

The Straits Times August 24, 2013

# Grade system means 'one subject can't save another'

By AMELIA TENG

WHILE many parents welcome the removal of the T-score for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), some now fear that pupils who are weaker in certain subjects may lose out under a new grades-based scoring system to be introduced.

Currently, secondary schools admit pupils based on their T-score, which is aggregated from all four subjects.

The main criticism of the T-score is that it sorts children too finely as it is based on how well a child does relative to his peers.

At the same time, however, under the T-score system, it is possible for a pupil to "make up" for a weak subject by doing very well in the other three. This means he can still get a good T-score with three very high A\*s and one B.

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## PSLE through the years

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**1980**

New pass criteria for the exam are implemented, and letter grades A, B, C and D are used. Pupils have to pass at least three out of the four subjects they take - English, Mother Tongue, Mathematics and Science. It is compulsory to pass English.

**1981**

Grade A\* is introduced.

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T-scores are issued to candidates.

**2004**

Direct school admission at the secondary level is introduced. The scheme is an alternative way for pupils to secure places in secondary schools by way of their talent in sports and artistic skills before their PSLE results are released.

**2012**

The Education Ministry decides to stop announcing the top PSLE scorer, in a move to reduce excessive competition and stress.

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announces in his National Day Rally speech that the T-score system will be replaced with wider grade bands like in O and A levels.



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This strategy would not work if letter grades were used instead, as they are in the O- and A- level examinations, said some parents.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had announced at the National Day Rally on Sunday that in a few years' time, the T-score will be replaced with grade bands.

Under the new system, pupils will get a grade band similar to how students get A1 to F9 for the O levels. These grades will then be converted into points for admission to secondary schools.

The Ministry of Education has yet to give details on how many points each grade will get, and whether an A\*, for instance, will get proportionately more points than an A, or extra points.

The uncertainty has caused anxiety among some parents who said their children excel in other subjects, but may not do well in their mother tongue like Chinese.

Putting it bluntly, marketing manager Valerie Teo, 39, said: "You can't use one subject to save another."

She has two girls in Primary 2 and 4, both of whom are weaker in Chinese.

Some also pointed out that unlike the O levels where students can pick their best subjects when applying to junior colleges or polytechnics, the PSLE has only four compulsory subjects.

Kindergarten principal Jake Goh, who took part in the Our Singapore Conversation exercise on education, suggests one way to widen the options would be to let children count other subjects, such as music and art.

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## Working out the T-score

■ Short for "transformed score", the PSLE T-score is the sum of the T-scores in all four subjects.

■ It is an adjusted score that shows how well a pupil does relative to his peers.

■ Because of the way it is calculated, it is possible for a pupil to "make up" for a weak subject by doing very well in the other three.

■ It is calculated using the following formula:  
$$\text{T-Score} = 50 + (10 \times (\text{raw score} - \text{mean}) / \text{standard deviation})$$

■ Raw score shows how good a pupil is in the subject.

■ Mean refers to the average mark scored by the cohort.

■ Standard deviation measures the "spread" of marks among the cohort. If the mean is 55, and standard deviation is 10, it would mean that the cohort scored 10 marks around the average, from 45 to 65.

■ For example:  
If a pupil scores 80 in a subject, the average mark scored by his cohort is 60 and the standard deviation is 14, this is how it would be calculated:

$$50 + (10 \times (80 - 60) / 14) = 64.29$$

Housewife Germaine Chan, 39, whose daughter will be in Primary 1 next year, agreed that it would not be "very fair" for PSLE pupils to be graded like O-level students.

"But you can't please everybody. Some prefer a system using broader grades because it is less stressful, while those with smarter kids prefer the "finer" system - like the T-score - because it gives them an edge," she said.

When contacted, the Education Ministry said it would work with the relevant stakeholders on the changes. More information will be released in due course.

Still, some parents are glad

there is a shift towards less precise scores. A parent who wanted to be known only as Mrs Ng said that using grade bands means "there's less stress to get every mark".

She added: "At the A levels, you also only have four or five subjects, and the banding system works."

Former Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School principal Lee Siew Choo said: "It is premature to worry now. I'm sure the ministry will tweak the system and examine all the downsides of any grading system."

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