



Parents express desire for greater government involvement to improve preschool education

In an online parents survey conducted by the Lien Foundation, a majority (72%) of parents think that kindergarten classes should be made part of Singapore's public education

Most parents (73%) are satisfied with their children's preschool education but more than half (73%) are ambivalent or dissatisfied with the accessibility, affordability and quality of the Singapore's preschool sector

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1. 1,395 parents with preschoolers responded to the Lien Foundation's call for their views on Singapore's preschool education in an online survey that ran from 17-31 July 2012. This parents survey follows from the Foundation's recent release of two studies on early childhood education this year. The first was a benchmarking study on early childhood education, entitled "*Starting Well*". It placed Singapore 29th out of 45 countries globally. Last month, in a local study called "*Vital Voices for Vital Years*" ("*Vital Voices*"), the Foundation shared its findings on what it takes to improve Singapore's preschool sector from the perspectives of early childhood education experts. Part of the 11 questions in the parents survey sought to find out if parents agreed with some of the opinions and suggestions raised by experts in the local study.
2. Most of all, the survey aimed to gain insights into parents' views on the importance of preschool education, the factors that influence their choice of preschool, whether they were satisfied with their child's current preschool and what they thought could be done to improve the preschool sector in Singapore in terms of affordability, accessibility and quality.

Parents are key

3. "The voices of parents are vital to any review of preschool education," said Mr Lee Poh Wah, Chief Executive Officer, Lien Foundation "Not only are they the children's first and foremost teachers, their values and expectations influence the choice of their children's

preschools and shape the face of preschools to come. Any wished-for improvements in preschool education is likely to draw a better chance of success with the support of parents.” Out of the survey’s total sample of 1,395 participants, 68% were parents with children in childcare centres and 32% were parents with children in kindergartens. An overwhelming 96% of parents considered preschool education as important or very important. When asked about their expectations of what preschool education should achieve (parents could only choose one option out of five), 68% of the respondents felt that preschool education should “teach my child to enjoy learning and be a lifelong learner.”

Wish for greater government involvement

4. The survey highlighted the parents’ desire for greater government involvement to improve Singapore’s preschool education. When asked what they thought could be done to improve preschools in Singapore, the top three chosen options were: (1) Increase government subsidies to help parents (2) Raise the qualifications, pay and status of preschool teachers (3) Regulate school fees. These factors are corroborated by the findings in ‘*Vital Voices*’ that highlighted the gaps of accessibility, quality, and equity of services in the preschool sector. To address these gaps, experts in the “*Vital Voices*” study had raised the possibility of the government playing a greater role to ensure the affordability of services – either in the financing of preschool services or the regulation of preschool fees.
5. The need for the government to play a role to ensure a better playing field was highlighted by Parent ‘A’s feedback: “The Government should ensure a minimum level of quality for all preschool education providers - be it childcare centres or kindergartens. The differences in quality among the preschools are too huge now. A parent who wants to send the child to a quality preschool has to fork out a lot of money to do so, and even then, this is subject to the availability of spaces. ... If the quality and price gap is not addressed, this also puts the less wealthy families at a disadvantage ...”

K1-K2 classes as part of public education

6. The majority of parents (72%) who participated in the survey were of the opinion that kindergarten classes should be made part of Singapore’s public education. Ms Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte, Deputy Head (Academic), SEED Institute and Centre Director, The Caterpillar’s Cove said, “This finding co-relates with a question parents frequently ask

me: Why is preschool education not like primary school education? Isn't it something that the government provides too?" In the Foundation's "Vital Voices" study, a majority (71%) of the experts interviewed felt 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.

