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Over-reaction to teacher's parking fees, as broader challenges of profession remain unaddressed

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TODAY File Photo

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The Ministry of Education (MOE) could have improved its announcement about teachers having to pay for parking in schools.



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The annual season parking rates, which will be levied from August this year, range from \$720 to \$960 for cars, and from \$123 to \$135 for motorcycles.

However, MOE did not state how many teachers are likely to be affected, or explain if other options were considered.

First, information on the number of teachers who drive or ride to school, perhaps by counting the number of car-park decals issued or by surveying a sample of teachers from primary and secondary schools and junior colleges across the island (and adjusting for school size), would quickly clarify whether a majority of teachers will have to pay the new parking fees.

Second, it was not clear whether policy alternatives were explored. Bearing in mind that it was in 2015 when an Auditor-General's report faulted some schools for allowing their staff members to park for free — practices “tantamount to providing hidden subsidies for vehicle parking” — the MOE has had three years to prepare for the announcement.

In January 2016, economist Donald Low of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, noting that free parking has its opportunity costs, instead mooted the idea of a cash subsidy: “If teachers were given a cash subsidy instead of free parking, some may value the cash more and choose not to drive. This frees up space for other purposes.

Even so, the announcement has been a long time coming, and its general premises — that other civil servants have been paying for their parking, that all five polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education have been charging for parking since October last year, and that the MOE has consulted extensively to set a reasonable parking rate — seem fair. If so, to what extent is the over-reaction to the news justified?

One argument against the parking fees is premised upon the notion that teachers are somehow different — or more important than — their counterparts in the public sector.



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professions and services” which would qualify, and did not justify the criteria for such a determination.

In this vein, another commentary detailed some possible reasons, such as teachers working long hours, helping weaker students, and having to pay for classroom accoutrements out of their own pockets, though still no specific comparisons were made with other professions.

The many exasperated Facebook posts and comments making their rounds feel like a repeat of the same overreaction from a couple of years ago, and they are also essentially variants of what Mr Singh is proposing.

In 2016, a Facebook post by a former teacher — suggesting that “teachers should stop paying for other items out of their own pocket, such as classroom decorations, gifts for students, and lessons they conduct on their own time” — went viral before it was taken down.

Two years later, a similar comment calling on teachers to stop similar practices such as working beyond slated working hours as well as “non-teaching duties and responsibilities” has now been shared widely, too.

Fundamentally, however, these do not question the need for parity throughout the Government, even as the Ministry of Defence begins to charge parking fees at more of its camps and bases.

Given their status and general contributions, teachers are oftentimes applauded as part of the public's rants. Yet imagine the inconsistent outcry if other civil servants had to clock in extra hours or work through the nights, deal with pesky individuals outside their job scopes, and take on extra duties. And then decided to use those as justifications for free parking.

Which is why knowing the number of teachers who drive, and who are therefore affected by the change, would have been a much better start for the MOE, before moving from this issue to a broader range of problems which most teachers



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This has resulted in an over-the-top cacophony of conflicting sentiments, which are neither representative of the more than 34,000 education officers in the country nor constructive for any discourse. Many of these challenges, unfortunately, remain unaddressed.

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