

Recruitment and Retention of Teachers in Singapore

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Abstract

This article examines how Singapore recruits and retains its teachers. It describes the two main sponsored pathways to becoming a teacher in Singapore including an overview of the key components of initial teacher education training programs, which are all delivered by Singapore's world renown National Institute of Education of Nanyang Technological University. Singapore has well-developed support and development programs for its teachers and schools. This includes professional development programs, a cluster school model, and career development and pathways for teachers. While Singapore's teachers face challenges such as workload, pressure to deliver results from parents and students, and administration, they perhaps do not encounter the unruly student behavior teachers in some other countries may have to cope with. This can be attributed to the disciplined nature of the country.

Keywords: Singapore, students, teachers, training, schools

1. Introduction

Singapore has one of the best school systems in the world (Thiruselvam, 2022; Tan, 2019) and the highest performing in terms of student results (Nielsen, 2020). *fe news* (2021) ranked Singapore number one for education. However, Singapore does face challenges such as student stress and well-being, high-stakes exams, highly competitive environment, parents feeling pressured, and the hierarchy of schools among the challenges (Chan & Kai, 2025). This article investigates how Singapore recruits and retains teachers in the public-school sector. The analysis seeks to discover the quality of teaching candidates that Singapore attracts to the teaching profession. Additionally, the article examines if there are low-performing schools in Singapore and what intervention mechanisms are used.

Following the introduction, a review of the literature is presented. The literature examined is based on low-performing schools and what can be done to improve these schools, particularly their academic outcomes. While Singapore does not face challenges some other countries do due to its inclusive, systems-based approach, and a lack of student behavior problems, this has been included to provide interested readers with further perspectives and references for further reading or investigation. Additionally, the content in the literature review provides readers with examples to compare not only Singapore with, but other countries relevant to their contexts and locations. A brief methodology section describes the approach to the research that has been employed. The final sections of this article are the recommendations for what other countries can learn from Singapore, the conclusion, and references.

2. Literature Review

Research indicates that there are various ways to identify low-performing schools. Measuring and defining school success is a challenging and difficult task (Bloom & Owens, 2011). There are no agreed upon research-based best practices but there is agreement that both quality and equity must be attended to when establishing criteria that differentiate between high and low-performing schools. There needs to be a balance between achievement and equity regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status or ability (Bloom & Owens, 2011). Schools are often categorized as low performing based on students' test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, and student and teacher attendance.

Some countries utilize the results of school inspections to determine a school is low performing (Gustafsson et al., 2015). Examples include the United Kingdom and New Zealand. In the United Kingdom inspections are called Ofsted Inspections (Government of the United Kingdom, 2024). The Education Review Office (n.d.) is the New Zealand government's external education review agency. Heystek and Emekako (2020) state that publicly available information on schools' performances can motivate change. This change may be supported through increased resource allocation and support mechanisms, and in many cases could be led by a school improvement plan (document) to guide schools and their key stakeholders. Such plans provide solutions or remedies to identify challenges and problems.

Why are there low-performing schools? Research illuminates the fact that there is not one

answer to this question but rather, each school possesses a unique combination of teacher, leadership, and student characteristics that lead to low performance. Factors that impact school performance are students' socio-economic status, the quality of teachers and the way they are motivated, a principal's leadership style, and the schools' physical working conditions. Unfortunately, children living in poverty tend to be concentrated in low-performing schools staffed by ill-equipped teachers (Murnane, 2007). Studies have found that teacher effectiveness is the most important school-based predictor of student learning and that several consecutive years of outstanding teaching can offset the learning deficits of disadvantaged students (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Hanushek et al., 2005).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) provides five recommendations to improve low-performing schools.

1. Strengthen and support school leadership. Grissom et al. (2021) found that effective principals have positive impacts on student achievement and attendance as well as teacher satisfaction and retention.
2. Stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning.
3. Attract, support, and retain high-quality teachers.
4. Ensure effective classroom learning strategies.
5. Prioritize linking schools with parents and communities.

This article is primarily aligned with the third recommendation. The report (OECD, 2012) provides four key recommendations to attract, support, and retain high-quality teachers.

