



## Call for vital changes to improve preschool education in Singapore

***Lien Foundation's study reveals the top concerns of 27 leading voices from Singapore's early childhood sector***

***Bold ideas proposed: A lead government ministry to spearhead preschool education; new "Team Around the Child" model of collaborative, multi-disciplinary holistic care; national campaign to uplift preschool profession***

Singapore, 17 July 2012

1. To examine what it takes to advance Singapore's preschool education<sup>1</sup>, the Lien Foundation commissioned a study that drew upon the views of 27 leaders from a range of disciplines in early childhood services. Entitled '**Vital Voices for Vital Years**', the study examined the key challenges facing the preschool sector and provides a ground-up perspective of solutions for improvements. "We hope this study will provide the platform for an informed discussion among policy makers, educators and parents that will lead to quality preschool education. This is one of many baby steps towards a headstart in life for every child in Singapore," said Mr Lee Poh Wah, Chief Executive Officer of the Lien Foundation.

### ***Call for Vital Changes***

2. The study's lead investigator, Dr Lynn Ang, Senior Lecturer of Early Childhood from University of East London said, "Throughout the study, the desire for change in Singapore's early childhood sector was unanimously agreed upon as of vital importance. The preschool years in a child's life are absolutely critical. Quality preschool services can maximise the benefits for children's learning and development, and ultimately develop children to be effective contributors to the community and society. At the heart of this project is to advocate for every child in Singapore to have the best possible chance in life to grow up into happy, confident and successful individuals."

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the press release, the term "preschool education" is used interchangeably with "early childhood education", both referring to childcare services and kindergartens.

3. Some of the challenges highlighted by the study include:
  - Uneven quality, equity and affordability currently present in the sector
  - Difficulties faced by the preschool profession – high turnover, low status and low pay
  - Need for increased efforts for greater parental awareness and education
  - Need for more cohesive governance of the preschool sector, at policy and operational level
  
4. When asked for their ideas on how preschool education could be made better, the study raised 11 possible areas for improvements (see **Annex A**). The suggestions covered four broad themes:
  - Leveling the gaps in quality, affordability and accessibility for better equity
  - Elevating the early education workforce to revitalize the profession
  - Drawing greater community and parental involvement for a holistic preschool education
  - Advocating the formation of a new distinct lead ministry for greater efficiencies and coherence of policies and implementation

***Leveling the gaps: Preschool education to be a public good***

5. Presently, school fees in Singapore’s market-based preschool system can range from \$100 to \$2000. The wide spectrum in cost and kind of programmes offered by preschool providers leads to significant differences in the quality of education. Parents who are financially able can purchase better quality education, while those with lower incomes are left with fewer choices. Non-profit voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) preschool providers are often disadvantaged by the market-based system as they try to keep their fees affordable for the families they serve.
  
6. The majority of participants (71%) in this study feel strongly that if early childhood services are recognised by the government as a **necessary public good**, then there should be *free preschool education for all children*, at least for those in Kindergarten 1 and 2. However, having a high-quality preschool service for all children requires increased investment and funding. To level the gaps and achieve an inclusive society, public spending in early years education has to increase and become an area of priority.

### ***Revitalising the Profession***

7. When asked about which aspect of the sector needs urgent improvement, the state of the early childhood education profession came up as the top concern for over 60% of the respondents. High turnover rate, low pay and the low status of the profession are major bugbears plaguing the sector. Ms Ho Yin Fong, Academic Director, SEED Institute pointed out, “Raising the status of preschool teachers is a first step to strengthening the sector. To do so, we need three important “Rs” - Respect, Recognition and a Rise in wages.” A national campaign to enhance the public image and regard for preschool teachers will not only increase respect and recognition for the profession, it can also attract the sorely needed new entrants into the industry. To revitalise the profession, career prospects in the preschool sector can be enhanced by creating different professional pathways in addition to teaching, such as mentoring, specialist and leadership roles.
8. The status and identity of the profession will also increase tremendously if a more formal pay structure could be developed and a minimum salary set. This could also address the present lack of parity in pay and job roles between those working in childcare, and those in kindergartens. If early childhood is to be regarded as part of Singapore’s public education system, the government can explore ways to progressively raise the salaries of preschool teachers, with the aim of establishing a national pay scale that will match those of mainstream teachers.
9. Another key issue that needs to be dealt with is the wide disparity and differences of training found in the sector. Unlike mainstream teachers who are trained by the National Institute of Education (NIE), preschool teachers are subject to a myriad of training experiences with varying quality and approaches from more than 13 training providers. The study suggests an independent review of training programmes is needed to strengthen the quality and consistency of training for this sector.

