The PSLE revamp is part of a larger shift away from academics towards broadening opportunities for students to discover their interests and talents, and develop life skills, a sense of curiosity and a love for learning. Experts say that while this is a necessary change, it will take time for the country to embrace it and move away from its preoccupation with marks.

Pupils in Primary 1 this year will be the first cohort to take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and receive a new set of results.

 In 2021, the national examination will do away with the aggregate score – often criticised for being the cause of excessive stress among pupils and parents. With the change, children will no longer be graded relative to one another.

In its place will be wider scoring bands such as A, B, C and D – similar to the scoring system used in the O- and A-level examinations.

But this is only the most obvious change to what has been a steady overhaul of a pressurecooker system which has had a strong focus on marks instead of a child's holistic development.

Already, in the early stages of primary education, exams have become a thing of the past. Pupils are increasingly being encouraged to express themselves. Applied learning is in, along with the development of character and life skills.

At Primary Four or Five, pupils take part in a three-day cohort camp and learn to prepare simple meals, adapt to the outdoors, and build resilience and camaraderie.

In the coming years, primary school leavers will have more choice to go to secondary schools offering niche programmes in robotics, environmental issues, the arts and music, for instance, where they can develop their interests beyond the three "R"s – reading, writing and arithmetic.

As Acting Education Minister (Schools) Ng Chee Meng explained in Parliament earlier this month when he announced the changes: "Let's help our children make good use of their time to branch out to explore other interests and passions and to pursue what they want to do in life.

"Let's help them make good choices about their educational and career pathways based on their aptitudes and aspirations.

 "Let's help them to be ready for the future."
- Adapted from article “Evolving the S’pore education system: Going beyond grades by AMELIA TENG, CALVIN YANG, The Straits Times, INSIGHT, B2 & B3, 17/04/2016.

There has been much debate in the Singapore Parliament and public sphere with regard to the revamp in the PSLE grading. The two articles provided below reflect some of the debate regarding this issue.

**Should the government revamp the PSLE grading system of using T-scores?**

In about 1000 words, write a persuasive argumentative essay defending your position in order to argue for your particular stance on this issue. Other than providing supporting arguments for the position you take on this issue, you MUST anticipate objections and provide counterarguments to write the paper. Relevant information for you to gather would be:

• Definition of T-score

• Issues (moral, ethical, social and etc.) surrounding the PSLE grading system of using T-scores

• Arguments for upholding the PSLE grading system of using T-scores

• Arguments against upholding the PSLE grading system of using T-scores (100 marks)

**Guidance Notes**

1. Your reasoning must be good.

2. Strengthen your argument with relevant examples and illustrations.

3. You may include any additional but relevant information to the ideas that have already been given in the scenario and articles.

4. You should use at least 7 research sources to help you write your essay. The given articles are considered as a separate research source each and can count towards the 7 research sources.

5. You are to use credible and reliable sources to help you write this essay. Marks will be deducted for non-credible and unreliable content.

6. Remember to use accurate grammar, correct sentence structures and a tone appropriate to academic writing. Marks will be deducted for poor English.

Article 1:

Singapore budget 2016

**PSLE T-score to make way for scoring bands in 2021**

Collective paradigm shift needed to prepare children for the future, says Ng Chee Meng

Section: TOP STORIES
By: LEE U-WEN Publication: The Business Times 09/04/2016
Page: 2
No. of words: 680
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Singapore

IT is time for Singapore's education system to undergo a "paradigm shift" away from an overemphasis on academic grades, Acting Education Minister (Schools) Ng Chee Meng told Parliament on Friday.

The biggest change is to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which will have a new scoring system starting with the Primary Six cohort in 2021.

 T-scores will be replaced by wider scoring bands, similar to what is used for the O-Level and A-Level exams. Full details of the changes will be released in the next two to three months.

Speaking during the debate on his ministry's spending plans for the new financial year, Mr Ng noted that academic excellence remains a hallmark of the education system and that there was recognition for the high standards achieved over the years.

"However, the focus of our education system should go beyond test scores. Currently, despite our efforts to move towards a holistic education, there is still a narrow emphasis on academics and paper qualifications. This is deeply ingrained in our culture, translated into the expectations of our children, parents, and teachers. Eventually, this is perhaps even manifested in employer mindsets in workplaces."

Stressing the need to dial back on the excessive focus on academic grades, he spent a large chunk of his speech outlining the thinking behind the changes to the PSLE scoring system. The way that the T-score is calculated may have created "unhealthy competition" among students.

The scoring is also done too precisely, which differentiates students more finely than necessary, and Mr Ng said that there was a need to move away from such fine distinctions for students at such a young age.

The T-score, also known as the transformed score, is used to standardise raw scores and rank students relative to others.

While he admitted that some broad level of differentiation was still needed to guide students to academic programmes that best suit their interests and strengths, the scoring would be "blunted" to a large extent. The new scoring system will be "more reflective of a student's learning and level of mastery", said Mr Ng.

Once a student shows a level of understanding and ability that meets the professionally-set standard, they will receive the grade, regardless of how their peers perform. This, Mr Ng added, is more meaningful than assessing a student's performance relative to his peers.

The minister also addressed concerns about the Secondary One posting system as a result of the PSLE changes, and he gave the assurance that it would still be a "fair and transparent system based on academic merit".

With the move to broader PSLE scoring bands, students can pick a suitable school from a wider range of schools with a similar academic profile. They can consider factors such as the school's unique programmes, co-curricular activities, and partnerships with the community and industry.

