

# Chapter 4

## LIMITED DECENTRALIZATION IN THE SINGAPORE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on decentralization initiatives that have taken place in the Singapore education system over the past two decades. These include the encouragement of greater school autonomy through the independent schools scheme, the autonomous schools scheme, and school clusters. Another initiative has been the promotion of aggressive inter-school competition through the annual publication of school ranking league tables and the institution of school quality awards. This sort of competition is supposed to promote diversity and choice and to improve overall educational standards. The chapter begins by discussing the goals of the various initiatives and proceeds to analyze their impact.

The Singapore case exemplifies the tensions between moves to decentralize authority and control to schools, on the one hand, and government decisions that reassert the centrality of government authority and control. It appears that schools are being awarded autonomy to decide how best to attain state-determined outcomes for the entire education system. Given the heavy emphasis placed on the school system's contributions toward improving national economic competitiveness and fostering social cohesion, the Singapore government is far from willing to allow schools full and complete autonomy.

### 2. INCREASED AUTONOMY FOR SCHOOLS

During the British colonial administration of Singapore from 1819 to 1959, educational provision was left predominantly in the hands of enterprising individuals, missionary bodies, or private organizations, with occasional government grants. Schools operated in one of four languages—English, Malay, Chinese, or Tamil—and differed in terms of curricula, management, and overall goals. Interest in educational matters among the various colonial governors varied according to individual temperament and according to the strength of beliefs held by the incumbent Director of Education. Political considerations also influenced official policy. For example, in the wake of anti-Japanese activities by students from Chinese-medium schools, the Registration of Schools Ordinance of 1920 called for the registration of schools, teachers, and managers, and attempted to regulate the conduct of schools. It also outlawed all schools that promoted ideas considered to conflict with the interests of the government. The government began offering financial aid to community-run

Chinese-medium schools in 1923. In return, the schools had to submit themselves to official inspections.

The first attempt to design educational policies that related to clearly defined goals came in the form of the Ten Years Program, which was adopted in 1947. Two of the general principles underlying the policy were the need for education to foster the capacity for self-government and for education to inculcate civic loyalty and responsibility. The Program also outlined plans to provide universal free primary education and a common curriculum for all ethnic groups. This policy was promulgated against the backdrop of increasing recognition by the colonial government that self-government for the colony was on the horizon.

In the wake of growing politicization of students in Chinese-medium schools and their involvement in labor unrest, the newly-installed Legislative Assembly commissioned an All-Party Committee in 1955 to study Chinese-medium education. The government responded to the Committee Report by issuing a White Paper on Education the following year that endorsed many of the Committee's recommendations. One of these was that all four language streams of education—English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil—were to receive equal treatment. Another recommendation was that all government and government-aided schools were to be treated equally in terms of financial grants, conditions of service, and salaries. In addition, common curricula and syllabuses were to be established for all schools.

Following on the heels of the White Paper, the 1957 Education Ordinance included provisions for the registration of schools, managers, and teachers, and provisions governing the role and responsibilities of school management committees. The Ordinance was followed by regulations that gave government and government-aided schools equal funding, and stated that staff qualifications and salaries and fees should be the same in both types of school. Government-aided schools were to adhere to standards comparable to those in government schools in terms of physical facilities, student attainment, and student discipline and behavior. In addition, the Director of Education was given control over staff recruitment and dismissal in all schools.

This marked the beginning of the move toward a highly centralized system of education. Upon coming to power as the first fully elected government in 1959, the People's Action Party stated its view of education as a key means of providing skilled manpower for industrialization. Over the next decade, subject syllabuses and educational structures were standardized across the various language streams of schooling, and common terminal examinations at both primary and secondary levels were instituted. At the same time, various attempts were made to promote a sense of national identity in all schools. These included the institution of daily flag-raising and lowering ceremonies, the singing of the national anthem, the recitation of the loyalty pledge, and civics curricula.

By the early 1980s, the tide of centralization had begun to turn. In 1982 the then Director of Schools, John Yip, announced that the Education Ministry wanted to decentralize educational management from the Ministry headquarters to the schools. He listed several benefits of decentralization. First, it would encourage greater efficiency. Principals and teachers would be stimulated to become innovative and creative. Students would be the ultimate beneficiaries of principals' strong educational leadership. Secondly, decisions on how to meet students' diverse needs were best

made by individual schools rather than by the Ministry. Yip noted, however, that the Ministry would continue to maintain sufficient centralized control and supervision in order to ensure uniform standards. Furthermore, principals would continue to be accountable to the Ministry through regular inspections.

