



Pressure Cooker Or Paradise: Improving Student Well-Being In Singapore Education

INTRODUCTION

The Singapore education system is globally renowned for its high academic standards and its students' stellar performance in international comparative test results. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD), Singaporean students have consistently outperformed the rest of the world in Programme for International Assessment (PISA) surveys, which evaluate students' global competence through assessing their reading, mathematics and science.¹ While Singapore is recognised as an ideal place to raise children for its competitive, quality education, there have been increased concerns that students face high levels of stress and anxiety over academic performance in school.²

From 2012 to 2017, the Child Guidance Clinics under Singapore's Institute of Mental Health (IMH) saw an average of about 2,400 new cases every year.³ While there are no statistics on cases related to school stress, IMH reported stress-related, anxiety, and depressive disorders becoming more commonplace.⁴ In particular, Dr Lim Choon Guan, senior consultant and deputy chief of IMH's Department of Developmental Psychiatry, commented that he has seen more teenagers from top schools experiencing school-related stress.⁵ A 2017 study done by the OECD further suggested that students in Singapore experienced levels of anxiety that were significantly higher than the OECD average. While 66% of students across all OECD countries reported they were worried about poor grades at school, the percentage was 86% among Singapore students.⁶ In addition, 76% of Singapore students reported feeling very anxious for a test even if they were well prepared, a far cry from the OECD average of 55%.⁷ Even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it was found that children in Singapore were more anxious about examinations than they were about the pandemic.⁸

Over the last few years, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has taken steps to promote student well-being on a macro level. With greater acknowledgement that an over-emphasis on academic achievements could be detrimental to one's overall well-being and mental health, the Singapore government has initiated direct policies to help reduce unhealthy amounts of stress that students face.⁹

¹ "Singapore Tops Latest OECD PISA Global Education Survey", OECD, June 12, 2016,

<https://www.oecd.org/education/singapore-tops-latest-oecd-pisa-global-education-survey.htm>.

² Ang Qing, "Singapore Students Say Parental and Self Expectations, Fomo Are Sources of Stress," The Straits Times, July 31, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/parenting-education/singapore-students-say-parental-and-self-expectations-fear-of-missing>.

³ Cheow Sue-Ann, "More teens in Singapore seeking help at IMH for school stress," The Straits Times, April 11, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/more-teens-in-singapore-seeking-help-for-school-stress-at-imh>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Anxiety in Singapore Students", Caper Spring, n.d.,

<https://caperspring.com/have-you-ever-wondered-about-what-goes-on-behind-the-minds-of-our-therapists>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ang Jolene, "Children in Singapore more anxious about exams than Covid-19: Survey," The Straits Times, September 18, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/children-more-anxious-about-exams-than-covid-19-in-singapore-survey>.

⁹ Ng Pak Tee, "The Paradoxes of Student Well-Being in Singapore," ECNU Review of Education 3, no. 3 (2020): 437-51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120935127>.

THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF “STUDENT WELLBEING”

Singapore’s current efforts have consistently been directed towards shifting its educational paradigm to one that is holistic, engaging, meaningful and values-based.¹⁰ These have had the aim of having students flourish both in academic and social realms. Examples of these efforts include the required development of an Applied Learning Programme (ALP) and Values in Action (VIA) Programme in every primary and secondary school.¹¹ Designed for students to apply their knowledge to real-life situations, ALP allows students to pick up skills such as journalism, photography and programming that go beyond the set academic syllabus.¹² The VIA Programme requires students to involve themselves in projects that benefit the community, placing an emphasis on values and character.¹³ As such, student well-being has not been the result of direct “wellness” policy in education but wider systemic changes in education that promote meaningful learning and a positive school experience.

The Office of Education Research at Singapore’s National Institute of Education (NIE) has done more to understand this concept of student well-being and how it can be fostered into the classroom. Research scientist Dr Imelda Caleon has explained that “well-being” comprises many other factors. One of the simplest and most often conceived ideas associated with well-being is ‘feeling good’.¹⁴ *Feeling good* is associated with positive emotional states, including feelings of joy, satisfaction and a relaxed state of mind. This points to the need for direct policy changes to help “loosen up” the education system and reduce stress.

WHAT ARE THE CHANGES?

Over the years, Singapore’s education system has undergone several structural changes. In addition to meticulous testing to observe the outcomes of these modifications, each change also necessitates a period of adaptation for the Singapore public before any further changes are implemented.

