

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 25 September 2026

Headline: Commentary: Parents want the best for their child, but P1 registration cannot be only about 'me first'

Commentary: Parents want the best for their child, but P1 registration cannot be only about 'me first'

Jacqueline Ho, Jason Tan, Vincent Chua

25 Sep 2026 06:00AM

(Updated: 25 Sep 2026 12:04PM)

Before considering bolder changes, we need to decide how to balance individual competitiveness and our collective values, say SMU's Jacqueline Ho, NIE's Jason Tan and NUS' Vincent Chua.



In a high-stakes, credential-conscious environment, parents understandably want to deploy every available resource to secure their child's educational future.

Recognising these pressures, the Ministry of Education recently announced adjustments to the Primary 1 registration framework. There will be more reserved places in Phase 2C for children with no prior connection to the school, up from 40 to 60 spots. Additionally, twelve schools in neighbourhoods with more private housing will offer a two-track Phase 2C to include those living beyond the usual 2km radius.

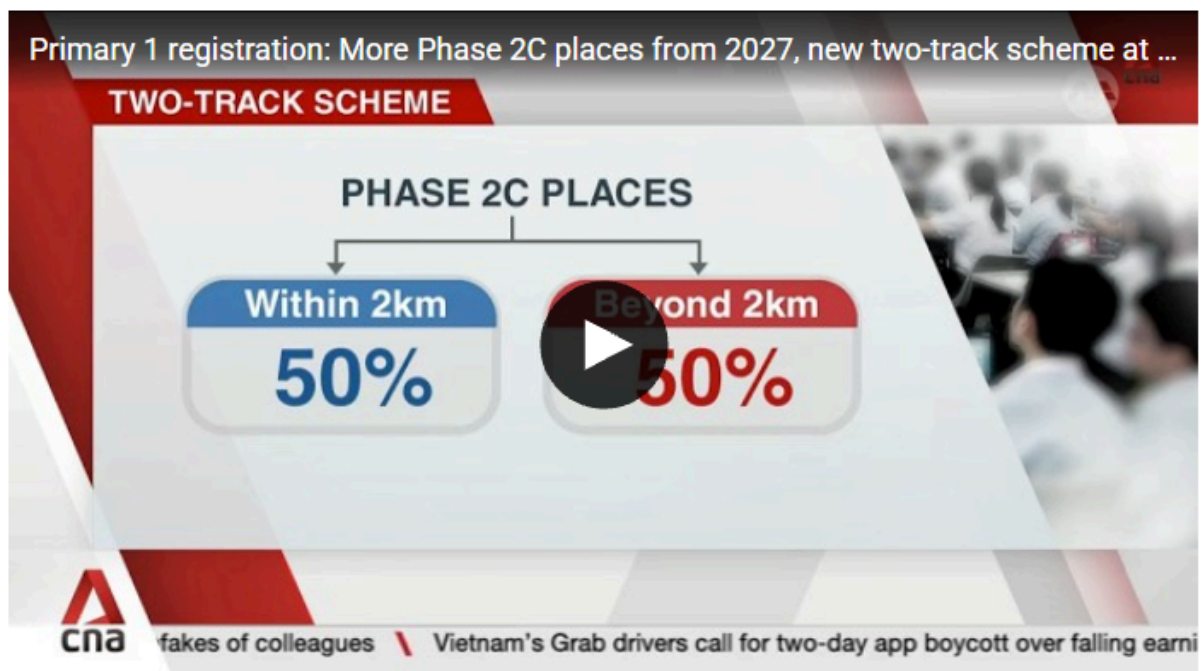
Publication: CNA Online

Date: 25 September 2026

Headline: Commentary: Parents want the best for their child, but P1 registration cannot be only about 'me first'

These changes send an important signal about MOE's commitment to broadening access to schools. Yet in practice, they can feel incremental.

In schools with larger cohorts of 300 students or more, many of them popular schools, 60 spots translate to at most 20 per cent of yearly enrolment. At schools with the median cohort size of 210, it falls just shy of 30 per cent. The 20-seat increase may end up making little practical difference at many oversubscribed schools to "improve access and support inclusivity".



"PARENTOCRACY" IN ACTION

Understanding how much further reform can go requires us to examine the underlying policy goals of the P1 registration framework.

The stated goals of Phase 2A and Phase 2B are to preserve school culture through alumni, clan and church connections, and recognise volunteer or grassroots contributions. For decades, these priorities have defined the boundaries of what Singaporeans imagine the P1 registration framework can and should accomplish.