1. Align teacher education with the needs of disadvantaged schools to ensure that teachers receive the skills and knowledge they need for working in these schools.
2. Provide mentoring for novice teachers working in these schools. Well-structured programs may improve teacher effectiveness and increase retention in disadvantaged schools.
3. Provide supportive working conditions to retain effective teachers in disadvantaged schools. Teachers are more likely to stay in those schools where they can work effectively and see the results of their effort. Without these, teachers may feel ineffective and may move schools or quit teaching altogether.
4. Design adequate financial and career incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers in disadvantaged schools.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this article was an analysis of publicly available documents and data on recruiting and retaining teachers in the public sector in Singapore. These documents include attracting people to become teachers, selecting trainee teachers, initial teacher education, the career ladder, and incentives to retain teachers.

4. Singapore

Singapore became an independent nation in 1965 and has experienced remarkable economic growth and diversification since nationhood. It is the largest port city in Southeast Asia and has one of the busiest ports in the world, and has developed powerful financial, technology, and industrials sectors (Ho, 2025). There are approximately 260 public schools and 80 government aided schools in Singapore (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2026a), and approximately 30,000 teachers (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024c), serving approximately 420,000 students in these sectors (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024a; 2024b). These figures have been provided so readers are informed of the demographics in the public sector (including supported) school system in Singapore. The content of this article is specific to the public sector.

Education in Singapore can be traced back to the establishment of the British settlement in 1819. These first schools were set up by communities. This approach continued throughout the 19th century and for the first almost half of the 20th century with different immigrant groups and missionaries establishing schools in Singapore (Ministry of Education (MOE) Heritage Centre, n.d.). In 1947 the Ten-Year Programme was introduced to provide equal opportunities for all children along with creating a centralized education system where schools adopted the same curriculum, textbooks, and common language of instruction (Ministry of Education (MOE) Heritage Centre, n.d.; Seng, n.d.). This program and approach delivered the foundations of Singapore's education system that set the city-state on the road to prosperity for the nation and its citizens. A teacher training college was established in 1950 to meet the demand for teachers.

In 1955, Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) was established, superseding the Department of Education. The MOE was tasked with setting the direction for education and implementing the necessary reforms (National Library Board, 2016). The *White Paper on Education Policy* was released in 1956, which introduced a Malay centered curriculum, textbooks, nationalization of communal schools, equal treatment for all schools regardless of the language of instruction, and bilingualism to enhance cohesion among the different races.

However, in 1959 when Singapore attained self-governance, Yorozu (2017) notes that Singapore did not have comprehensive school system. Additionally, most of the population was illiterate and unskilled, and there were not enough schools. This is despite the opening of two technical schools, a commercial secondary school, and established Joint Advisory Council for Apprenticeship Training in 1956. 1958 saw the opening of Singapore Polytechnic (National Library Board, 2016). The now autonomous region needed to industrialize to be able to provide employment for its people.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew became Singapore's founding prime minister in 1959 (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2025). His bold leadership transformed Singapore and placed a strong emphasis on education as a key driver of Singapore's development, which has been a significant driver of and for Singapore's economic, social, stability, and environment success, and optimism (Business & Leadership, 2025).

1959 realized the first of four phases in the transformation of Singapore's education described by Yorozu (2017), that is the survival-driven (1959-1978) phase. The key aims were to increase school participation rates, build more schools, train teachers, and strengthen technical and vocational education. The second phase, the efficiency-driven phase ran from 1978-1997. A challenge Singapore continued to face was dropout rates in secondary school. Streaming students based on their academic performance was introduced to support students' needs based on their academic performance and ability. This helped to equip secondary school graduates to work in increasingly skilled and capital-intensive industries, such as engineering and high-value manufacturing. Recruitment and retainment of teachers' policies were revamped with teachers being paid highly competitively. To support his change, school leaders, and graduate and non-graduate teachers were provided with professional training and development.

The third phase was the ability-based, aspiration driven phase (1997-2011), with the 2012 phase being the student-centric, values-driven phase. These phases represent Singapore's economic development and the evolving needs of the country and its citizens. The "focus has shifted from widening participation and increasing early-years enrolment to unlocking the full potential of every individual through quality pre-employment training (PET) and continuous education and training (CET)" (Yorozu, 2017, p.17). In 2008 the streaming of students at primary level was replaced by subject-based banding. Students could pursue certain subjects at a higher level, while continuing to study other subjects at a level more appropriate for them. With the shift towards higher order competencies, the MOE, in 2010, introduced a new framework of 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes. This framework was designed so that the skills attained at each level could be reflected in each learner's continuing education.