More satisfied with preschool services than with the sector

7. While the survey drew many suggestions of improving preschool education, the majority of parents (73%) are satisfied or very satisfied with the current preschool that their child has enrolled in. However, when asked about their satisfaction with the accessibility, affordability and quality of the Singapore's preschool sector, 73% of the respondents are ambivalent, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Dr Lynn Ang, Senior Lecturer, Early Childhood Studies, University of East London observes, "This result shows a distinct disparity between the level of parents' satisfaction of the quality of the preschool service that their child is currently receiving and their views of the overall shape of the sector. This could well indicate that parents are more discerning and acutely aware of the gaps that currently exist in the sector."
8. A confused Parent 'B' shared her woes: "There is much variation in terms of physical environment, curriculum and teacher's qualifications/capabilities between preschool to preschool. It would be good if there can be a framework or minimum guidelines set up on what a standard preschool should offer for what fee structure. Right now I have no idea whether what I am paying is value for my money."

Feeling the pinch

9. 88% of all parents surveyed considered preschools in Singapore as costly or very costly. 90% of parents with children in childcare centres felt preschools are costly or very costly, while 83% of parents with children in kindergartens felt that fees are costly or very costly. The survey noted that about half of the respondents with children in childcare pay less than \$600 per month (after subsidies), and about half of the respondents with children in kindergartens pay less than \$300 in monthly fees. The perception of high cost explains why parents placed "more government subsidies" (71%) as the most desired improvement for preschool education and "regulate school fees" (60%) as their third most popular choice for improvement (they could pick more than one option).

10. Of grave concern is how the perception of high cost is putting couples off from having more children. Parent 'C' captured this sentiment with this feedback: "Preschool fees are really very expensive. Many parents are put off with having another kid because of the high preschool fees. How to afford \$1k a month for each kid's fees and another \$1k for a maid to take care of them when they fall sick in childcare?"

Uplift for teachers to improve preschool education

11. Besides cost, teachers were a key factor that received the parents' top votes for importance and improvement. Quality of teachers was the top factor that influenced the parents' choice of a preschool. The second and third most important factors were Location and Affordability. In response to the question on what should be improved in preschool education, two out of three parents wanted the qualifications, pay and status of preschool teachers to be raised. This indicates that the work of MCYS and MOE to improve the quality of teachers are aligned with parents' priorities. However, more needs to be done in this area.

12. Mr Philip Koh, Founder of Preschool Teachers Network on Facebook urged, "Many preschool teachers are persevering in the profession because of their love for the job and the children. Despite challenging conditions, many of them continue to impart knowledge, values and skills to our young ones. They want to improve their quality of teaching, expertise and proficiency and we should do our best to support them." Some survey respondents brought up the plight of preschool teachers in their feedback. Parent 'D' wrote: "Preschool teachers are also not well paid - but their job is actually very physically and mentally tiring. We need to attract more well-qualified preschool teachers, including graduates, so that they can develop and deliver quality programmes..."

Partnering Parents

13. In his recent National Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called for the government to "work with parents to bring their children to more equal starting points for primary school, through good and affordable childcare and kindergartens." This recognises the role that parents play and could bode well for a sector desiring much-needed review. As William Wordsworth wrote, "The child is father of the Man". The children we nurture today will shape the course of our future tomorrow.

About the Lien Foundation**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.

In the area of early childhood education, the Foundation aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers. To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, "Vital Voices for Vital Years" that examined leaders' views on improving Singapore's preschool sector. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called "Starting Well" that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education.

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.

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ANNEX: RESULTS OF PARENTS SURVEY**Q1 In your view, how important is preschool education for your child(ren)?**

Majority of respondents (96%) view preschool education as important or very important.

	Number	Response Percent
Very Important	1034	74.1%
Important	308	22.1%
Moderately Important	49	3.5%
Little Importance	4	0.3%
Not important	0	0.0%
	1395	

Q2 The type of early childhood education service respondents' children are enrolled in:

951 parents (68%) have children in childcare, while 444 parents (32%) have children in kindergartens.

