

# OPINION

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Sweden's model management

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Less fuel to drive Indonesia's growth

## Kind approach to better kindergartens

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HE Education Ministry's admission criteria for prototype state-operated kindergartens, when ready, are likely to stir much interest. Places are necessarily limited as it will start with only five of 15 planned centres next year. There might even be a scramble for entry as surveys show almost all parents rate pre-school education as an important form of preparation for the start of formal school.

The ministry's entry, even as a trial project, will have raised expectations of a larger state role, perhaps even of making pre-school a standard part of public education. The ministry may demur as such an undertaking could over-burden its already wide remit. The Government has resisted calls to "nationalise"

pre-school; one reason is that a diversity of experiences is preferred over a narrow, prescriptive approach in the early growth of a child's learning capabilities. A new statutory board that is to oversee the pre-school education sector will need time to assess the way forward.

As it is, a tiny minority receive higher quality grounding in some private centres that charge a lot for the privilege. Most children go to less expensive places where standards vary. One study, conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit and commissioned by the Lien Foundation, placed the nation in the bottom half of an international ranking on early childhood education. A respected pace-setter is clearly needed to help up-

lift the entire sector and state-run kindergartens can play a useful role here.

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat raised parents' hopes in saying the number of state kindergartens could be increased if public support and the value created are evident.

What also deserves public attention is the accessibility of good programmes to children from poor homes. It is proper to see acceptable pre-school education for children from poorer homes as an integral element of the "levelling up" process to check declining social mobility. A deficiency could be significant at this stage as studies show the early years are the most formative.

A commendable initiative by Lien

Foundation and Care Corner deserves to be replicated by others in providing a holistic approach to early childhood development and in reaching out to low-income groups. It is a model that strives to combine "social work, learning support, health services and parental involvement" to help those born into less well-off homes close the gap. At the initiative's Leng Kee centre, the majority are from families receiving government financial assistance.

While reaching for teaching methods of the highest standard and, perhaps, a similar integrated approach to development, pilot state-run schools should also strive for a good mix of students from different social backgrounds.