

# What took Singapore so long to scrap streaming in secondary schools?

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- One of the world's best education systems has just slaughtered a sacred cow to staunch the growing class divide.
- In doing so, it hopes to end the stigma of being 'normal'



Singapore has a widely acknowledged world-class education system. Photo: Roy Issa

Singapore announced on Tuesday that it would end a 40-year-old system of streaming secondary students into three broad categories.

Instead of sending 12-year-olds to the Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams based on their results in the national Primary School Leaving Examinations, secondary students will choose a mix of subjects at three levels of difficulty, depending on their ability.

The switch to Subject-based Banding (SBB) will take place in 2024, which means that those who are eight years old now will be the first batch in the new system where all students will complete secondary school in four years, instead of some now taking five years.

## What a Singapore Strait traffic jam says about the world economy

Singapore has a widely acknowledged world-class education system, with schools that boast top facilities, high-quality teachers and a rigorous curriculum. Its students regularly emerge top in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a triennial international survey to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing 15-year-olds.

So why scrap a system that has worked so well, for so long? The change has been described as nothing less than slaughtering a sacred cow.

One reason is that this is part of a relentless drive by the Singapore government to constantly tweak the education system to prepare children for the future. Leaders of the tiny, resource-scarce city state emphasise regularly that people are its only resource.



Education Minister Ong Ye Kung announced on Tuesday that streaming would be abolished. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

But the change also reflects long-held concerns that streaming based on exam results stigmatises those students considered slower. As Nominated Member of Parliament Azmoon Ahmad put it in a commentary last year, the system tended to “lump together” as slow performers children from tough socioeconomic backgrounds, those more adept at hands-on learning and late bloomers.

Experts also pointed out the demotivating effect of streaming on children’s outcomes and signs that a class divide was emerging after years of segregating students of different academic abilities from one another. Many also said streaming damaged the self-esteem of generations of Normal stream students.

## **Mahathir Mohamad: ‘I am pro-Malaysia, not anti-Singapore’**

The Education Ministry has taken cautious and gradual steps over the past two decades. Five years ago, it allowed some students in the Normal stream to take higher level subjects, and found they performed comparably to Express students in four subjects in the O-level examinations. The scheme was then expanded to all schools last year.

### **CHANGE IS HARD**

From educators to parents to politicians, many felt that scrapping streaming could not have come sooner. At least five backbenchers from the ruling People’s Action Party brought it up again before Education Minister Ong Ye Kung announced the change in Parliament.

Opposition politician Yee Jenn Jong recalled asking for a review of streaming in his maiden speech in Parliament in 2011.

“Retracting a policy is always difficult, especially in education, because parents have different expectations,” he said. “Not all parents are in favour of removing streaming and some remain concerned with how the latest move will be implemented.”



Singapore’s leaders have always stressed that people are its only resource. Photo: AFP

But why did it take so long?

Dr Goh Ban Eng, formerly with the Education Ministry’s gifted education branch, said it was more difficult to change a system that had served the country well than to change a totally flawed system.

Indeed, streaming is credited for slashing Singapore's drop-out rates from about one-third of every cohort to less than 1 per cent today.

It was started in 1981 after a report by then deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee suggested sorting children by ability to keep them in school longer with lessons designed to match their ability. It worked for the most part.

### **Going, going, going: why is Lion dance dying in Singapore and Hong Kong, but roaring back to life in China?**

As Education Minister Ong put it this week: "We have been grappling with this trade-off – between customisation in education and the downside of stigmatisation."

For Education University of Hong Kong assistant professor JJ Woo, who previously studied and taught at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, the change is long overdue.

"A move to a more flexible and subject-based system could allow students to flourish in the areas they are strong in, without placing unnecessary stress on them," Woo said.

### **STIGMA OF BEING NORMAL**

National serviceman Kelvin Nah, 23, remembers the comments when he entered the Normal (Technical) stream: "People looked down on us and said we were lousy, when some of us had already tried our best."

Mathematics had always been his strongest subject but he could not take it as an O level subject in the Normal (Technical) stream. He worked hard and was moved to the Normal (Academic) stream, and that allowed him to join Express students for Elementary and Additional maths lessons.

He went on to score distinctions for both at the O level examinations at the end of secondary school and now has a polytechnic diploma.

Bank worker Cathy Tang, 49, remembers her son's agony when he had to move to the Normal (Academic) stream in Secondary 3 after failing to meet the criteria to continue in the Express stream. He missed the cut-off point by just two marks because of his weakest subject – Chinese Language.

