

Picking a pre-school



A child at NurtureStars Preschool, which began operations in 2010 and is one of the brands under the Kinderland Group. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Here are some options available and the latest educational trends



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Anchor operator or partner operator? Montessori or play-based learning? Childcare or kindergarten?

These terms may baffle first-time parents weighing up a pre-school for their child, so The Straits Times has laid out some of the options on offer and highlighted the latest educational trends in the sector.

There is certainly no shortage of choice – the number of childcare centres has grown from just over 1,000 in 2012 to 1,530, providing full- and half-day care programmes to children under seven.

Kindergartens, on the other hand, have programmes typically lasting three to four hours. These centres cater to children from 18 months to below seven. Some kindergartens have two sessions a day.

The number of such centres has dipped from around 500 in 2012 to 400 today, with falling enrolment.

Meanwhile, childcare enrolment has surged, as more parents head back to work and need their children to be taken care of for longer hours, prompting some pre-school operators to switch to childcare.

The Early Childhood Develop-

ment Agency (ECDA), which oversees the pre-school sector, started in 2013 and has been driving initiatives to raise quality and accessibility in the sector.

It has also increased pre-school subsidies and allowed more families to benefit from extra subsidies to make education in the early years more affordable.

Increased state involvement means 80 per cent of children will have a place in a government-supported pre-school by around 2025, up from just over 50 per cent last year.

This growth will be driven primarily through selected pre-school players, which have anchor-operator and partner-operator status.

Under these schemes, pre-school operators receive grants that help offset costs such as staff salaries, in return for meeting fee caps and quality criteria.

There are five anchor operators, including PAP Community Foundation's Sparkletots and NTUC First Campus' My First Skool. They have to keep to a monthly fee cap of \$720 for full-day childcare, excluding goods and services tax.

Meanwhile, 324 childcare centres run by 29 operators or consortia have been appointed to the new partner-operator term that starts next month.

The fee cap for centres under this term will be set at \$760 a month for full-day childcare, \$40 less than the \$800 now.

Overall, the quantum of government support for pre-schools has risen from \$360 million in 2012 to \$840 million in 2017 and \$1 billion in 2018. It is expected to more than double over the next few years.

Dr Rebecca Chan, a lecturer from the National Institute of Education's Psychology and Child & Human Development academic group, says the Government's involvement has helped the pre-school sector in several ways.

The ECDA has led the sector in providing quality care and education through the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework (Spark) requirements, she says, which serve as a guide for parents to identify good pre-schools.

There are more than 980 Spark-certified centres now, up from 568 in 2016.

“(The agency) has given a boost and clearer sense of the sector's career pathway, where opportunities are created to cater to differing aspirations, such as infant educator, leadership and teaching roles,” says Dr Chan.

Educators also now have greater support in their professional development and training through subsidised courses and scholarships, she adds.

With lower fees, families also benefit from better learning facilities, services and resources, while purpose-built mega pre-school centres now cater to children's developmental needs through indoor and outdoor spaces.

“In addition, the funding enabled some organisations to provide additional services like learning support teams to close the gap at an early stage of the kids' lives, especially in language and literacy learning and development, critical to reading and writing later in formal schooling,” Dr Chan says.

She adds that government funding has supported lower-income families, whose children can go on

field trips or enrichment programmes that might not have been open to them in the past.

But even with the state playing a greater role in the pre-school sector, Dr Chan hopes that independent and private-run pre-schools will be given due recognition.

“These private pre-schools, although small in size in comparison with newer pre-schools, provide personalised services coupled with trusting relationships built over the years and have a lasting impact on children's learning and development too,” she says.

“Early childhood education is creative, innovative, adaptable and experimental in nature; we need choices and varieties to thrive,” she adds, noting that smaller pre-schools need the Government's help, too, to adapt to changes.

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