

# Govt should run pre-schools: Experts

Group says such schools are critical and should not charge fees

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ALL Singaporean children should be offered free pre-school education run by the Government, a group of leading childhood experts have recommended.

They said the Government should recognise that this kind of schooling is critical to a child's development, and take charge of the sector.

The 27 experts were asked for their views by philanthropic group the Lien Foundation.

Their recommendations come three weeks after a global survey released by the foundation gave Singapore's pre-school sector a disappointing report card, ranking it 29th out of 45 countries.

The Republic fared worst in quality, based on factors such as pre-school teachers' qualifications and student-teacher ratios.

The survey led to renewed calls for the Government to take charge of Singapore's 500 kinder-

gartens and more than 900 child-care centres. These are run by a range of operators, from the PAP Community Foundation and religious outfits, to clan and grassroots associations.

All the 27 experts felt strongly that the Government should be in charge of pre-school education, said lead investigator Lynn Ang.

She said more than seven in 10 of them thought it should be provided free for all children.

Currently, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports both oversee the sector. But the experts called for one of them, preferably MOE, to take the lead. If not, a new ministry should be set up, such as one dedicated to children and families.

Dr Ang, a senior lecturer of early childhood at the University of East London, said: "There is overwhelming evidence that quality pre-school is critical to child development." She added most of the experts felt the Government

should "recognise quality education as a necessary public good".

But Dr Ang said this does not mean all children should go to state-run kindergartens.

"The Government could provide good pre-schools for the majority of the children, but also allow and support some private operators who have a proven record of providing high-quality education. This way parents will still have a choice," she said.

The experts include Dr Christine Chen, president of the Association for Early Childhood Educators. She noted that pre-school fees range from \$100 to over \$1,000 and there are significant differences in quality.

"Parents who are financially able can purchase better-quality education, while those with lower incomes are left with fewer choices," Dr Chen said.

Ms Ho Yin Fong, academic director of the National Trades Union Congress-run Seed Institute, stressed the importance of raising the status and salaries of pre-school teachers. She said: "It is a first step. To do so, we need three important 'Rs' - Respect, Recognition and a Rise in wages."

Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah said: "Our pre-school system should narrow the gap between the rich and poor, not widen it as it does now."

He announced that the group was launching a survey to seek parents' views on pre-school education. They are invited to visit: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/vitalvoices>

MOE did not respond to the study released yesterday, but two years ago, then Education Minister Ng Eng Hen said there were no plans to nationalise pre-school education. He said doing so would deprive parents of choice and give rise to counter-productive comparisons between pre-schools.

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Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of the Lien Foundation, which sought the experts' views on pre-school education. More than seven in 10 thought it should be made free.  
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