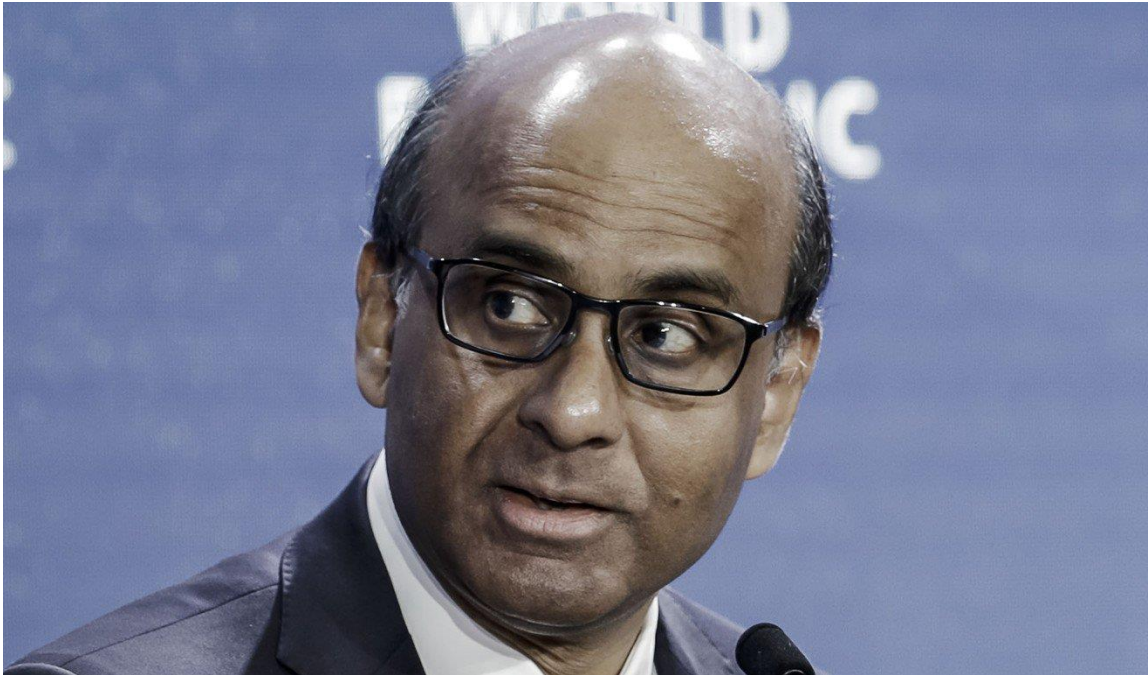
The "Express" boy found himself ostracised by his new "Normal" classmates and struggled to make friends as they felt he was different from them.

Academics say that matching students' abilities with their subjects at the right level can go a long way towards reducing stress.

SIM Global Education's Dr Timothy Chan said: "You are no longer putting people in a fixed queue. This flexibility is the way to go."

Unsurprisingly, it is parents with high ability children who worry about the end of streaming.

Housewife Elsa Yeo, 45, who has three children in the Express stream in secondary school, and two younger ones, said: “We have to be careful how we place kids in subject-based banding without affecting those who may be faster.”



Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam had spearheaded changes to Singapore’s education system when he held the portfolio over a decade ago. Photo: Bloomberg,

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who spearheaded changes to the education system when he held the portfolio over a decade ago, last month reminded parents of the role they played in helping children benefit from a changing education system. They should set high expectations but need to be encouraging, not authoritarian, he said.

Tharman’s term between 2003 and 2008 set the stage for more flexibility and choice for students to try new subjects – including practice-oriented ones – and discover their talents.

A former teacher with 20 years’ experience, who declined to be named, asked if the latest change is merely cosmetic. He pointed to how there is already competition for independent or autonomous schools that receive less or no funding from the government and can offer through-train programmes that culminate in the A levels or International Baccalaureate exams, for example.

These schools tend to take the cream of the crop from every year’s primary school graduates, which means, “there is still streaming .....the bright ones are already streamed”, said the ex-teacher.

Opposition politician Yee is more optimistic, and said if schools go with the spirit of the change and instil diversity in the classroom wherever possible, there will be better mixing of students with different abilities.

“It is also a better reflection of society,” he said. “When we go to work, we have to work in teams with people of different abilities. Students can learn to handle learning in a classroom with diversity.”

Website: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2189285/what-took-singapore-so-long-scrap-streaming-secondary-schools>