### ***‘It takes a village’***

10. When asked why preschool education is important, 90% of participants in the study responded that it is to support children as lifelong learners. To do so, a holistic approach in preschool education is needed. One proposed model is to create a “Team Around the Child” (TAC) where the child is at the heart of a multi-faceted network of support covering health, education, social services and community

outreach services. This collaborative model will allow sharing of best practices and harmonised services. If these service hubs can be located within the community and near families, it will help ensure that services for the children are focused on what families want and need. Professor Ho Lai Yun, Director, Child Development Programme, Ministry of Health, and Senior Consultant, KK Women's and Children's Hospital said, "Preschool education has a big influence on the child's development. As the aspects of care, learning and education of a child are interdependent, holistic care and community involvement in the early years can result in better outcomes for preschool children." The concept of weaving an 'ecology of support' around the child also involves parental involvement.

***Improved parental and community involvement***

11. Dr Christine Chen, Founder and President of Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) said, "I believe that parents are children's first and life-long teachers. If we as preschool teachers want to make a sustained difference in our children's lives, we need to include parents and families as an integral part of preschool education. It is not a choice, but a necessity." Although there have been parental education efforts, like those by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), the take-up of these programmes appears to be patchy. Parental outreach programmes, especially those in the local heartland neighborhoods, can bolster the outcomes of early childhood education. When parents are well supported and equipped with the right skills and information to care for their children, they can better help them achieve their potential. This in turn will boost the overall quality of Singapore's preschool education.

***Better focus and synergy with one coordinating ministry***

12. Due to the division of oversight where childcare programmes come under MCYS and kindergartens are under the Ministry of Education (MOE), preschool programmes are diversified and widely differ in quality. Respondents expressed a strong desire for more coherent governance of the early childhood sector. To achieve this, a possible suggestion was to look at forming a lead ministry with the sole focus of overseeing and regulating the early childhood sector. This will bring kindergartens and childcare centres under the same direction and leadership. It could lead to better regulatory frameworks and administrative systems, and more cogent policy development and implementation.

***To be or not to be: The Role of the Government***

13. Dr Lynn Ang concluded, “The study provided compelling rationales for increased government investment and funding of the sector, in order to ensure that underlying causes such as the high attrition rate of the workforce, pay disparities, and inequities of the sector are addressed.”
  
14. The collective viewpoints of this study represent the leading voices that consider preschool education as crucial to Singapore’s future and continued success. Mr Lee said, “Presently, preschool education is optional and remains the responsibility of parents. The early years of a child’s life are so vital that preschool education should be a shared responsibility of both parents and the government. Any efforts by the government to step up its role in this area should be balanced by active parental involvement.”
  
15. As part of its aim to advance preschool education, the Foundation is seeking parents’ views on the shape of preschool education today. Parents are invited to take part in an online survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/vitalvoices>. It opens today till end July 2012.

***The methodology behind “Vital Voices for Vital Years”***

To obtain the views of the participants, a survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews were conducted. A group interview was also carried out with preschool principals and teachers. The data collected were transcribed independently, with a selection transcribed by two research assistants. The transcripts were then categorised according to emergent themes and analysed by two independent reviewers. The data was also coded thematically and analysed using the qualitative research software, NVIVO7, to ensure validity of the results.

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**About the Lien Foundation**

**[www.lienfoundation.org](http://www.lienfoundation.org)**

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to enhance educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, advance excellence in eldercare and promote environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

The “Vital Voices for Vital Years” study is part of the Lien Foundation’s efforts to advocate greater access to quality early childhood education. It aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers.

The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation’s efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation has championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success is inspiring a scaled-up national version in Singapore. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called the Starting Well Index that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education.

**Media contacts**

Genevieve Kuek  
Qeren Communications  
[gen@qeren.biz](mailto:gen@qeren.biz)  
+65 97633110

Joanne Lee  
Qeren Communications  
[joanne@qeren.biz](mailto:joanne@qeren.biz)  
+65 90027696

**ANNEX A**

**SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVING THE PRESCHOOL SECTOR**