A major boost to the idea of freeing schools from centralized control was given by the then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1985. He spoke of the need to allow more autonomy within schools (including the right to appoint staff, devise school curricula, and choose textbooks), while conforming to national education policies such as bilingualism and common examinations. Goh asserted that prestigious schools had lost some of their individuality and special character through centralized control. He thought that principals and teachers should now be allowed greater flexibility and independence to experiment with new ideas.

Goh's sentiment was echoed the following year by the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who felt that government domination of educational provision meant a lack of competition and diversity. At the end of 1986, 12 school principals were invited to accompany the then Education Minister to study the management of 25 "acknowledged successful schools" in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and see what lessons could be learned for Singapore. The principals' report recommended greater autonomy for selected schools in order to "stimulate educational innovation" and to allow schools "to respond more promptly to the needs and aspirations of pupils and parents" (Ministry of Education, 1987, p. ix).

Accepting the recommendations, Education Minister Tony Tan stated that several well-established schools would be allowed to become independent schools. They would be given autonomy and flexibility in staff deployment and salaries, finance, management, and the curriculum. These schools were to serve as role models for other schools in improving the quality of education. They would also help to set the market value for good principals and teachers by recruiting staff in a competitive market. Parents, teachers, and students would enjoy a wider variety of schools to choose from.

In 1987, three well-established boys' secondary schools announced their intention to go independent in 1988. Their applications for independent status were approved by the Education Ministry. They were followed a year later by two prestigious government-aided girls' secondary schools. To date, a total of eight secondary schools, all of which are well-established and prestigious, have become independent.

All of the independent schools are academically selective. This setting aside of high-performing students in a few selected schools is consistent with the Singapore government's well-entrenched elitist philosophy (Milne & Mauzy, 1990). The independent schools scheme may be viewed as part of an attempt by the government to foster creativity and innovation in the citizenry, a theme lent special urgency ever since the 1985–1986 economic recession. It is also part of an attempt to pass a greater proportion of the costs of operating social services such as education and health to the public (Low, 1994). The policy aims to lessen government subsidies and to make Singaporeans more self-reliant. The government has been careful to avoid using the term "privatization" with its connotations of "profit-making." Its position is that the government will continue to subsidize basic education, but that the public will have to help bear the cost of high quality education.

What is interesting is that existing education subsidies are not straining the government's budget, as it continues to enjoy healthy budgetary surpluses and to invest heavily in education. These subsidies amount to 98% of recurrent expenditures in non-independent secondary schools. In fact, the independent schools are by no means financially independent of the government. On the contrary, they remain heavily dependent financially on government subsidies. For instance, the government provides these schools with annual per capita grants equivalent to the average cost of educating secondary students. The Singapore case thus presents a contrast with other countries where decentralization has resulted from financial stringency on the part of governments.

Right from the introduction of the independent schools scheme, there was intense public criticism over its elitist nature and the high fees charged by the schools. In the wake of the 1991 general elections, which saw the governing party returned to power with a reduced parliamentary majority, the government took steps to defuse public criticism of the scheme. First, it limited the number of independent schools, thus reversing its earlier announcement that it wanted to see more schools turn independent. Another step was the establishment in 1994 of a new category of schools called autonomous schools. In the first 3 years, 18 existing non-independent secondary schools, all of which had outstanding academic results, were designated as autonomous schools. These schools receive 10% more in annual per capita government grants than non-autonomous schools. They are supposed to provide a high quality education while charging more affordable fees than independent schools. Parents and students will thus have a wider range of choices.

The Ministry of Education announced in early 2000 its intention to allow about 25% of all secondary schools to become autonomous schools. These schools must have a track record of outstanding academic results, well-rounded education programs, and strong community ties. The principals of autonomous schools will be allowed discretion to admit up to 5% of their students on the basis of demonstrated talent in specific niche areas, such as sports or the arts (Teo, 2000). Between the years 2001 and 2005, another seven schools joined the autonomous schools scheme. In a departure from previous practice, these seven autonomous schools have applied to the Education Ministry for autonomous status instead of having autonomous school status thrust upon them.