Removal of Examinations

In the spirit of Singapore’s growing recognition of education beyond academic excellence, MOE announced the removal of several examinations to help reduce overall stress levels in 2018. This saw the removal of all examinations over the next three years for Primary 1 and 2 students and the streamlining of the academic curriculum.¹⁵ Mid-year examinations were also scrapped for Primary 3 and 5, and Secondary 1 and 3 students.¹⁶ This change has been seen to have had a positive impact, with teachers being better able to pace and deepen students’ learning without the pressure of preparing for examinations. As such, current Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing has announced plans to remove all mid-year examinations for all primary and secondary school levels by 2023.¹⁷

¹⁰ Ng Pak Tee, “The Paradoxes of Student Well-Being in Singapore,” *ECNU Review of Education* 3, no. 3 (2020): 437–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120935127>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ang Jolene, “Values in Action Programme Making Lasting Impact on Students: Ministry of Education,” *The Straits Times*, September 18, 2018,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/values-in-action-programme-making-lasting-impact-on-students-ministry-of>.

¹⁴ “Student Well-Being: What About It?,” *Singteach*, n.d., <https://singteach.nie.edu.sg/2019/09/30/issue64-bigidea/>.

¹⁵ Teng Amelia, “MOE taking steps to ‘loosen up’ education system to reduce stress, says Ong Ye Kung,” *The Straits Times*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/moe-taking-steps-to-loosen-up-education-system-to-reduce-stress-ong-ye-kung>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ang Hwee Min, “Mid-year exams for all primary and secondary school levels will be removed by 2023: MOE” *CNA*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/mid-year-exams-all-primary-and-secondary-school-levels-will-be-removed-2023-moe-2544051>.

New PSLE Grading System

Special efforts have also been made to counter the ‘do-or-die’ mentality which is deemed to be commonplace during any students’ education journey.¹⁸ Alongside the official recognition of other forms of non-academic talents through Direct School Admissions (DSA) to secondary schools and junior colleges,¹⁹ there has also been a move away from the rigid T-score system in Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) to a wider grade band system and the adoption of aptitude-based entries to higher institutions.^{20,21} The new PSLE grading system comprises scoring bands known as Achievement Levels (ALs). Each subject is scored using 8ALs, and students who perform similarly are placed in the same AL for that subject. A student’s PSLE score will be the sum of four subject scores, ranging from 4-32, with 4 being the best possible score.²²

<u>AL Scoring System</u>		<u>Calculation of Scores Example</u>
AL	Raw Mark Range	English Language: AL3
1	≥ 90	Mother Tongue Language: AL4
2	85 - 89	Mathematics: AL1
3	80 - 84	Science: AL2
4	75 - 79	
5	65 - 74	
6	45 - 64	
7	20 - 44	
8	< 20	PSLE Score: 10

Taken together, these measures seek to de-emphasise the weight placed on academic grades through the growing embrace, acceptance and recognition of non-academic strengths. Such is in hope of reducing the academic stress students face.

Removal of Streaming in Secondary Schools

Further restructuring of education pathways also involve the abolishment of streaming in secondary schools. This is to be replaced with subject-based banding from 2024. Announced in a parliamentary address by then-Education Minister Ong Ye Kung in March 2019, students will be placed into three bands based on their PSLE scores in the new system.²³ At the start of Secondary 1, they are able to take a combination of G1/2/3 (G1 being the least demanding) subjects based on their respective subject scores. Beyond Secondary 1, subject levels that students take are based on their newly assessed abilities in secondary school.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “What does this mean for your child?” Ministry of Education, July 9, 2021,

