



Supporting teachers key to Singapore's success

OSBA president shares views from visit to one of the world's best school systems

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When I awakened to embark on a 30-hour trip to Singapore, I had no idea my most profound insight as to why that nation's school system had become one of the highest-performing in the world would come before I next slept.

After arriving at my hotel, I was unable to sleep due to the 12-hour time difference, so I switched on the television. On the screen was a public service announcement by the Singaporean government touting the virtues of being a teacher and the importance of teachers to everyone's well-being. Among the messages were:

- "The difference a teacher makes is felt long after the class is over."
- "Teach. You'd be amazed at the difference you can make."
- "Thank you for teaching me. I am a teacher now! You inspired me!"
- "Make a difference. Teach."

Having just left the United States, where teachers are often under-appreciated and under-supported, what I witnessed in my sleep-deprived daze was jarring. Over the next week, I learned that these were not just advertising jingles, but that supporting, not maligning, teachers was the linchpin to Singapore's educational success.

Early in 2012, I was invited to participate in the Global Education Study led by Battelle for Kids. The study's purpose was to engage, observe and learn from educators in five of the highest-performing school systems in the world. I was assigned to the team traveling to Singapore.

How does Singapore consistently achieve such impressive results on international assessments? After much study and observation, I concluded that teacher recruitment, selection,

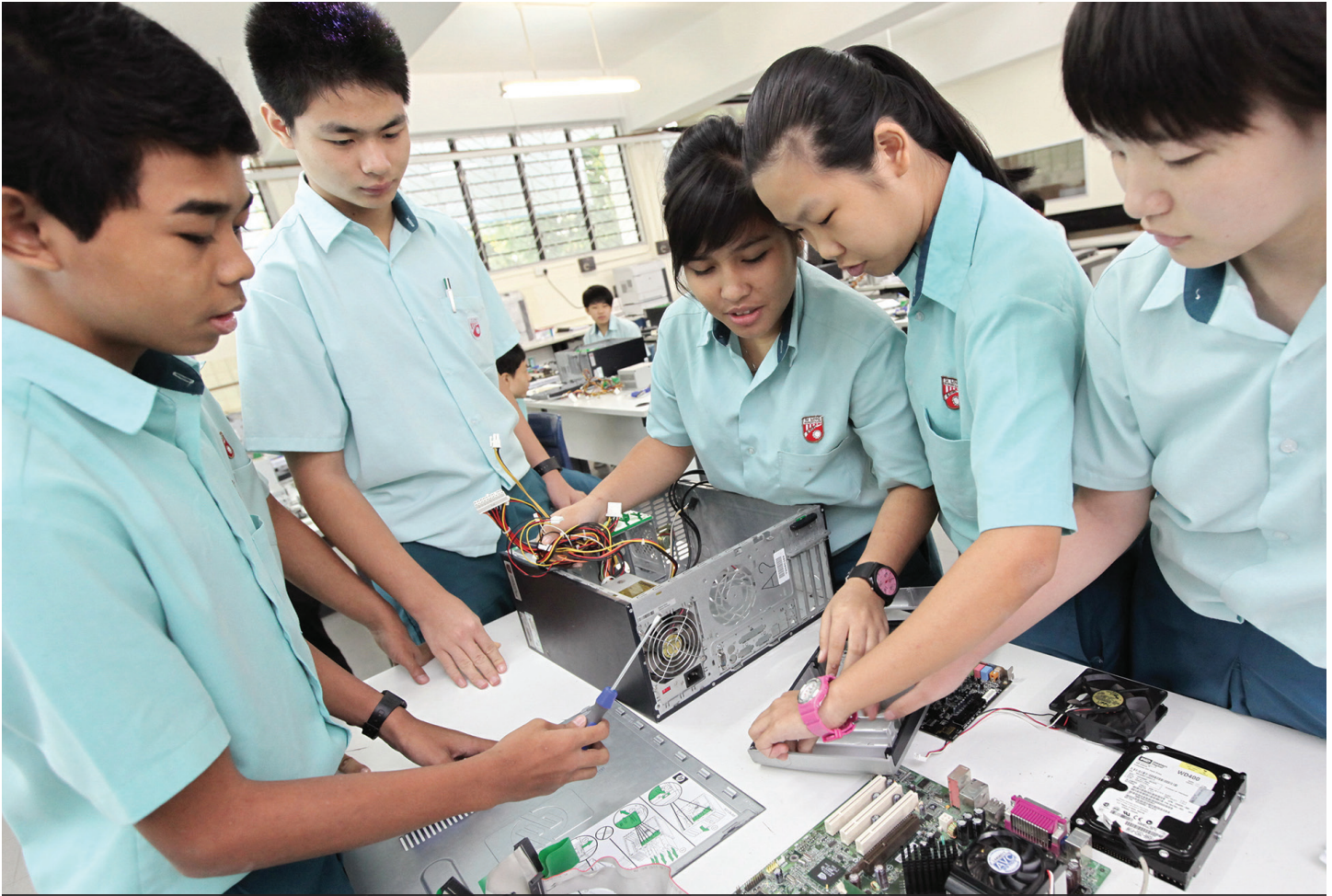
training and professional development are critical to the nation's educational success.

When Singapore achieved independence in 1965, it was a poor, small, tropical island with few natural resources. It had no compulsory education, few schools and not many high school and college graduates. Most of its two million people were illiterate and unskilled. Furthermore, recurring conflict among its numerous ethnic and religious groups was rampant. Race riots were common.

Singapore is committed to eliminating the gap between high- and low-achieving students by leveling up its education system systematically.

