

'Wake-up call' for S'pore kindergartens

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A GLOBAL survey on early-childhood education has given Singapore a disappointing report card.

The Republic was ranked 29th in a field of 45 developed and emerging economies covered in the survey into the extent to which governments provide good, inclusive early-childhood education to those aged three to six.

The top three spots were taken by Nordic states Finland, Sweden and Norway; in the Asia-Pacific, New Zealand, South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Australia outdid Singapore.

The study was commissioned by local philanthropic group the Lien Foundation.

The "Starting Well" Index, as it is called, evaluated pre-school education in four areas – social context, availability, affordability and quality.

Singapore fared well in "social context". This was a nod to its high literacy rates and standard of living, which

means children here do not suffer from malnutrition or ill health.

But it scored only "average" in availability, as children here do not have a legal right to pre-school education. The report said that making it a legal right makes governments accountable – obligated to provide pre-school to those who want it, as distinct from making it mandatory.

Despite this, the report noted that the level of pre-school enrolment here is high.

Singapore also did only "average" for affordability.

The report noted that the Government here balances having a pre-school sector that is market-driven – with families paying for the pre-school of their choice – by providing direct subsidies to eligible lower-income families.

But Singapore's worst performance came in the "quality" department.

Reasons for this included a high teacher-student ratio of 1:20.

Another aspect which pulled Singapore down in this area was relatively

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THE WEAK LINK
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– Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of the Lien Foundation, which commissioned the study

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Source: ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT

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low average wages and the low entry requirements for pre-school teachers.

The median monthly wage for pre-school teachers was about \$1,600 in 2010, which means half the teachers were drawing above this, and the other half, below. This was just half the national median wage that year.

Qualifications-wise, pre-school teachers in the top-10-ranked economies have degrees; teachers here only need to have five O-level credits and a diploma in pre-school education.

But if this impinged on the quality of pre-school education here, the report said the Government had stepped

in to provide curriculum guidelines.

The report also noted the weak link between pre-school and primary school here, and the relatively low level of parental involvement that ensures that learning continues at home.

Nordic countries top the rankings largely because of their governments' long-term investment and prioritisation of early-childhood development, said the report.

By contrast, Singapore spends only a third of what Norway does on pre-school education per child.

Calling the ranking a timely wake-up call, Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah said research had shown good pre-school education pays off with less remedial schooling down the line – and even lower crime rates: "If there is a weak link in our national education system, the pre-school phase would be it."

"The ideal of equal opportunity for children in our society should start from pre-school. A better playing field would give disadvantaged children a head start that could change their life outcomes."

Pre-school education consultant Khoo Kim Choo suggested that the Government not only provide subsidies to parents, but also to pre-school operators. This could go towards raising teacher salaries and defraying rising rental costs.

The Ministry of Education could step in to take over K2 classes, she added. This would standardise the curriculum and ensure all children have a smooth transition to primary school.

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How Singapore fared in the four areas assessed

THE "Starting Well" Index ranked each of the 45 economies in four areas defining the quality of their pre-school education. Singapore's pre-school system was ranked 29th overall as a result of its performance in the following areas:

■ **Social context: Ranked joint 1st** with 27 economies such as Finland and Japan. In this area, Singapore scored the maximum points as a result of its low infant mortality rate and high literacy among adults, among other factors.

■ **Availability: Ranked 25th** Singapore came in the bottom half primarily because children here do not have a legal right to pre-school education, which would entail the Government being obligated to provide it. However, despite the sector being run by private players, pre-school attendance is nearly 100 per cent.

The Government just announced the building of 200 child-care centres as one among many moves to arrest the declining birth rate.

■ **Affordability: Ranked 21st** With the pre-school sector here run by private operators, households earning less than \$3,500 a month or \$875 per head every month are eligible for Government subsidies on school fees.

■ **Quality: Ranked 30th** The teacher-to-children ratio, at 1:20, is relatively high, compared to a ratio of between 1:5 and 1:11 in the economies ranked in the top 10.

The average wage and qualifications of pre-school teachers here also lag behind other economies in the index.