



The Early Advantage

Singapore System at a Glance

Demographics

In 2017, there were a total of 388,228 children aged 0 to 9 (187,653 aged 0 to 4 and 200,575 aged 5 to 9) in the resident population, or about 10 percent of the total population. This represents a slight decline from 2010 levels. Of the 0-9 group, 68.52 percent were Chinese, 16.94 percent were Malay, 10.63 percent were Indian, and 3.91 percent were “other” ethnic group. Malays are recognized as the indigenous community. A growing number of children are of mixed parentage, having parents from mixed ethnic or racial groups.

Support for Children and Families

Under a 2008 law, the Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood Package, the Singapore government established a number of entitlements to support families. These include the Baby Bonus Scheme, which comprises a cash gift of SIN\$8,000 (US\$5,760) per child for first and second child and SIN\$10,000 (US\$7,200) per child for the third child onwards. The package also includes the Child Development Account (CDA), which provides dollar-for-dollar matches by the government to a savings account that can be used for child care, preschool, and medical expenses. In addition to these entitlements, working mothers are entitled to 16 weeks of paid maternity leave and working fathers can take up to two weeks of paid paternity leave; working mothers also receive tax benefits. To support children’s health, all Singapore citizen newborns born on or after 1 January 2015 qualify for the enhanced SIN\$4,000 (US\$2,880) Medisave Grant for newborns. This grant helps parents defray the costs of their child’s health care expenses. The government also created a Medisave Maternity Package, which parents can use for delivery expenses and pre-delivery medical expenses. Medisave is a mandatory savings account in which individuals put aside between 8-10.5% of their monthly income to meet family health care expenses; savings can also be used to pay for the national health insurance plan, MediShield Life. The government provides subsidies to reduce health insurance premiums for low-income families.

Enrollment in ECEC

Kindergartens provide educational programs for children from approximately 3 to 6 years of age. Child care centers provide child care and education for children between 18 months and 6 years. Some centers may also provide infant care programs for infants between 2 and 18 months. The number of children attending preschool has surged in the last decade, as slots have expanded. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of available places in child care centers more than doubled, from 62,911 to 143,468, and child

enrollment increased from 50,290 to 108,351; conversely, enrollment in kindergarten decreased from approximately 82,000 to 59,620, because parents chose to enroll children in child care centers, which provide full-day care. While enrollment of children up to the age of 2 is relatively low (21 percent), this increases dramatically to 69 percent for Nursery 1 (the year children turn 3), and is between 89-91 percent for all subsequent years. Compulsory schooling begins at age 7.

Service Providers

Center-based care and education is provided for children from 2 months to 6 years of age. With the exception of a small but expanding number of government kindergartens, all provision is in the private sector (government-supported, non-profit, and for-profit centers). The government administers two funding programs—the Anchor Operator Scheme, for center-based care, and the Partner Operator Scheme, for child and infant-care operators—that provide funding to centers that agree to keep fees low and invest in improving quality and professional development.

Governance

Historically, direct responsibility for ECEC fell under the charge of two ministries: the Ministry of Education (MOE), which oversaw policy and management of kindergartens, and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports (MCYS), now the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), which had responsibility for child care regulation and policies. In 2013, the government created a new agency, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), to coordinate oversight over ECEC. ECDA reports to both the MOE and the MSF.

Finance

In 2012, government funding to the ECEC sector was doubled to S\$605 million (US\$439 million), or 0.2 percent of GDP, less than the OECD average of 0.8 percent of GDP, and in 2017 the Prime Minister announced that annual government spending in the ECEC sector will again double, from S\$605 million to S\$1.2 billion (US\$439 million to US\$870 million), by 2023. The government administers grant programs to providers to maintain quality and keep parents' fees relatively low. The government also provides means-tested subsidies to working parents for child care and kindergarten, which are available to families earning up to S\$5,400 (US\$3920) per month, which is higher than the median income.

Regulation of ECE

The government has developed curriculum frameworks for children aged 2 months to 3 years (Early Years Development Framework; EYDF) and for children aged 4 to 6 (Nurturing Early Learners Kindergarten Curriculum Framework; NEL). Both frameworks are suggested guidelines to educators; centers are not mandated to adhere to them. The government inspects centers and kindergartens to monitor compliance with regulations, staff qualification and continued professional development,

management of the center, children’s physical well-being, and curriculum program. Inspection does not monitor child learning outcomes, parental satisfaction, financial stability, or value for money. ECDA may also use the inspection data to impose sanctions for those in breach of regulations. Data from inspections are not publicly available to parents or the media, or on the internet. Under the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK), centers are also monitored and accredited. Accreditation is voluntary, although Anchor and Partner operators are encouraged to seek accreditation; as of November 2017, 40 percent of preschools in Singapore had attained SPARK certification. There is no accreditation program for programs serving children 0-3.

Teacher Quality

The recently adopted SkillsFuture framework, which outlines the qualifications for a broad range of occupations in Singapore, has set criteria for ECEC professionals as well. Although the government provides scholarships for ECEC teachers to pursue bachelor’s degrees, a degree is not required. Educators, who work with children aged 2 months to 4 years, are required to have an accredited Certificate, which typically requires eight to 13 months’ equivalent of full time study and includes approximately 240 practicum hours. Teachers, who work with children 18 months to 4 or 6 years, depending on their qualifications and experience, are required to complete of a Diploma, which typically requires 18 months’ full time study and approximately 300 practicum hours. Becoming a Leader requires additional professional qualifications. In January 2019, the Ministry of Education will set up the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC), housed at the National Institute of Education (NIE). NIEC will offer Certificate-level and Diploma-level Pre-Employment Training (PET) courses for post-secondary students, Continuous Education and Training (CET) courses for mid-careerists, and in-service upgrading and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses to further develop the competencies of in-service teachers and leaders.

Starting salaries for ECEC professionals are comparable to those for primary school teachers who hold a Diploma in Education (DipEd), which range from SIN\$1,300 to SIN\$1,520 (US\$944 to US\$1,104) per month. However, starting salaries for ECEC professionals are significantly lower than primary school teachers holding a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) or a Bachelor’s Degree, or about 75 percent of teachers, who typically have a starting salary of around SIN\$2,240 to SIN\$2,530 (US\$1,626 to US\$1,837) per month. Because the sector is primarily private, salaries may vary considerably across providers. There are three career tracks for ECEC: the Educator track, the Teaching track, and the Leadership track. Educators move up these tracks based on competencies and experience.