



13 APR, 2025

Closing the learning divide

Sunday Star, Malaysia



'Ensure support for **at-risk students'**

As global assessments reveal growing disparities, experts urge targeted action. > 5



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HOW well students perform in their studies hinges significantly on their socioeconomic backgrounds.

The correlation may seem like a given, but results from two of the most recent global benchmarking studies reveal just how stark the reality is.

According to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2023, students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds scored, on average, 67 points lower than their peers from high SES backgrounds.

A similar trend appears in the findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, which show that SES accounted for 18% of the variation in mathematics performance among Malaysian students.

Such disparities call for proactive measures to mitigate their effects, say experts.

Teach For Malaysia (TFM) chief executive officer Chan Soon Seng said ensuring children from low SES backgrounds receive a good education is important for the upward mobility of their families.

He emphasised that for this to happen, these students need access to additional resources, including “high-quality” teachers.

“Students from high-income backgrounds inherently have access to resources – private tuition and extracurricular activities – that can support or accelerate their learning, allowing them to go above and beyond the traditional expectations of the system. This is not the case for most children from low SES backgrounds,” he told *StarEdu*.

He added that these students faced a big setback to their education when they had to depend on digital learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The reality is that around 1.3 million children did not have access to a device of their own or Internet connectivity.

“A lot of them would have been sharing their parents’ mobile phones, which weren’t the most conducive platform for learning, whereas children from higher-income backgrounds had access to all the devices they needed, additional support, or even an adult coaching them and helping them to stay engaged in their learning,” he said.

Chan noted that students who spent their formative

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years during the pandemic were even more affected.

“These students had almost two years of no access to face-to-face learning in Year One and Year Two. But when they returned to school, they were in Year Three and were taught its syllabus,” he said.

He stressed that learning should be made more “relevant” for underserved children to keep them engaged in school.

“When you think about the challenges in our education system, it is very one-size-fits-all and we informally ‘stream’ students, which makes us have set presumptions about their capabilities.

“It is not just about money, but about how much care and time a teacher has for different students based on their expectations of how those students can perform,” he said.

Highlighting the limited time to complete the syllabus, Chan said teachers are not able to dedicate enough classroom time to assist weaker students.

“The system is not conducive for teachers to customise lessons according to their students’ needs,” he asserted.

For this to change, Chan said teachers need to be given more autonomy in deciding how to teach their students.

Bridging digital gaps

The digital divide between urban and rural schools must also be addressed, said UCSI University vice-chancellor Emerita Prof Datuk Dr Siti Hamisah Tapsir.

“More so since going

online is now the norm for remote or hybrid learning, assignment submission, virtual classrooms and group projects,” she added.

As of 2024, the Education Ministry had reportedly provided Internet access – including fibre optic, 4G wireless broadband and satellite connectivity – with speeds of up to 300Mbps to 10,237 schools.

Prof Siti Hamisah, however, said the digital divide remains substantial, with rural students still lagging behind their urban peers in digital skills.

She noted that Internet access ensures students can obtain the latest learning materials compared to physical textbooks.

“Urban students, particularly those from affluent families, possess multiple digital devices and enjoy high-speed Internet access.

“This gives them a big head start and allows them to access new technologies and develop better digital skills from a young age,” said Prof Siti Hamisah, who served as the Higher Education Ministry director-general from 2017 to 2019, during the period when both the Higher Education and Education Ministries were merged.

Separately, a Khazanah Research Institute report also recommended reducing inequalities in digital learning.

“Address

access-related issues, particularly faced by those within lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to future-proof the nation against shocks,” it stated in its “The State of Households 2024” report.

Holistic approach

Weighing in, Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Educational Studies Professor in Curriculum Studies and Education Policy Dr Hazri Jamil said teacher quality is “extremely important” when it comes to determining learning outcomes.

“Research consistently shows that teacher quality is one of the most influential school-based factors in student achievement.

“Effective teachers not only deliver content well but also inspire students and adapt to their diverse needs,” he said.

Adding on, Chan said there needs to be a more holistic approach to assessing students, in line with their capabilities and talents outside of academics.

“For example, at TFM, we look at academic growth, leadership development – confidence, communication and cooperation – and the third thing we look at is providing access to opportunity.

“We need to take an equity lens to our decision-making, as well as resource and opportunity distribution,” said Chan, adding that this could mean investing even more resources in children who are struggling.

TFM is an independent, not-for-profit organisation on a mission to give all children the opportunity to realise their potential through quality education. It partners with the Education Ministry to reach high-need national schools and is one of the partners of the prestigious global education network Teach For All.

According to a TFM article “More Malaysian Students Have Access to Schools – Now What?” published in Nov 29 last year, despite increased access to schooling, SES remains a key predictor of student performance.

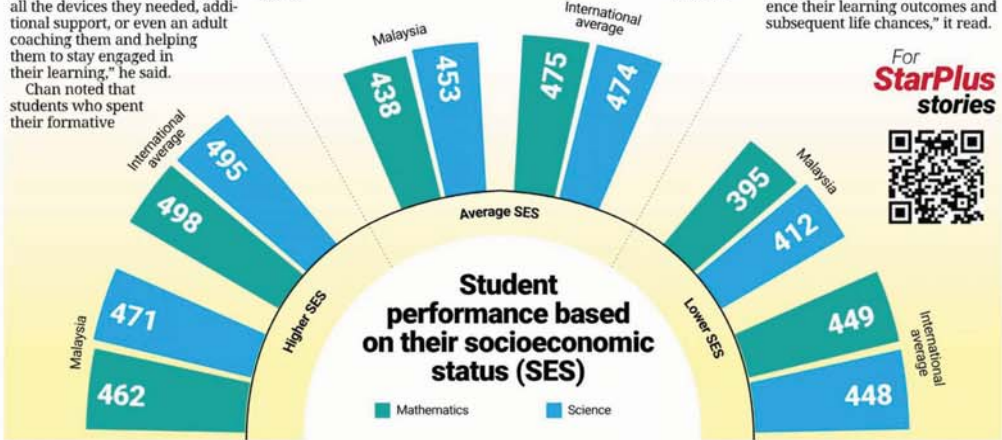
“This means that a child’s family background continues to influence their learning outcomes and subsequent life chances,” it read.

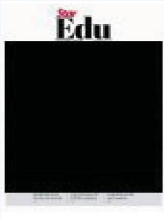


Prof Siti Hamisah



Prof Hazri





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SUMMARIES

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