Q3 Respondents' children are enrolled in:

	Number	Response Percent
PAP Community Foundation	171	12.3%
NTUC First Campus	242	17.3%
Linked to faith-based organisations (e.g. Churches, Mosques)	219	15.7%
Non-profit organisations	61	4.4%
Private operators	702	50.3%
	1395	

Q4 Range of school fees paid by respondents

	Your child has enrolled in a:			
	Childcare centre	Cumulative %	Kindergarten	Cumulative %
Less than \$100	7	1%	21	5%
\$100 to less than \$200	19	3%	102	28%
\$200 to less than \$300	70	10%	101	50%
\$300 to less than \$400	199	31%	71	66%
\$400 to less than \$500	109	42%	34	74%
\$500 to less than \$600	130	56%	17	78%
\$600 to less than \$700	117	68%	21	83%
\$700 to less than \$800	77	77%	19	87%
\$800 to less than \$900	73	84%	12	90%
\$900 to less than \$1,000	36	88%	13	93%
\$1,000 to less than \$1,200	70	95%	19	97%
\$1,200 to less than \$1,400	29	98%	4	98%
\$1,400 to less than \$1,600	11	100%	3	98%
\$1,600 to less than \$1,800	4	100%	2	99%
More than \$1,800	0	100%	5	100%
	951		444	

 Median band of respondents who enrolled child in Kindergarten

 Median band of respondents who enrolled child in Childcare centre

Q5 What is your view on the fees of the preschools in Singapore?

Majority of respondents (88%) regard preschool fees as costly (43%) or very costly (45%). The breakdown of parents who enrolled their child in a childcare centre or kindergarten are as follows:

	Your child has enrolled in a:			
	Childcare centre	%	Kindergarten	%
Very costly	461	48%	166	37%
Costly	397	42%	203	46%
Reasonable	92	10%	73	16%
Very reasonable	1	0%	2	1%
	951		444	

Parent 'E' wishes for direct subsidies for schools

"Pre-school is very expensive in Singapore but lowering the cost would affect the quality the schools are able to provide. Could the government consider subsidizing the schools directly, as it does for primary education, etc?"

Q6 In your view, what are the most important factors influencing your choice of a preschool?

Parents ranked the factors influencing their choice of a preschool in this order of importance: **1 being the most important factor, 7 being the least important factor.**

The average rating of each factor are presented below, beginning with the most important factor:

	Rating Average
Quality of teachers	2.57
Location	3.18
Affordability	3.63
Academic programme	3.99
Physical environment and facilities	4.37
Small class size (low teacher-child ratio)	4.64
Reputation of preschool	5.62

Q7 What is the expectation of what preschool education should achieve? (Parents were asked to pick only one option)

Most parents want their children to achieve the skill of being a lifelong learner.

	Number	Response Percent
To teach my child to enjoy learning and be a lifelong learner	942	67.5%
To prepare my child for primary school	208	14.9%
To help my child socialise with other children	93	6.7%
To boost my child's academic achievement	68	4.9%
To foster my child's independence	49	3.5%
Others	35	2.5%
	1395	

Parent 'F' suggests regulating programmes to ensure preschools instill a love for learning:

"Regulate the programme so that it is not focused on excelling in studies but rather stir up curiosity and open up ways for children to express themselves. More preschools should go for theatrical programmes, outings to places of educational interest e.g fire stations, botanical gardens, science centre and even thrift stores, old folks home and art galleries.

Currently, only a handful of private operators expose children to them. The bottom line is that children learn in different ways and not all are able to learn well sitting in classrooms. Education efforts should cater to all types of learning so that children learn the joy of learning. There should also never be "homework" to be handed out for preschoolers."

Q8 Overall, how satisfied are you with the preschool that your child has enrolled in?

Majority of parents (73%) surveyed are satisfied with the preschool education their children are receiving. 22% of respondents were ambivalent, while 5% of the respondents were dissatisfied and very dissatisfied.

	Response Percent
Very satisfied	13%
Satisfied	60%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	22%
Dissatisfied	4%
Very dissatisfied	1%

	The operator of the centre that your child has enrolled is:				
	PAP Community Foundation	NTUC First Campus	Linked to faith-based organisations	Non-profit organisations	Private operators
Very Satisfied & Satisfied	62%	70%	76%	80%	75%

Q9 Overall, how satisfied are you with Singapore's preschool sector in term of its accessibility, affordability and quality?