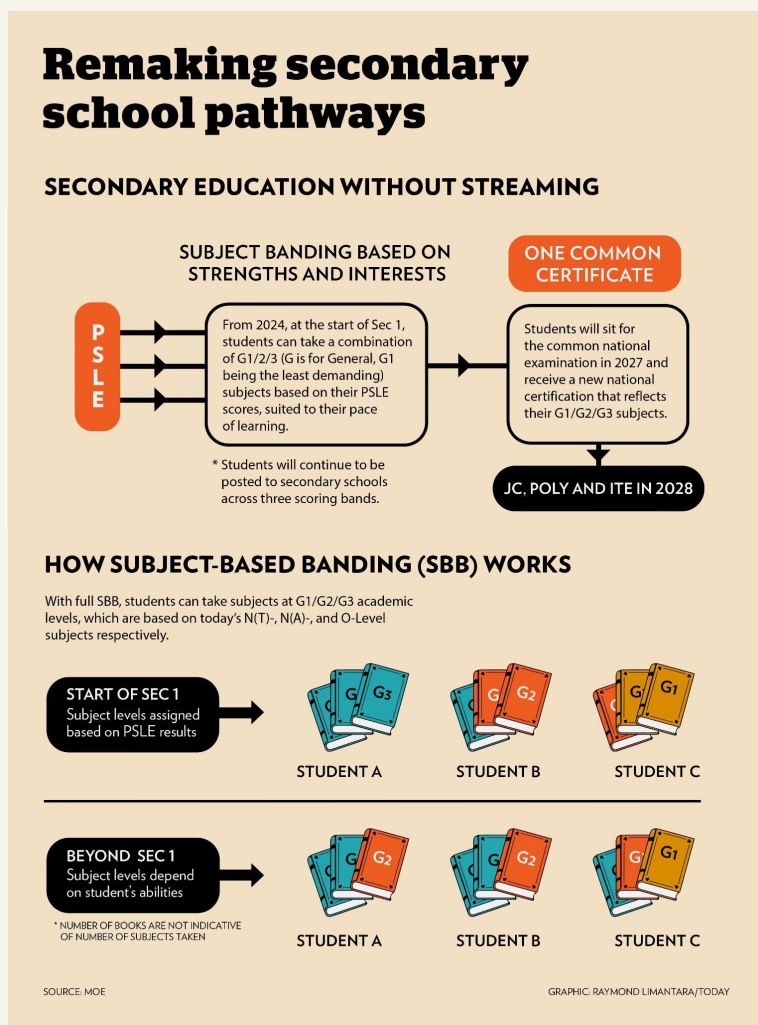
<https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/psle-fsbb/psle/new-psle-scoring-system.html>.

²³ Faris Mokhtar, “Secondary School Streaming to Be Abolished in 2024, Replaced with Subject-Based Banding,” TODAY, March 5, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/secondary-school-streaming-be-abolished-2024-replaced-subject-based-banding>.

Common National Examination After Secondary School

During the same parliamentary address, Minister Ong also announced that from 2027, students will no longer sit for the GCE O-Level or N-Level examinations, but take a common national examination and certification reflecting their G1/2/3 subjects. This comes in tandem with removing streaming from secondary schools. Such are attempts to better customise education for students to take and be assessed on subjects at levels they are best suited for. An individual growth mindset is encouraged in place of constant comparison with their peers - one of the largest sources of stress among students.

Figure 1: Overview of Subject-based Banding in Secondary Education (MOE, 2019)²⁴



AN EFFECTIVE CHANGE?

Singapore is not unknown for its hyper-competitive culture, driven by a *kiasu* (local slang meaning fear of losing out) mentality towards academic achievements in school. With Singapore's widely accepted meritocratic system, academic success, which comes from individual merit and hard work, is systematically believed to lead to a better

²⁴ Ibid.

occupational performance, and by extent, success in life. Increased academic pressure put on students by themselves and their parents only comes naturally.

Policy changes are often the first step to societal change, but not the last. If one were to dig deeper, the issue of student well-being is not entirely within the control of the government. While the government has made various policy initiatives in line with its efforts to lower stress levels among students, Singaporeans may still remain fixated with examination grades and paper qualifications - something deeply ingrained in students, parents, teachers, and employers. In response to the removal of certain examinations, reports of anxious parents fearful of their children becoming disadvantaged for milestone examinations,²⁵ and tuition centres preparing papers to fill the gaps of missing examinations were unsurprisingly prevalent.²⁶ At the end of the day, *kiasu* parents and competitive students who experience *a fear of missing out (FOMO)* may still impose and self-impose the importance of grades in fear of losing out.²⁷ Behaviour is difficult to change after all, let alone social conventions and pressures that seem embedded into the day to day lives of Singaporeans. While learning how to cope with school-related stress is crucial in training individuals to be resilient in life, too much of it can be detrimental to one's physical and mental health. Hopefully, these measures devised by educators and relevant authorities can enable students to reach their full potential without compromising their well-being.

Authored by Vivienne Tan and Laiyi Li. Published on 07 June 2023.

This Policy Explainer was written by members of MAJU. MAJU is an independent, youth-led organisation that focuses on engaging Singaporean youths in a long-term research process to guide them in jointly formulating policy ideas of their own.

By sharing our unique youth perspectives, MAJU hopes to contribute to the policymaking discourse and future of Singapore.

²⁵ Tan Jason, "Commentary: Why scrapping mid-year exams is giving some parents more anxiety than relief," CNA, March 12, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/mid-year-exams-removal-anxiety-parents-more-stress-2557851>.

²⁶ Yang June, "Commentary: Scrapped year-end exams- kids rejoice but parents need assurances", CNA, October 9, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/exams-school-cancelled-home-based-learning-primary-school-2230551>.

²⁷ Ang Qing, "Singapore students say parental and self expectations, FOMO are sources of stress", The Straits Times, Jul 31, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/parenting-education/singapore-students-say-parental-and-self-expectations-fear-of-missing>.

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