4.1 Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

Singapore does not have challenges recruiting teachers. This section describes the recruitment process and pathways to become a teacher in Singapore, how Singapore retains its teachers, and why Singapore does not have problems recruiting and retaining teachers. While Singapore may not have challenges retaining teachers, it does not mean teachers do not encounter challenges in the Singapore school system. These are presented in this section.

The Singapore public education system recruits teachers on a needs-based system. This is one of the many examples of the how Singapore is proactive in its planning for the country and its citizens – many countries should learn from and implement this approach. This includes calculating the number of teachers that will be needed to be trained at the world renowned, currently ranked eighth in the QS World University Rankings by Subject 2025: Education and Training (QS TopUniversities, 2026), National Institute of Education (NIE) at Nanyang Technological University. The number of teachers to be trained in coming years will increase from 700 to 1000 per year (Shafeeq, 2025). This is to meet the needs of expected retirements, developments such as AI and other technologies, social media, developing diverse skills, creating inclusive learning environments, and nurturing social cohesion; and the need to keep abreast of rapid developments and advancements.

The application process is rigorous as Singapore seeks to attract and does attracts high-quality candidates to the teaching profession. This includes candidates' academic background and results, community engagement and contributions, and a panel interview to determine candidates' suitability, which focuses on candidates' values, skills, and knowledge.

There are two recruitment streams to become a teacher in Singapore. One is through the Ministry of Education scholarship programs for students and graduates, and the second is for career switches. Both pathways include sponsored teaching training at the NIE (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2026b). The career switch pathway is for professionals who are seeking to transition to teaching. They are supported through sponsored training at the NIE and school-based induction and mentoring programs (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2026b). Both streams provide allowances for trainee teachers. All Ministry of Education sponsored students completing initial teacher education programs at the NIE are bonded to the MOE. That is, they must complete a certain number of years – depending on the program, but usually three years. If a teacher fails to fulfil their bond, they are required to reimburse the fees and allowances they received. The NIE also accepts qualified fee paying domestic and international applicants into its initial teacher education programs.

The initial teacher education programs prepare teachers for teaching. They include core components on curriculum studies, education studies, knowledge, practicum, and specialization. All programs offered by the NIE are listed on its website with downloadable handbooks, which provide information on subjects, requirements, and grading. (Nanyang Technological University, 2026).

The Ministry of Education in Singapore initially retains its sponsored teachers through the teaching time requirements of the bonds. The preparation that trainee teachers receive during their initial teacher education programs at the NIE, school and teaching induction programs, and mentoring and support when they start teaching all contribute to retaining teachers from the outset of their teaching careers. Salary increases, ongoing professional development, opportunities for scholarships and training (abroad), career opportunities, and an attractive payout and retirement scheme all contribute to supporting teachers long term commitment to the profession. Teachers receive service payments every three to five years and an accumulated balance after thirty years of service and the pension from the age of 65 (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2026).

The content of this article has thus far painted a very 'rosy picture' of becoming and being a teacher in a Singapore. While Singaporean teachers may not face the disciplinary and behavioral challenges teachers and schools that many nations encounter, it is not all 'smooth sailing' for teachers in Singapore. Teachers work long hours in Singapore, longer than their counterparts in other development countries (Hong, 2025). Additionally, teachers report high levels of stress, huge administrative burdens, an overload of marking, being held responsible for student results, and responding to and engaging with students and parents (Min, 2025). The Ministry of Education expects technological developments will ease some of the workload and contribute to teacher development.

4.2 Career Development

The MOE has three career tracks for teachers in Singapore: the teaching track, the school leadership track, and the senior specialist track. There are opportunities to move across tracks if the person meets the requirements of the position. Career development and opportunities to apply for promotions contribute to retaining teachers.