The Education Ministry will take a few years to work through all the changes carefully, as well as give enough time and support for parents and students to understand and adjust.

In his speech, Mr Ng also said that there was scope for greater flexibility in how different forms of merit and achievement in the overall Secondary One posting system are recognised.

Thus, the Direct School Admission (DSA) scheme, introduced in 2004 to promote holistic education, will be reviewed to see how best to bring it back to its original intent. Noting that there was "some unevenness" in how different schools pick their DSA students, Mr Ng said that the review would look at having more options in more secondary schools for those with specific aptitudes and talents.

 The ministry also wants to sharpen the focus of the DSA to better recognise talents and achievements in specific domains, rather than general academic ability that can be demonstrated through the PSLE.

Article 2:

**Tweaks to PSLE alone won't relieve pressure on children**

Section: EDUCATION
By: JANE NG
Publication: The Straits Times 02/05/2016
Page: B9
No. of words: 1223

Parents need to change mindsets, and shift focus from just marks to character and values.

For the past two months, we have been watching a re-run of the first season of Junior MasterChef, and it came to a close a few weeks ago.

Jubilation erupted after 12-year-old Alexander Weiss emerged as the winner, but my 10-yearold son made a remark that caught me off-guard.

"Wow, Alexander joined the competition in his PSLE year. Doesn't he need to study?" he asked.

While I did not expect his comment, I was not surprised that he was aware of the looming exam – three of his closest friends have older siblings who sat the Primary School Leaving Examination in the last two years, and I know they compare notes.

I braced myself for the onslaught of questions that would follow when I said: "Alexander doesn't have to sit the PSLE. There's no PSLE in America."

 As expected, he railed: "What? No PSLE? So unfair! Why?"

I tried to explain that different countries have different education systems, and ours favoured an exam at Primary 6 to sort pupils, so they can learn at a pace suitable for them.

It was perhaps too simplistic an explanation but he left it at that, and, after some grumbling, moved on to think about the dishes he was inspired to cook for the family.

We put aside the discussion after that, and he paid only cursory attention when I told him days later that there would be changes to PSLE that would affect his sister, who is in Primary 1 this year.

The PSLE T-score will be replaced by wider scoring bands in 2021, but the bigger issue is how pupils will be sorted, based on those grades. With little information available at present, it is premature to speculate about the outcomes of the changes.

 But many people, including my husband, wonder whether the new system, meant to reduce the nation's obsession with results, will end up creating more stress.

Will the focus on non-academic achievements result in additional pressure for the children?

Will this mean that those who can afford to hone their non-academic skills will have an edge?

Will there be a fair way to allocate school places to children who attain the same letter grades?

And in reality, will it be any different from the current system?]

These are some issues the Education Ministry will have to grapple with as it works out the nuts and bolts of the new system.

But these are among the other questions on my mind: Who are the people obsessed with results?

And what will it take to persuade them otherwise, since mindsets would have to change for the changes to be effective?

It could be a chicken and egg situation.

Parents who load their children with tuition, assessment books and past-year exam papers say they have no choice since they want to give their child an edge in the current system. And the stress begins even before the child enters primary school.

On the other hand, schools say they are catering to parents' demands. I once asked my son's pre-school principal why he was given so many worksheets to do in a day, and why playground time was cancelled if worksheets were not completed. She said it was because parents wanted it. And so the vicious circle persists.

 When I wrote about pulling him out of that pre-school, like-minded parents shared their stories.

One said she pulled her child out of remedial classes because she did not think the additional hours were necessary since her child was not failing in the subject. "We say we are happy when our child scores a B or C, and we mean it," she added.

 It takes a brave parent to go against the tide and make that decision.

Parents I spoke to also suggested that effort could also be made to level the academic playing field, perceived or otherwise.

This would go some way in assuring parents that the same academic resources are available to their child, no matter which school he is in. After all, the children eventually sit the same national exam.

This could come in the form of a centralised portal where resources, for instance revision notes or exam papers of top schools, could be made available to all schools.

This is even as steps have been taken to help schools distinguish themselves from one another in non-academic areas, to make "every school a good school".

 But apart from parents and educators, mindsets of employers and interview panels for scholarships will also have to change, otherwise the move to reduce academic obsession would be a meaningless exercise.

Even before more details are released on PSLE grading and school allocation, several things are clear.

The change is to reduce the obsession with academic results, not to lower academic standards or remove the rigour from our education system.

It ultimately aims to encourage parents to choose secondary schools based on their child's interest and strengths. And that, to me, as a parent, is a move in the right direction.

The best schools in Singapore that many are aiming to get into may not be the best match for the child, even if he qualifies for them.

 But at the moment, not many may consider this. While I cannot control how school allocation is done, I can do my part by telling my children there is more to life than academic results – character and values are what will see them through life.

Eventually, when they leave school and start work, it is their attitude that will go a long way in helping them succeed. Not their PSLE, O-level or A-level results.

So, no matter which secondary school they end up in, it is up to them to make the best of it, and up to me to help them make the best of it.

Of course, most parents, including myself, want to have our cake and eat it too. I want the children to enjoy their childhood, I also want them to do as well as they can for exams.

But it is also up to me to help them strike that delicate balance. If I manage to do that, then joining a competition like Junior MasterChef in the PSLE year may not be such a far-fetched notion, after all.

And if the upcoming changes allow our children to enjoy learning, find their strengths and discover their passions, that would just be cherry on the cake.