Over a 40-year period, Singapore has raised its educational level from one similar to that of most developing countries to one of the best in world. At the beginning of the 1990s, Singapore did not have a high-quality teaching profession. Teaching was not a valued profession and most teachers were poorly paid and ill-trained. Later in the decade, the country's leaders took deliberate policy actions to develop a comprehensive system for selecting, training, compensating and developing teachers and principals.

Prospective teachers are carefully selected from the top one-third of high school graduating classes by panels that include principals and teachers. A strong academic record is essential to being selected, but so are student



Students engage in hands-on learning while working on a computer in a Singapore classroom. With its focus on recruiting, training and supporting high-quality teachers, Singapore boasts one of the leading educational systems in the world.

empathy, a long-term commitment to the profession and a demonstrated desire to serve diverse student bodies.

While in training, pre-service teachers receive a stipend equal to 60% of a teacher's salary. Interest in teaching is seeded early through internships for high school students and deliberate government policies touting the importance of the teaching profession, such as the public service announcement I saw right after I arrived.

All teachers are trained in the Singaporean curriculum at the National Institute of Education (NIE). There is a close working relationship between NIE and schools, and all new teachers are mentored for their first few years. NIE focuses strongly on pedagogical content knowledge.

The Singapore Ministry of Education keeps a close watch on starting salaries and adjusts them for beginning teachers to ensure new graduates see teaching as an attractive occupation. Teaching is regarded as a 12-month position, and there are many other career opportunities within

education for teachers.

Teachers are entitled to 100 hours of professional development each year to enable them to keep up with rapid changes in the world and constantly improve their practice. Each school has ample funds to support teacher growth in a number of ways, including allowing teachers to develop fresh perspectives by going abroad to examine aspects of education in other countries, especially the U.S. Teacher networks and learning circles encourage peer-to-peer learning, and the Academy of Singapore Teachers encourages teachers to continuously share best practices.

By putting its energy into recruiting high-quality people and giving them good training and continuing support, Singapore does not have the massive attrition problems afflicting America's education system. Since the 1990s, teaching in Singapore has developed into a desirable and well-regarded profession. It is considered an honor to be a teacher in Singapore, and teaching is open to only the very best.



Singapore does not use test results and performance evaluations to reward or punish teachers and schools, rather its approach is to concentrate on learning, not assessments. Singapore focuses teachers on student learning, not on testing, so the emphasis is always on what is best for individual students.

The nation is focused on attracting, retaining and rewarding the best teachers; making great use of their skills; and honoring the collaborative nature of work in schools. To accomplish this, Singapore eschews reliance on student test scores. Instead, it has built a system that provides feedback that teachers trust by using multiple measures, primarily classroom observations by experienced colleagues.

Singapore identifies and nurtures talent, then creates systems that encourage and develop fantastic teachers. It believes teachers would not be more motivated or become better teachers by competing with other teachers or receiving differential compensation. To the contrary, Singapore provides teachers with an environment based on collaboration, one in which they can rely on one another to share lesson plans, get advice and understand what works well in other classrooms.

Instead of using differential compensation to encourage teachers to improve, Singapore provides all its teachers with high-quality professional development opportunities; strong, experienced, empathetic school leaders; engaged, supportive families and communities; and the chance to work closely with like-minded colleagues.

Singapore's education system is dedicated to creating feedback and evaluation systems that reflect the patience and involvement of teachers and administrators.

As one Singapore school administrator told me, "Everything comes down to having a teacher feedback and evaluation system grounded in strong relationships and mutual trust." In Singapore, the emphasis is always on collaboration, never on competition.

The Singapore system does not punish schools or teachers for struggling. Instead, if schools or teachers are underperforming, they are given extra help, support and resources — the opposite of punishment — to help them improve.

Finally, Singapore is committed to eliminating the gap between high- and low-achieving students by leveling up its education system systematically. Those efforts are premised on two underlying assumptions: differentiated curriculum and learning experience for weaker students, and equity is about equalizing opportunities, not outcomes.

First, Singapore believes a differentiated curriculum and learning experience — if implemented efficiently by dedicated teachers with all the resources they need — can benefit weaker students. The nation uses a targeted approach toward intervention through a "pull-out program" for weaker students who are taught by specially trained and highly experienced teachers in a class of six to eight students.

Besides being given a differentiated curriculum and learning experience, weaker students receive far more resources than their higher-achieving peers. These additional resources include more experienced and better-trained teachers, small class size, computer literacy classes and better computer labs.

In addition, Singapore is now exploring the possibility that delivering differentiated learning can become more inclusive, like in Finland where inclusive learning experiences bring about qualitative benefits for all students.

The second assumption underlying Singapore's leveling-up efforts is that equity is about equalizing opportunities, not outcomes. The Singaporean approach adopts a pragmatic stance simply because tailoring learning experiences that consider diverse student backgrounds in the hope of equalized outcomes is not practicable.

The educational leveling-up effort is similar to the country's health care industry, where the focus is to provide high-quality, patient-specific health care to all patients, not to equalize outcomes among all patients regardless of their disease or condition.

Singapore understands any system that focuses on equalizing outcomes risks becoming desensitized to the specific needs of different students by being too concerned with the differences in learning outcomes for students or groups of students. Singapore fears that too much focus on differences of outcomes in students or student groups will result in too much attention and blame being attributed to the students, and not to the system itself.

Finally, and most importantly, while Singapore seeks to equalize learning outcomes, it has spent much time grappling with the critical question of whether the definition of "outcomes" can be more embracing, comprehensive and holistic. Singapore realizes that the most important attributes cannot always be measured objectively, precisely or scientifically.

The nation is greatly concerned that if its educational system focuses solely on narrowly defined outcomes based on single-dimension test scores, then it may not be leveling up students with an ability to leverage more opportunities for a fulfilling life in all its dimensions. ■