About one in four of the respondents were very satisfied or very satisfied. 36% were ambivalent, while more than one third of respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

	Response Percent
Very satisfied	2%
Satisfied	26%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	36%
Dissatisfied	29%
Very dissatisfied	8%

Q10 What do you think can be done to improve preschools in Singapore? (Parents were asked to choose more than one option)

The list of actions for improvements in Singapore preschools ranked in order of the strength of the respondents' choice:

	Response Percent
Increase government subsidies to help parents	71%
Raise the qualifications, pay and status of preschool teachers	66%
Regulate preschool fees	60%
Provide free preschool education for all	36%
Increase awareness of what preschool education is about	34%
Provide free preschool education for the needy	29%
More parental education programmes	28%

Some of the parents' suggestions on improving the preschool sector:

Parent 'G' – Smoother transition to P1, more level playing field, regulate fees and reduce teacher-child ratio

"(1) More specific alignment between preschools and primary schools/MOE so that there is more uniformity in expectations as to what exactly is needed to prepare a child for the next stage of education. The entire education system should be aligned/seamless, so as to prevent differing degrees of "preparedness" of kindergarten children for the next stage of education. The transparency as to what is to be expected will lead to a more level playing field and ease the anxiety of parents and help preschools prepare their curriculum and temper their expectations of our children more accurately.

(2) Fees ought to be regulated. I am not sure how sustainable it is for the government to give free preschool but at least something should be done to keep the fees more uniform and controlled. When looking for a preschool for my children, I rang some 25 preschools and the fees ranged from approximately \$250/month to \$2000/month. The broad range is simply ridiculous and did not necessarily mean the costly option had better curriculum/teacher-to-child ratio/facilities.

(3) Teacher-to-children ratio set by MOE is also too high and ought to be reduced to 1:5 or 1:7 at most. Children at preschool age and honestly, even in primary school, would do so much better with more attention from their teachers and small group learning."

Parent 'H' – Regulate fees, provide direct government subsidies or rebates to preschool operators, give guidelines for P1 preparations, flexi work arrangements for preschool teachers

"1) Ensure that the schools do not increase their fees when there is an increase in subsidy (even though the school will probably use the excuse that it is due to rising costs).

2) If rising cost is really a problem for schools, maybe schools can make tax free purchases of school equipment and material, or the government can provide some financial support/rebates to preschools to offset GST in their purchases. If the schools are unable to pay the teachers better as it would add to costs, maybe the government can cover the shortfall (there of course needs to be some kind of regulation to figure out what is an appropriate amount and to ensure no abuse of this policy by schools).

3) There needs to be oversight on the curriculum. It needs to be established what really needs to be learnt by Primary 1 (at the same time ensuring that Pri 1 expectations are not unreasonable and are age appropriate). If parents are assured that their children learn what is needed for Primary 1, AND, arguably more importantly, their children are encouraged to be lifelong learners who ENJOY the learning process, then it could be a step towards reducing the seemingly nationwide itch for enrichment classes.

4) There needs to be more flexible work options for preschool teachers. Many teachers are mothers themselves and will need the flexibility for their own children. Teachers who are mothers of school children tend to be good teachers of other children, but they are needed in their own homes. Make it conducive for them to stay in the workforce in their chosen industry."

Q11 Do you think kindergarten classes should be made a part of Singapore's public education system, like primary education?

72% of respondents were of the opinion that kindergarten classes should be made part of Singapore's public education system. 17% disagreed and 11% had no comment.

Parent 'I' suggested public preschool education for 0-6 year olds

"I believe that preschool education should always be a public good. It should also serve children from birth to 6 years. Most times, we tend to cater to 5-6 years because it is the year before primary school, though what we believe based on neuroscience that the age before 3 is important. Teachers who teach the lower age group should be properly trained, get the pay and status they deserved...I would like the stakeholders to consider making the early years, not just the kindergarten years a public good for all parents. It should be a holistic sector and not fragmented."

-ENDS-