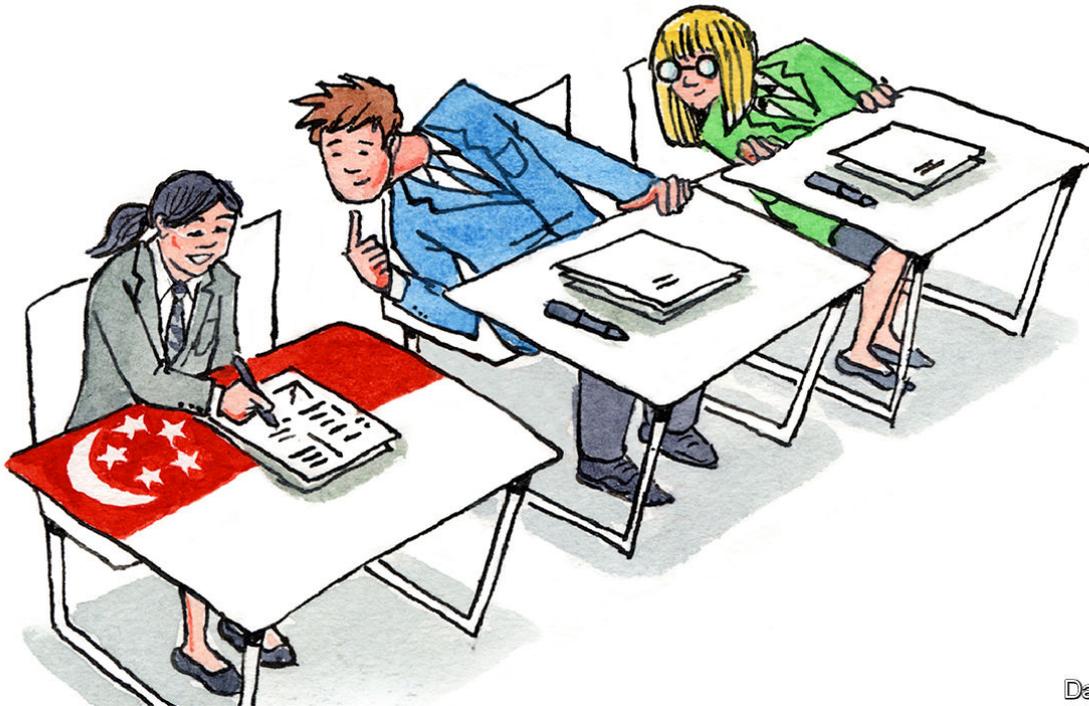


From the ECONOMIST

What other countries can learn from Singapore's schools

Rigorous teaching methods and excellent teachers keep the island-state top of the class



Dave Simonds

Print edition | Leaders

Aug 30th 2018

WHEN the island of Singapore became an independent country in 1965, it had few friends and even fewer natural resources. How did it become one of the world's great trading and financial centres? The strategy, explained Lee Kuan Yew, its first prime minister, was "to develop Singapore's only available natural resource: its people".

Today Singapore's education system is considered the best in the world. The country consistently ranks at the top of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a triennial test of 15-year-olds in dozens of countries, in the main three categories of maths, reading and science. Singaporean pupils are roughly three years ahead of their American peers in maths. Singapore does similarly well in exams of younger children, and the graduates of its best schools can be found scattered around the world's finest universities.

The island-state has much to teach the world. But other countries are reluctant pupils. One reason is that Singapore favours traditional pedagogy, with teachers leading the class. That contrasts with many reformers' preference for looser, more "progressive" teaching intended to encourage children to learn for themselves. Although international studies suggest that direct instruction is indeed a good way of conveying knowledge, critics contend that Singapore has a "drill and kill" model that produces uncreative, miserable maths whizzes. Parents worry about the stress the system puts on their children (and on them, even as they ferry kids to extra classes).

Yet Singapore shows that academic brilliance need not come at the expense of personal skills. In 2015 Singaporean students also came first in a new PISA ranking designed to look at collaborative problem-solving, scoring even better than they did in reading and science. They also reported themselves to be happy—more so than children in Finland, for instance, a country that educationalists regard as an example of how to achieve exceptional results with cuddlier methods of teaching. Not content with its achievements, Singapore is now introducing reforms to improve creativity and reduce stress (see [article](#)). This is not a sign of failure, but rather of a gradual, evidence-led approach to education reform—the first of three lessons that Singapore offers the rest of the world.

Where other countries often enact piecemeal and uncoordinated reforms, Singapore tries to look at the system as a whole. It invests heavily in education research. All reforms are tested, with the outcomes diligently monitored, before being rolled out. Close attention is paid to how new ideas and results should be applied in schools. Carefully developed textbooks, worksheets and worked examples—practices often seen as outdated in the West—are used to inject expertise into the classroom. The result is good alignment between assessments, accountability and teaching styles.

The second lesson is to embrace Singapore's distinctive approach to teaching, notably of mathematics—as America and England are already doing to some extent. It emphasises a narrower but deeper curriculum, and seeks to ensure that a whole class progresses through the syllabus.

Struggling pupils get compulsory extra sessions to help them keep up; even the less-able do comparatively well. An analysis in 2016 in England found that the Singaporean approach boosted results, though it was somewhat watered down in transition.

The third and most important lesson is to focus on developing excellent teachers. In Singapore, they get 100 hours of training a year to keep up to date with the latest techniques. The government pays them well, too. It accepts the need for larger classes (the average is 36 pupils, compared with 24 across the OECD). Better, so the thinking goes, to have big classes taught by excellent teachers than smaller ones taught by mediocre ones. Teachers who want more kudos but not the bureaucratic burden of running schools can become “master teachers”, with responsibility for training their peers. The best teachers get postings to the ministry of education and hefty bonuses: overall, teachers are paid about the same as their peers in private-sector professions. Teachers are also subject to rigorous annual performance assessments.

Class dismissed

The system is hardly faultless. Other countries might wish to avoid Singapore’s dividing of high- and low-achievers into separate schools from the age of 12. The benefits of doing so are unproven, and it contributes to stress about exams. Singapore’s size, moreover, allows for an unusual degree of centralisation. The director-general of the ministry of education says he knows more than 80% of head teachers by name, which makes it easier to keep tabs on what is going on. Other trade-offs would be unpalatable elsewhere. In most countries, teachers’ unions and parents are resistant to big classes, for instance. That is a shame. Education would be much better if more countries copied Singapore’s homework.

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "Copying allowed"