

NDR 2019: More pre-school subsidies as Singapore set to spend more on early childhood education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

SINGAPORE: Singapore's annual spending of about S\$1 billion on early childhood education will "more than double" over the next few years, as the Government looks to make pre-schools more affordable for parents here, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Sunday (Aug 18).

This includes plans to increase the number of government-supported pre-schools to 80 per cent over time.

At the moment, just over half of all pre-school places are government-supported.

Citing a recent survey by the People's Action Party Women's Wing, Mr Lee said young parents remained concerned about the affordability of pre-schools.

He added that he agreed with a point made by the MPs involved in the survey, in that "pre-schools should be like housing and healthcare" where there are good and affordable government-funded options for all Singaporeans.

"For housing we have HDB. For healthcare, we have the restructured hospitals," said Mr Lee.

"Similarly, for pre-school, we should have good quality, government-supported choices available to all Singaporeans," he added.

HELP FOR MIDDLE-INCOME FAMILIES

Pre-school subsidies will also be enhanced, announced Mr Lee in his National Day Rally speech.

At the moment, families are only eligible for additional means-tested subsidies if their monthly household incomes do not exceed S\$7,500.

To offer more help to those from the middle-income, this income ceiling will be raised to S\$12,000 per month.

This will extend the means-tested subsidies to 30,000 more households.

"For middle-income parents, pre-school fees can take up a chunk of their household budget, especially if two or more kids are in pre-school at the same time," he pointed out.

There will also be an increase in the quantum of pre-school subsidies across the board, said Mr Lee.

In his speech, he raised the example of the Lows – a middle-income family with two children, Kaylen and Kyler, enrolled in a government-supported pre-school.

At the moment, the Lows do not qualify for additional subsidies and are paying about S\$560 per month for each child's pre-school education.

The enhanced subsidy will knock off one-third of the pre-school expenses to around S\$370 per child, according to Mr Lee.

"Later on, when Kaylen and Kyler enter primary school, the family's expenses will go down even further," he said, adding that primary school is almost free and even if after-school student care is needed, it will come up to S\$300 per child.

This – the addition of primary school fees and student care fees – is lower than the family's pre-school expenses, Mr Lee noted.

This will be the goal that the Government has for the medium term.

"In the medium term, we aim to bring down full-day pre-school expenses to around that level – the cost of primary school plus after-school student care," Mr Lee said.

"We need a while to get there, but we are working towards that."

He added: "Hopefully with all these improvements, parents will no longer think of pre-schools as an expensive phase of bringing up their

children.”

In recent years, Mr Lee noted that a “major shift” has been made to improve pre-school education here.

“We want to start earlier in a child’s life because these years make a big difference to his development,” he explained.

“A good pre-school education can make a crucial difference.”

Apart from ensuring affordability, other efforts include the doubling of full-day pre-school capacity to almost 180,000 places since 2012.

Pre-schools here have also been upgraded, with better-designed HDB void deck centres and mega centres such as the PCF Sparkletots at Punggol.

The number of kindergartens run by the Ministry of Education – currently at 24 – will more than double in the next few years, while the set-up of the National Institute of Early Childhood Development will give pre-school teachers better training and career progression, the prime minister said.

EXPANSION OF KidSTART PROGRAMME

Mr Lee on Sunday also announced the expansion of the KidSTART programme to another 5,000 children over the next three years.

The initiative was piloted in July 2016 with the aim of helping 1,000 children from disadvantaged families.

“We are very happy with the results, and so are the parents,” he said.

While the exact benefits will need to be tracked over a few more years, “there is no time to lose” for each new cohort of babies.

The Government will hence widen the programme over the next three years, before taking stock again on how to expand it further, said Mr Lee.

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