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Best teachers for the weak

Peg bonuses to number of students they turn around, make brightest teach in weakest schools

Letter from Tang Li

I WAS delighted to read Chng Hee Kok's letter, "More help for less well known schools," (Jan 26). The letter underlines one of the key issues we face – growing inequality.

How did this happen? Singapore is a meritocracy. We have to accept that some people are more capable than others and so they get ahead faster. Successful people, as Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew rightly pointed out, are more likely to provide conditions to raise successful children.

Look at the virtuous cycle for our elite schools. They attract children from successful families that value education. This leads to good academic results and funding to invest in facilities and teachers. This leads to higher enrolment of children from successful families.

This system has served Singapore by producing a competent leadership class. However, Singapore only has its human resources and it has been pointed out that our talent pool is limited. Having a capable elite class is good but to sustain our prosperity, we need to widen the talent pool rather than concentrate it. To do this, we need to invest in "average" schools.

The usual response to this would be: Give neighbourhood schools more money. However, more money is bound to be wasted if such schools do not have the culture to nurture success. To create the right culture, you need the academic staff.

Our system currently views good teachers as those who produce good academic results. So, teachers will try to get into the best schools, places where the support of parents is almost assured. Everybody takes notice of the teachers who produce classes with the most A grades.

What few take notice of are the teachers who turn students around. It takes more skill to help a student from a dysfunctional family graduate, than to get an elite student

It takes more skill to help a student from a dysfunctional family graduate, than to get an elite student from a successful family to score an A.

from a successful family to score an A. To encourage teachers who want to be so challenged, we could look at pegging teachers' bonuses to the number of students they turn around. We should also consider making our brightest teachers spend their formative years teaching in the worst-performing schools.

Singapore's schools need more educators like former Xinmin Secondary principals Goh Tong Pak and Lee Hak Boon, who turned the school from a failing neighbourhood institution into an award-winning one. More must be done to lionise such people, to convince young educators their purpose is to make a difference instead of producing As.

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