

Educators hope revamp will lead to mastery of content

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SINGAPORE – With students' performances no longer weighted against their peers, educators TODAY interviewed said the changes to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) would relieve some of the stress in the pressure-cooker education system here.

But whether a less finely differentiated scoring system might lead parents driving their children to stand out in non-academic ways — such as sports — to gain an advantage in admissions, remains to be seen.

Commenting on the changes, to take effect in 2021, Pasir Ris Crest Secondary School principal Balamurugan Krishnasamy said students can now aim for a “broad range of attainments instead of a specific T-score, which has become an obsession over the years”.

Agreeing, Orchid Park Secondary School principal Shawal Hussin said this would reduce the previous “pressure points” of comparing against peers

and chasing the last few marks. Instead, the focus can be on grasping and having a “mastery over content”, and striving towards one's personal best.

The changes to the PSLE system, announced yesterday, will see the end of the T-score aggregate. Instead, exam scores for each subject will fall into one of eight Achievement Levels (ALs), pegged to a number of points. A student's overall PSLE score will be the sum of the ALs scored in all four subjects.

Not fighting for the last few marks would give more time and space for students to explore other areas to broaden their experiences, said Mrs Lay See Neufeld, principal of Damai Primary.

Citing examples like its modular programmes such as in-line skating, hip-hop and coffee art, she said: “While we build literacy, numeracy in our subjects, we also want children to explore and find other interests.”

And with the order of one's school choices to become a new deciding factor in cases where balloting is needed to place students, there would provide “greater impetus and need” for sec-

'MORE ACCURATE, FAIRER'

● Professor David Chan, director, Behavioural Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University, said the changes would make the system more accurate and “fairer”. Small differences in T-scores are “not meaningful” as they do not reflect “true differences in academic abilities or potential between students”, he said.

ondary schools to differentiate themselves further through niche areas said Mr Balamurugan.

His school has an Applied Learning Programme in communications and is looking at developing students' skill sets in broadcast journalism, for instance.

On whether this might spark off intensified competition over non-academic markers for entry via the Direct School Admission (DSA), Mrs Liam Wee-Kwan, principal of Waterway Primary, said: “We should work collectively to recognise that exams like PSLE are not the be all and end-all ... It's more important to focus on enjoying the learning process, than chasing after a few academic points.”

Added Mrs Neufeld: “Regardless of what system you come up with, there will always be this small group of parents who will look for ways to beat the system, and find loopholes. But for majority of parents, we need some form of stress to motivate the children to excel, as well as to learn resilience to overcome challenges.”

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY LAURA PHILOMIN