

Every school's a good school? Show, don't tell

Principals should dive back into the spotlight to show off what their schools are doing right



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When Education Minister Heng Swee Keat announced last week that secondary schools would no longer be placed in performance bands according to their results, it was hard to see how far this would work in persuading parents that every school is a good school.

Most of us want our children in what we think are good primary schools, so they will have the best chance of getting into what we believe are the best secondary schools. Then they will be set for life, we hope.

We worry, perhaps needlessly, some more than others. Hence the accounts of bizarre behaviour every year around Primary 1 registration time, when places fill up too fast here, require balloting there, grown people shed tears of joy or frustration and the unhappy demand even more admission rules.

Clearly, many aren't convinced that any primary school will do.

The same is true when children move on to secondary school, although by now parents face a reality check in the form of the Primary School Leaving Examination score, which determines which doors are open and which are shut.

Everybody knows that some secondary schools are superior to others, some are very good and some... well, let's just say they aren't anyone's first choice.

Such perceptions are not new. Even before secondary schools were ranked by their O-level results in the 1990s, people could name Singapore's top 10 or 20 schools as well as the ones to avoid.

And after intense criticism led the Education Ministry to replace ranking with placing groups of schools in bands, we still knew that all schools were not equal. So how much will change now that the bands are history, too?

When it comes to choosing secondary schools, most children go to the schools that will take them depending on their PSLE scores. The main question is: What's the cut-off?

So I'm not optimistic that removing the bands will make entrenched perceptions go away soon, though Mr Heng also announced several other measures to put children first and reduce an unhealthy emphasis on grades.

I wish, though, that the minister wasn't the only one selling the idea that every school is a good school.

Where are all our principals?

I don't know when or why this happened, but somewhere along the line Singapore's school principals became invisible.

There was a time, back in the 1980s and 1990s, when many principals were identified with their schools and were almost household names. Some were in mission or clan-run schools, others in government schools and neighbourhood schools.

If there was an issue in the news about education, schools or teenagers, they could be counted upon to give their views and share an enlightening anecdote or two.

In the 1980s, there was also something called the Schools Council, which met regularly with reporters present, to thrash out major upcoming changes in education.

For those interested in education and schools, this was prime-time action. We got to see principals speaking their minds,

agreeing or disagreeing with the ministry's top brass; it was an education for everyone.

Then something changed. Even as the top ministry people took to describing principals as chief executive officers of their schools, Singapore's principals quietened down and vanished.

I did a quick check the other day and asked who could name the principals of Raffles Institution, St Joseph's Institution, Singapore Chinese Girls' School, Bukit Panjang Government High, Anderson Secondary, Tanjong Katong Girls' School and Xin Min Secondary. Nobody I asked could name even one.

Once, all these schools and many others had principals who were regularly in the public eye, prepared to share their views on issues of the day if approached.

It wasn't a calmer season in the education scene then. In fact, there was a big and sometimes emotional debate over the idea that some secondary schools were so much better than other that they deserved to be freed to run independently, unfettered by ministry rules.

As a reporter, I visited Raffles Institution when it was off Grange Road. The principal strode through the corridors pointing out how crummy the premises were, the classrooms furnished with the most basic old desks and chairs.

The boys who come to this school deserve so much better, he declared. They should have better classrooms, better programmes, better teachers, because this school draws boys whose PSLE scores say they are the brightest in Singapore.

Mr Eugene Wijesingha was unapologetic because it was all true, and he believed that Singapore's premier boys' school should go independent to become even better.

Many years later, I was in a group of parents and ministry officials who visited a Yishun secondary school that was no RI. Its premises were tip-top, but you could tell quickly that it had many students in the Normal Academic and Normal Technical streams.

In a presentation for the visitors, there was a mini fashion parade by a group of girls wearing their own

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ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

Northbrooks Secondary School in Yishun offers a wide selection of CCAs, such as guzheng (top) and floorball (above). Its teachers make the effort to bring out the best in students. But how many parents know what a terrific school it is?

creations, and a boy in white distributed sample menus and told us his dream was to be a chef.

The teachers present beamed throughout; it wasn't easy, but they had helped these children uncover talents to use well.

There was more. In one corner of the ground floor, the school's resident hairdresser waited shyly for the visitors. He was a boy who had been somewhat withdrawn until a teacher discovered his secret interest in hairdressing.

One thing led to another and the school set up a salon for him. How he thrived in his space, never short of clients with unkempt hair to be trimmed or coloured hair that needed returning to black.

I had not heard of Northbrooks Secondary before that visit. If you had been there that day and if you had a son or daughter whose PSLE score put this school on his list of

choices, you would have seen a terrific place where teachers worked extremely hard with the children who came their way.

Principal Helen Chong assured me last week that there has been no let-up in her teachers' efforts and students are now sent on job attachments that are making a big difference.

How would parents know about the many other schools like Northbrooks if principals are invisible, publicity-shy and prefer to keep their heads down until an official showcases what they do?

When it's the minister who says that every school is a good school, the cynics will mumble: "Yeah, right. Would you send your children to any school?"

If principals are CEOs of their schools, they should grab this opportunity to show that "Every School A Good School" is not just

another line from a ministry with an uncanny knack for producing acronyms and slogans for everything it does.

We need principals with public-relations savvy, even a dash of larger-than-life showmanship like some of their predecessors, proud to show off their schools and confident to speak their minds about matters they know best.

Who better to shed light on so many issues from tuition, homework and tests to school stress, troubled teenagers, underage sex, computer gaming addiction and more?

Who better to show how well schools are run, how teachers put students first and that educators care about the issues that keep parents and counsellors up at night?

To persuade parents that every school's a good school, show, don't tell.

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