the independent schools, scholarships are also available.

Schools with a higher number of children on the Financial Assistance Scheme are given extra funding under the Opportunity Fund (i.e. funding for enrichment programmes). Internationalization funds are also set aside for all schools (including government schools with high proportion of students from lower income families) to encourage overseas programmes, as part of the Ministry's effort to widen the global mindset of Singaporean students.

## *School distinctiveness protected by law and policy*

### *Distinctive character*

There is no law or regulation prohibiting schools from being distinctive as long as they follow the legal framework laid down by the MOE. Religious and community-based schools are allowed to maintain their distinctive character so long as they do not contravene the Education Act, which forbids proselytizing or compelling students of other faiths to attend its religious lessons.

In a bid to cater to the diverse spectrum of abilities in their students, schools have been encouraged to differentiate their programmes further and create their own distinctive character. Each school is to craft out its own mission and vision statements (specific to the needs of the school and student population) and devise learning programmes guided by the broader MOE's curriculum policies. A number of schools have since developed specialization or niche areas based in their strengths and student interests.

The setting up of the specialized independent schools mentioned above is an outcome of the Niche Area Scheme, where schools are able to pursue a specialized curriculum and further develop distinctive character. The Singapore Sports School, set up in 2004, for example, is one such school, catering for students with the desire to develop their sporting talents professionally. Likewise, the Singapore School of Arts caters for students with a penchant for the Arts.

The other specialized independent school, the NUS High Mathematics and Science, breaks tradition in forgoing the national GCE 'O' level examination, using instead a curriculum that is a blend of 'A' levels and a Junior College curriculum (i.e. known as the 'Integrated Programme'), providing a stimulating environment for students with exceptional aptitude and interest in mathematics and science.

### *Decisions about admitting pupils*

The education policy is based on the principle of meritocracy where secondary school admission is based largely on examination results at national level. As provided under the Education (Grant-in-aid) Regulations, Education Act (Chapter 87, Section 61), schools cannot refuse any students on the grounds of race or religion. Some leeway for preferential admission, however, is given to mainstream schools with niche



programmes, and up to 5% of the secondary one intake is admitted based on their talents in the specific areas the schools are offering; 80 out of 154 secondary schools currently offer discretionary places under the Direct School Admissions System. Specialised independent schools (e.g. Singapore Sports Schools) are allowed full autonomy in student admission based on students' sports/arts talents and academic results.

## *Decisions about staff*

The government is the employer of most of the teachers in Singapore. Applicants interested in the teaching profession apply to the Ministry of Education to become teachers. Applications are divided into two categories: those with teaching qualifications and those without teaching qualifications. A newly appointed teacher receives a letter of appointment informing him or her of the appointment, and the terms and conditions of service. All teachers in government schools (and some teachers in aided schools) are civil servants. As such, upon appointment, they are subject to the usual terms and conditions of civil servants and any public disciplinary regulations governing their employment. These terms and conditions are incorporated into the contract signed by the teacher with the government and are also set out clearly in the Instruction Manual, which all civil servants have access to.

## *Accountability for school quality*

All schools, regardless of their status, undergo yearly financial audits by the Ministry of Education, as well as school appraisal once every three years. The appraisal focuses on organizational attributes, such as leadership, planning, teaching and learning processes and school outcomes. Over and above the school appraisals, schools at the secondary level are evaluated and ranked based on the following criteria (academic and non-academic domains):

- Overall student academic results in O level
- Value-addedness of students' performance in national examinations
- Performance of students in the national physical fitness tests
- Achievements and awards

Ranking is kept confidential, with the exception of the top 50 secondary schools, and the ranking results are published yearly. The government's position is that public accountability is strengthened with the publication of secondary school ranking for top schools. It also provides guidance to parents who are selecting secondary schools

for their children. Further, it may even motivate all schools to improve their performance as an education provider.

## *Teaching of values*

In the four decades since Singapore became an independent nation, the importance of education is revealed in its function of preserving racial and social harmony, and providing the country with quality human resources to cope with the demands of social and economic development.

At the core of the education system since Singapore's independence in 1965 was the concern for social cohesion. Together with the establishment of national identity, it was of paramount importance to develop nationalistic commitment in the young. As a result, National Education curriculum had become compulsory in all schools.

The promotion of racial and religious harmony is imparted through the formal and informal curriculum at all levels. Citizenship or civic education and social studies have been included in the school curriculum in order to preserve harmony and social cohesion in such a diverse, multi-racial society. The Co-Curricular Activities programme conducted outside school hours also promotes social integration by providing various avenues for students from different social and racial backgrounds to engage in cultural activities (e.g. community projects and celebrations of ethnic festivals). Schools have been encouraged to increase the number of platforms for inter-racial integration.

To mitigate the effects of religious influences, the government has set boundaries for institutions established by religious organizations. Schools run by religious organizations are also under the ambit of the Education (Grant-in-Aid) regulations. Schools may not compel students to attend religious instruction or observance (provided the parents make their request in writing); religious observance and instruction are not to be made a condition for admission; and such observance and instruction are to be made additional to the requirements of school subjects in government schools (Education (Grant-in-Aid) Regulations; Education Act (Chapter 87, Section 61). These schools are also not to provide any form of religious teaching for those children outside their belief system.

In relation to citizenship education, where students are taught civic duties and secular ethics, a fixed curriculum has been adopted, with an emphasis on the history of Singapore.

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