To date, both the independent schools scheme and autonomous schools scheme have been confined to the secondary sector. A further move to extend autonomy to primary schools, secondary schools, and junior colleges (offering 2 years of pre-university schooling) has been the introduction of school clusters. The first clusters were piloted on an experimental basis in 1997. Every single school is now a member of a cluster. There are now a total of 28 clusters, each of which contains between 10 and 14 schools. Some clusters consist entirely of primary schools, while the others contain a mix. Each cluster is headed by a superintendent, whom the Education Ministry provides with an annual budget for teacher development and the purchase of teaching resources. The superintendents are supposed to lead school principals in pooling resources and discussing strategies to address common concerns.

The results of increased school autonomy have been mixed. The principals of independent schools have enjoyed greater flexibility in decision-making in a

few respects. First, a few independent schools have recruited additional full-time administrators, such as public relations officers, estate managers, and bursars. In the mid-1990s each non-independent school was allowed to hire one school administrator and operations manager to assist the principal in carrying out administrative duties. Beginning in the year 2000, each non-independent school principal was permitted to hire an additional school administrator or operations manager, and apply for a monthly grant of around S\$2,000 to purchase administrative services from privately run agencies.

Second, unlike non-independent schools, the independent schools are run by school governing boards that may determine admission policies, school fees, and major financial policies and budgets. Third, all the eight independent schools have raised their fees to levels far above those charged by non-independent schools. Finally, they are able to determine their own student admission figures, a privilege denied to non-independent schools.

However, it is still clear that the Ministry of Education continues to wield considerable control over the independent schools. The School Boards (Incorporation) Act of 1990 provided for the establishment of governing boards in independent schools. All appointments to governorship have to be approved by the Education Minister. The Minister may also vary or revoke individual governing board constitutions, or appoint the Director of Education to take over the running of schools. The latter provision has been invoked twice in the case of an independent school, The Chinese High School, once in 1997 and again in 1999. On both occasions, factional squabbles among governing board members resulted in the Minister appointing new governing board members.

The independent schools have also exercised greater control in curriculum. For instance, several independent schools have scrapped subjects that are compulsory in non-independent schools or have made certain other subjects non-examinable. Teacher recruitment is another area in which the independent schools have taken advantage of their increased autonomy by recruiting as many teachers as their finances will allow. The schools have thus improved their teacher–student ratios vis-à-vis their non-independent counterparts.

In some other respects, however, the degree of choice and diversity is still rather limited. The government still exerts a great deal of influence over all secondary schools. In particular, the imposition of national curricular requirements and the pressures imposed by common national examinations restrict the scope for curricular innovation. None of the independent schools or autonomous schools have moved away from a subject-based curriculum. In addition, the range of subjects offered in these schools is largely identical to that in non-independent, non-autonomous schools. As long as principals are held accountable for their schools' performance in national examinations, they cannot afford to stray too far from the mainstream curriculum. None of the independent schools or autonomous schools are allowed to stray from key national policy initiatives, such as Thinking Schools Learning Nation (which is aimed at promoting critical and creative thinking skills), the Information Technology Masterplan, and National Education (which is aimed at fostering a sense of national identity).

A second major factor inhibiting innovation is conservatism and resistance to change among some Education Ministry officials. Such attitudes often prove

frustrating for school principals who desire greater autonomy from Ministry control, as manifested in this statement by the principal of an independent school:

So the system on the one hand allows it [autonomy], on the other hand chokes it. . . . There's a gap here. You've got the rules in the middle, on one side. You've got the people interpreting them. . . . You've got the school principal, who's got to abide by the rules and be inspected by the inspector who works for the rules, because he's accountable to his bosses. So if this principal doesn't observe that rule fully, the inspector's got to account for that principal and give the answer up here. . . . And yet the Director on top is saying, "But if you read the rules, they've [referring to school principals] got a lot of freedom.

(Tan, 1996, p. 218)

There are thus tensions between centralizing tendencies in the Ministry, on the one hand, and the desire by some principals to exercise their professional judgment on the other hand. Two boys' independent schools, The Chinese High School and the Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), had in the early 1990s expressed their desire to break away from the national General Certificate of Education (Ordinary) Level examinations conducted jointly by the Education Ministry and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. Their attempts were repeatedly blocked by Ministry of Education officials (Tan, 1996). At the end of the year 2001, both schools finally found support for their proposals when the Education Minister said that his Ministry would consider allowing top-performing students a greater range of assessment options. At about the same time, the Prime Minister announced that the government might allow the establishment of private schools to encourage diversity and innovation in teaching methods (Goh, 2001). Although they could be totally independent of the Education Ministry, they would still be required to teach core subjects. The principal of The Chinese High School promptly expressed interest in turning his school private, and hoped that the school could continue to receive financial subsidies from the government.