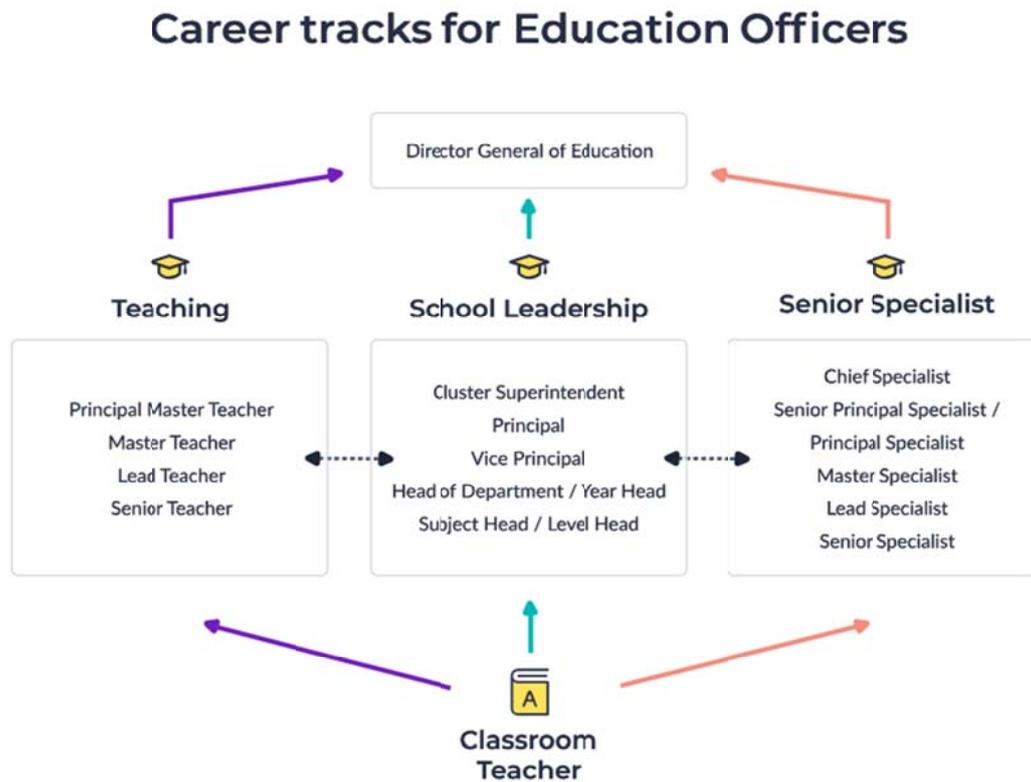


Figure 1. Career Tracks for Education Officers

Note. From *Professional Development and Career Tracks* by Ministry of Education Singapore, 2023.

Singapore has a teacher appraisal model (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2025a). It is a ranking and promotion framework where teachers are appraised by their supervisor(s) and cross-ranked with their peers by a ranking panel. It allows the MOE to identify high performers while at the same time providing support and professional development for teachers.

4.3 Professional Development

There are numerous professional development options and opportunities for teachers in Singapore. Professional development provides prospects for promotion and career progression, furthering teachers' technology skills and use of it, and potentially and hopefully reducing the workload of teachers. It also contributes to supporting and retaining teachers.

New graduates receive an induction program, lasting up to two years. It is a buddy system where new graduates are mentored to support their practice and support them in their initial

journeys at their schools. These early career teachers may have a reduced teaching load allowing them to observe classes and attend professional development programs. These sessions may be led and delivered by lead teachers at the cluster level (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2026) and other bodies such as the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST).

Singapore groups its schools into clusters based on location. The school cluster structure was initiated by the MOE in 1997. In the cluster structure, a cluster superintendent – a former school principal - oversees and supports a cluster of 11-13 schools (Kwek et al., 2023). The cluster school model allows for information and knowledge sharing, professional development, resource allocation, professional learning communities (PLCs), networked learning communities (NLCs), development of curriculum and instruction, and to develop the culture of thinking schools.

The AST was set up to provide professional development for MOE staff (Academy of Singapore Teachers, 2026). The professional development programs for education officers include Singapore Instructional Mentoring Programme, Teacher Leaders Programme, Teacher Work Attachment Programme, and Outstanding Educator-in-Residence Programme. In addition to the professional development programs AST has for educators, the AST delivers programs for executive and administrative staff and allied educators. Conferences have been organized by the AST for many years, and more recently an online learning platform has been constructed allowing MOE staff to complete micro-credentials. It is also home to the teachers awards, professional excellence, academies and centers, and Principal Master and Master Teachers.

