

Learning from Singapore's school success

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Singapore is "one of Asia's great success stories, transforming itself from a developing country to a modern industrial economy in one generation," said a report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, which comprises a group of nations (including the United States) working together for global economic development. "During the last decade, Singapore's education system has remained consistently at or near the top of most major world education ranking systems," the report said.

In the 1960s, Singapore was a developing nation unable to sustain an economy smothered by high population growth and unemployment. Schools were merged into a single system with strong, top-down management from the nation's government. From 1979 to 1996, Singapore concentrated on producing a highly-skilled labor force by instituting the practice of streaming (tracking) students based on academic ability, from elementary school onward.

In the 1990s, emphasis expanded toward creating workers for a knowledge-based economy, which increased emphasis on creative thinking skills, the OECD report said.

Today's Singaporean students receive six years of primary-school education before taking an examination that determines whether their secondary education will be in a special schools for talented students, a mainstream school, a vocational school or a special education setting. A later test determines options for higher learning.

Ability tracking is frowned upon in the U.S. school system, one of several barriers to adapting Singapore's system.

"In trying to understand Singapore's success, it is also important to remember its small size," the OECD report said. "Singapore's national education system is more like that of a city or a small state, with approximately 522,000 students and 360 schools. Professor Lee Sing Kong, director of [Singapore's] National Institute of Education, likens it to 'turning around a kayak rather than a battleship.' The stability of the government and the broad popular consensus on the purposes of education also make it possible to pursue policies for long enough to see if they have any impact."

Singapore's success in teaching mathematics has gained admirers around the world. The country's math curriculum is taught by many homeschool practitioners in the United States, and in some public and private schools.

"In contrast to the most common math programs in the United States, Singapore math devotes more time to fewer topics, to ensure that children master the material through detailed instruction, questions, problem solving, and visual and hands-on aids like blocks, cards and bar charts," said a 2010 story in the New York Times. "Ideally, they do not move on until they have thoroughly learned a topic."

Students develop a strong foundation in math under the system and can advance rapidly later on, the story said. The method is seen as a balanced approach between old-fashioned math drills and new methods that stress critical thinking. It is hard to implement in U.S. schools, however, because it requires expensive retraining of teachers, the New York Times said.

A possible downside of Singapore's education system is that students are under intense pressure to succeed on high-stakes tests.

In Singapore, "tiger mothers" — a reference to Amy Chua's book on Chinese parenting — "load their cubs down with extra homework and tuition to make them excel at school," said a report in the Economist.

"Western parents are usually horrified at the pressure the tiger mums exert on their children to get better grades or become concert violinists, preferably before puberty," the report said. "But in Singapore this style of parenting, especially among the ethnic Chinese majority, is rarely questioned."

The age of the tiger mother might be waning, though. Last August, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien gave a speech in which he encouraged parents to ease up on their kids.

"Most of his remarks celebrated Singapore's success, as usual," the Economist said. "But then he berated parents for coaching their 3- or 4-year-old children to give them that extra edge over the 5-year-old competition. And he added: 'Please let your children have their childhood. ... Instead of growing up balanced and happy, [they] grow up narrow and neurotic. No homework is not a bad thing. It's good for young children to play, and to learn through play.'"

A delegation from North Carolina visited Singapore to learn from the country's economic and education system, and brought back recommendations in a report called "Learning From Singapore."

Teacher quality was cited as a major factor in the success of Singapore's education system. Teacher candidates in Singapore are recruited from the academic upper one-third of high school graduation classes, and given full tuition and a salary while studying to become teachers. And, the beginning pay for teachers is higher than that for medical doctors starting out in their field.

Lessons learned from the North Carolina cultural delegation included:

1. The importance of vision and planning that integrates economic development and education;
2. The return that comes from thoughtful investments in teachers and school leadership; and
3. The potential gains that result from harnessing research-based best practices from around the world.

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