A prominent Ministry of Education report on the reform of the upper secondary and junior college education was published in 2002. Subsequently, a number of prominent secondary schools (including five of the eight independent schools) and junior colleges have been allowed to offer "integrated programs" (that is, programs that allow top-performing students to bypass the national General Certificate of Education "Ordinary" Level examinations). One of these secondary schools, the Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), has finally been allowed to break new ground, becoming the first mainstream school to offer an alternative qualification, the International Baccalaureate, to its students. These efforts have been officially applauded as lending greater diversity to the local education landscape.

This report also endorsed the establishment of specialized independent schools. Since then, the Singapore Sports School and the National University of Singapore Mathematics and Science High School have begun admitting secondary students. The latter school has promised its students a wider range of qualifications beyond the conventional General Certificate of Education examinations. Both these schools have been made associate members of existing school clusters.

Another recommendation in the 2002 report was to establish a few privately-funded secondary schools to add choice and diversity for students and parents. Two such schools began classes in 2005. However, they have to adhere to Ministry of Education guidelines on National Education, daily flag-raising and national anthem rituals, a minimum 50% Singaporean student enrolment, and the study of ethnic languages. These measures are to ensure that “all Singapore students continue to learn and interact with one another in an environment that nurtures a Singaporean spirit and character” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 61).

### 3. INCREASED COMPETITION AMONG SCHOOLS

A major feature of Singapore education over the past decade, and one that has gone hand in hand with the granting of increased autonomy to schools, has been the intensification of competition between schools. Besides improving the quality of education, competition is supposed to provide parents and students with a wider range of choices and to improve accountability by forcing schools to improve their programs (Goh, 1992). This competition has been fostered in various ways. For instance, all secondary schools and junior colleges have been publicly ranked on an annual basis since 1992 and the results have been published in the various local newspapers. The official justification is that parents and students must be provided with better information in order to make intelligent and informed choices (Goh, 1992; Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 64, March 1, 1995, Col. 27). Secondary schools have been ranked on three main criteria. The first of these is a composite measure of students’ overall results in the annual General Certificate of Education (Ordinary) Level examinations. The second measure evaluates schools’ value-addedness by comparing students’ examination performance with their examination scores upon entry to their respective schools. The third criterion is a weighted index that measures a school’s performance in the National Physical Fitness Test as well as the percentage of overweight students in the school.

The promotion of inter-school competition and the pressures on schools that result from the ranking of schools have led many principals to engage in marketing activities. These include recruitment talks, the design and distribution of brochures, the screening of promotional videos, and the courting of the press in order to highlight school achievements. Even primary schools are engaging in these activities, with principals reaching out to parents of kindergarten students.

The introduction of explicit measures to promote competition among schools has aroused a great deal of controversy and criticism, both within and outside the governing party. For instance, in 1992 the then Senior Minister of State for Education told Parliament that public ranking of schools in terms of their academic results was “undesirable.” It was “absurd” and “nonsense” to say that one school was ahead of another because of minuscule differences in their overall academic results. It would also increase tension and stress among parents while not improving education for children at all (Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 59, March 13, 1992, Cols. 991–992). However, the results of the first annual ranking exercise were still published 5 months later.

It is highly contestable whether fostering competition does improve the quality of education for all students and promote greater choice and diversity for parents

and students. First of all, the competition among schools does not take place on a level playing field. The terms of competition are to a large extent dictated by the government. For instance, the number of independent schools and autonomous schools is determined by the government. Next, non-independent schools enjoy less flexibility than independent schools in determining their own enrolment figures or the number of teachers that they wish to employ. Furthermore, not all secondary schools may offer certain prestigious programs such as the Gifted Education Program or the Art Elective Program. The government only conducts such programs in selected schools, all of which are either independent or autonomous.

In other words, non-prestigious, non-academically selective schools are simply unable to compete effectively with well-established, academically selective schools. The former are caught in a vicious cycle: because they are unable to attract high academic achievers, their academic results fall far below those of the well-established schools. This in turn means that they remain unable to attract high academic achievers. Analysis of the ranking results for secondary schools over the last 12 years reveals that the majority of the top 30 secondary schools have remained in this category throughout the 12 years. It is therefore questionable to what extent increased competition actually helps to improve standards in all schools.