The NIE works with the MOE to develop and deliver professional development programs for in-service teachers. The NIE, along with having research centers and postgraduate research and taught programs for educators to continue to develop themselves, has two key departments: Professional and Leadership Programmes and Continuing Education and Training. The former delivers credentials from advanced diplomas to short courses for educators to develop themselves. Such programs may allow graduates of these programs to progress their careers on one of the three pathways presented in the previous section.

There are other professional development options in Singapore. These may be organized by schools or clusters, or individuals themselves. The Principals Academy, a joint venture between the Academy of Principals and the Economic Development Board (Principals Academy, 2026) is such an option with a suite of contemporary professional development programs being available.

4.4 How Singapore Ranks Its Schools

Singapore does not officially rank its schools. However, there is a hierarchy of schools in Singapore, and this places considerable pressure on parents and children alike (Chan & Kai, 2025). While high-stakes student testing has been reduced in primary school grades in recent years, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) determines students' secondary school course and subject eligibility (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2025b). PSLE score

ranges for secondary schools are available on the SchoolFinder (2025) website.

The official school evaluation system in Singapore is the MOE's School Excellence Model (SEM). It is a self-assessment model whereby schools evaluate themselves against criteria. The SEM evaluation is supported by the cluster superintendents. It is an intervention and trust model and not a punishment model. School improvement plans are developed and supported, professional development if needed is delivered, and communication between the MOE and school leadership teams is supported and coordinated by the cluster superintendent. While Singapore faces challenges in its schools and school system, paramount to proactively addressing these challenges is ensuring equity for students, particularly those from disadvantage backgrounds and addressing concerns about student wellbeing (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2026).

Singapore does not have challenges attracting and retaining teachers at primary schools who may not rank highly on PLSE scores or secondary schools whose student intake are in the lower PLSE score range. Its planned approach to teacher recruitment and training, and jobs advertised on the Singaporean government jobs website (Careers@gov, 2026) ensures schools do not have teacher shortages. Programs and support for initial teachers and in-service teachers, along with well-developed, proactive mentoring, development, and support programs contribute to no schools being disadvantaged through teachers not wanting to be at a school.

While the teaching profession is demanding in Singapore, the disciplined nature of Singapore and investment in education are tools that have helped shaped Singapore (Gunapala, 2024). It is the discipline of Singaporeans from a young age that is a huge contributor to the lack of behavioral challenges and problems in low-performing schools. Such problems result in schools having problems recruiting and retaining teachers. Additionally, teaching is viewed as a highly regarded profession in Singapore (Liu, 2023) with a high level of societal respect and teachers are seen as nation builders. Additionally, teachers' salaries are competitive, there is job stability, and career paths available to support and encourage teachers.

5. Recommendations

This section focuses on what other countries could learn from Singapore. Yes, Singapore has fewer teachers, schools, and students than most countries. However, Singapore achieves and delivers evenness across its schools and other larger by land mass and demographics regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, and South Korea and Japan produce great outcomes. All four places have strong teacher training, are disciplined, and do not have problems in recruiting and retaining teachers. Some of the recommendations resonate with the content presented in the literature review.

1. Aligning initial teacher training programs to the curriculum. This includes subject knowledge, skills, and values; pedagogy; classroom management; and technology. Strong and engaging practicums must be a core component of initial teacher training programs, where trainee teachers are mentored and guided, and provided with feedback.

2. Introduce a cluster school model similar to the model used in Singapore. This not only provides support for schools and communication channels with the Ministry of Education, but in some countries could provide a shared resources model.
3. Provide professional development and career pathways, particularly teaching pathways.
4. Reduce the workload on teachers. Help teachers and schools introduce and use technology to support teachers and reduce their workload.
5. Create or perhaps recreate a disciplined society. Look at how Singapore does it and maintains its disciplined society.
6. Reward teachers and ensure they are seen as pillars for a country to build upon.

6. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Singapore has a very well planned and managed teacher recruitment, training, and retention system. The education system and country benefits from the disciplined attributes Singapore and its people have, and the high-regard teachers are held in the country. The cluster school model that includes self-identified support for schools and teachers is proactive and intervention based. This approach enables schools, teachers, students, and parents to be supported to reach the goal of educational equity and opportunities for all, regardless of background and location.

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