The government has claimed that the independent schools and autonomous schools will serve as role models for other schools in improving educational standards. This of course raises the question of whether what proves effective in these well-established schools can in fact be transplanted into other schools. The government's reasoning also ignores the part played by a selective student intake in schools' academic success (see for instance, Thrupp, 1998). It is therefore not clear to what extent the experience of independent schools and autonomous schools can be valid lessons for the bulk of Singapore secondary schools, struggling with less-than-ideal student ability and motivational levels.

Another criticism is that competition leads some schools to focus narrowly on those outcomes that are relevant for public ranking and that may be useful for attracting students and parents (see for instance, Reay, 1998, for a discussion of the situation in England). Such a criticism is especially relevant in a situation such as Singapore where performance in competitive examinations is still a major determinant of educational and social mobility. There has been press coverage of how several reputable secondary schools have decided to make the study of English literature optional rather than compulsory for their graduating students. This is because English literature is perceived to be a subject in which it is difficult to do well during national examinations. These schools have been wary of the potential consequences that students' less-than-ideal performance in English literature might have on their positions in the annual ranking exercises (Nirmala, 1997; Nirmala & Mathi, 1995). It is particularly ironic, then, that these strategies were being employed even as the Minister for Information and the Arts was extolling the virtues of the subject to students (De Souza, 1998). Even physical education has not been exempt from the adverse effects of ranking exercises. Some schools have over-emphasized preparation for the National Physical Fitness Test at the expense of the acquisition of skills in sports and games.

The growing stress on school accountability and the use of narrowly defined, easily quantifiable performance indicators has clearly had a detrimental impact on



some schools. Far from promoting choice and diversity, heightened inter-school competition and rivalry may in fact work against these goals. Cluster superintendents will find it difficult to foster intra-cluster cooperation and discussion of strategies to improve academic performance while the various school principals are vying with one another to boost their schools' positions in the school ranking league tables. In this regard, the attempts by two independent schools in the 1990s to break away from the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary) Level examinations may be seen as attempts to also break free from the tyranny imposed by the school ranking league tables. With the advent of the integrated programs in 2004, the schools offering these programs have been left out of the school ranking league tables since their students no longer need to sit for these national examinations. Somewhat oddly enough, what might be viewed as new-found freedom from tyranny of the school ranking league tables has not always been seen in that light by some parents, who have publicly demanded to know how these schools stand vis-à-vis other schools in terms of tangible student outcomes.

Even though an external review team commissioned by the Education Ministry heavily criticized the detrimental aspects of the practice of school ranking exercises in a report published in 1997 (External Review Team, 1997), the Education Ministry refused to consider scrapping the exercises altogether. Subsequently, however, in recognition of the growing public criticism of the practice, the Ministry of Education announced in 2004 that the secondary school ranking league tables would be modified to consist of bands of achievement instead of raw numerical ranks. Furthermore, junior colleges would no longer be publicly ranked.

Another Ministry response to criticism of the narrowness of the ranking exercise has been instead to broaden the range of indicators upon which schools are to be assessed, through the use of the School Excellence Model (SEM). This model, which was implemented in all schools in 2000, is meant to help schools appraise their own performance in various areas, such as leadership, staff management, staff competence and morale, and student outcomes (Ministry of Education, 1999). Beginning in the year 2001, each school was supposed to subject its own internal assessment to external validation by a team headed by staff from the School Appraisal Branch of the Ministry of Education. These validations are to be carried out at least once every 5 years.

Part of the SEM involves the awarding of Achievement Awards, Development Awards, Sustained Achievement Awards, Outstanding Development Awards, Best Practice Awards, School Distinction Awards, and School Excellence Awards to individual schools. Schools that score at least 400 points out of a total of 1,000 during the external validation exercise are encouraged by the Education Ministry to apply for Singapore Quality Class certification by the Productivity and Standards Board. It is arguable that the use of the SEM may result in some schools using more of the same covert strategies that they have been using thus far, this time in a wider spectrum of school processes and activities in order to boost their schools' performance in as many of the aspects that are being assessed as possible. For example, principals may narrow the range of available co-curricular activities in order to focus the schools' resources on those activities that are considered more fruitful in terms of winning awards in inter-school competitions. The use of the SEM continues to ensure that independent schools and autonomous schools, even those offering integrated programs, will not stray too far from official policy dictates and priorities.

Amid this climate of risk-averse behavior, what then are the prospects of wide-ranging and sustained change triggered by wide-ranging policy initiatives, such as the teaching of critical and creative thinking skills, are concerned? Government leaders are united in lamenting the apparent lack of creativity and thinking skills among students and members of the workforce (see for instance, Goh, 1997; Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 53, March 20, 1989, Cols. 550–551; Vol. 55, March 15, 1990, Cols. 310–311). Improving examination scores in the national examinations are beginning to sound less impressive. In this regard, it is ironic that a few months after the Prime Minister had stressed the need to move toward critical thinking skills, a departmental head in a secondary school, when asked by a newspaper journalist about the secret behind her students' examination success, replied that it had taken months of repeated mock examination practice. As a result of at least 12 rounds of practice per subject, students were familiar not only with the examination format but, more importantly, with the examination content as well (Pan, 1997). There is a clear tension between the use of decentralization as a means of freeing schools to be creative and innovative on the one hand, and the concurrent narrowing of diversity that is encouraged by the ever-tightening grip of intense inter-school competition on the other hand.

Another serious consequence of all of this intense competition is a growing hierarchy of schools and social stratification. Schools that were already academically selective have remained so. School principals who wish to maintain or improve their schools' ranking positions need to keep a constant watch on their student intake. The trend of academic selectiveness on the part of top schools will inevitably lead to a further stratification of schools, with the independent schools and autonomous schools at the top and the rest below. Equally worrying is evidence that students from wealthier family backgrounds are over-represented in independent schools (Tan, 1993). The government is well aware of the potential impact of social stratification on social cohesion as well as on its own political legitimacy. However, it claims that it is only right to nurture the more able students as the whole country will ultimately benefit (Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 59, January 20, 1992, Col. 365).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Terms such as choice, competition, innovation, and diversity have now become commonplace in the Singapore education system over the past two decades. The government has attempted to delegate some decision-making authority to school principals through such means as the independent schools scheme, autonomous schools scheme, school clusters, and the Edusave scheme. This chapter has demonstrated that the government continues to exert considerable influence over schools. Not only does it impose national curricular requirements and examinations on all schools, it retains ultimate control over independent schools' governing boards. Intense inter-school competition over the past decade has worked as a powerful centralizing influence on all schools, and has worked against the promotion of diversity and innovation. Schools appear to have been granted greater autonomy so that they might better achieve government-dictated macro-policy objectives and goals. The recent attempts to allow greater curricular diversity through the integrated programs represent limited efforts to break out of the standard mold imposed by the national examinations. Because all the schools offering integrated programs are still subject to the SEM and

to other Ministry of Education policy priorities and dictates, it is likely that their various programs will end up converging to a large degree rather than being genuinely distinctive from one another.

In view of the central roles which the government has assigned to the education system in supporting economic development and fostering social cohesion, it is highly unlikely that centralized control will ever be relaxed. The regulations governing the approval of privately-funded schools bear testimony to this. It may also be argued that there are benefits to having a certain amount of centralized control of schools. One of these is the need to ensure that all children enjoy similar access to a basic general education.

Another detrimental consequence of decentralization and inter-school competition has been their impact on social stratification. However, the government shows no signs of reversing its policies. If anything, it is likely to further encourage competition among schools. This is part of its urging all Singaporeans to constantly “stay ahead of the pack” in terms of global economic competitiveness (Lee, 1994). At the same time, it has urged Singaporeans not to allow “our children to be softened” by the alleged denigration of academic excellence and the promotion of a “soft approach to life” by “liberals in the West” (Goh, 1992). Its response to criticisms of the elitist nature of independent schools has been confused at times. For instance, it has tried to dispel the notion that non-independent schools are inferior to independent schools (Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 63, August 25, 1994, Col. 398). At the same time, though, it has stated that the independent schools are to be developed into “outstanding institutions, to give the most promising and able students an education matching their promise” (Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 59, January 6, 1992, Col. 18).

The Singapore experience with decentralization differs substantially from that in most other countries in one important respect. While financial stringency is a key motivating factor in many cases, the developments in Singapore are taking place against the backdrop of healthy budgetary surpluses and increased government expenditure on education. These spending trends are likely to continue for some time, especially since education is viewed as playing a key role in enhancing national economic competitiveness in the global economy.

It remains to be seen how central policy dilemmas will play out in future. These include the tension between aggressive competition and inter-school collaboration. Another is the balance between conservatism brought about by the yoke of central control, and the quest for genuine diversity and innovation. There is the question of whether major policy initiatives such as the one promoting critical and creative thinking skills will really take off in schools, or whether they will simply fall victim to the intense inter-school competition and fail to take root. Finally, an uneasy co-existence will persist between the government’s elitist philosophy and its claims to provide equal educational opportunity to all Singaporeans.

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