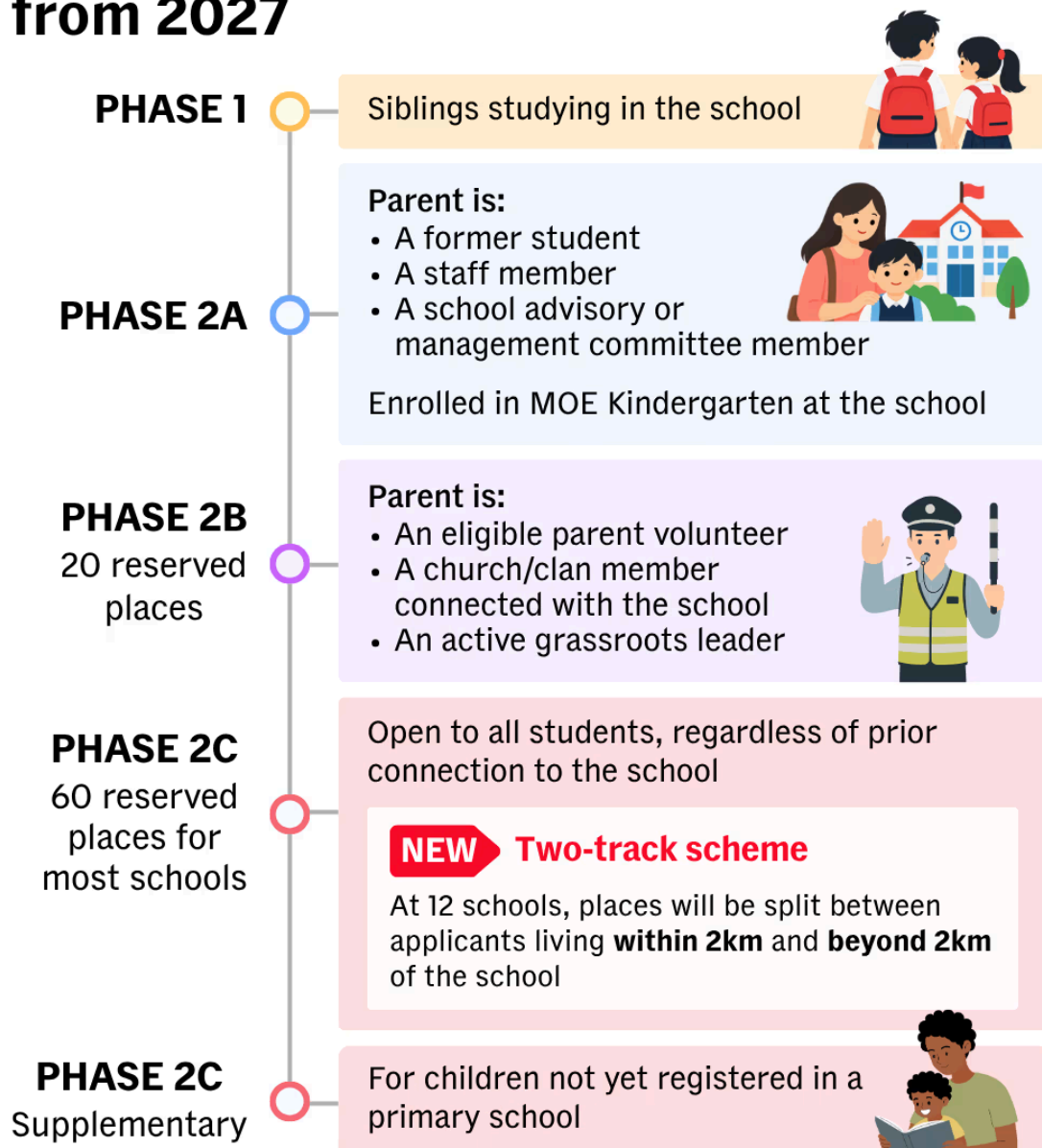
Yet while these policy objectives sound reasonable in theory, the registration rules meant to achieve them have become gameable levers of advantage in practice.

Alumni priority, once a celebration of institutional heritage, is now frequently used as an "insurance policy" against the unpredictable Phase 2C ballot. Justified by the language of "school culture", it converts public educational opportunities into inheritable private assets, allowing top schools to remain self-reproducing enclaves.

Likewise, parent volunteer schemes are less about active community service, and more about the possible reward of securing a spot. This in effect turns time into access—favouring those who have flexible working hours, are stay-home parents or can afford domestic help.

Even proximity rules, which are wholly defensible from a convenience and child well-being standpoint, mean that access to public education in some neighbourhoods comes via the luxury real estate market.

P1 registration framework from 2027



Publication: CNA Online

Date: 25 September 2026

Headline: Commentary: Parents want the best for their child, but P1 registration cannot be only about 'me first'

Left unexamined, this natural parental instinct to give their children the best can encourage the formation of “self-perpetuating closed circles”—something that former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned against.

THE BALANCE IS SHIFTING

The P1 registration system directly ties educational access to the advantages that parents bring to the table, to a much greater degree than in other admission exercises. However, the revised rules chip away at these mechanisms, building on the direction of previous reforms.

Reserving 20 additional spots in Phase 2C makes it less guaranteed that alumni and volunteers will secure a spot. This expands on the last change in the 2022 registration exercise, which doubled the number of reserved places in Phase 2C to 40, in addition to removing the advantage that alumni association members had over regular alumni.

At schools surrounded primarily by low-density private housing, the two-track scheme achieves a better balance between ensuring convenience for families and keeping access open to families that cannot afford to live in these prime areas.

This drift towards more inclusivity is increasingly acknowledged on the ground. A growing number of primary schools have reportedly scrapped the parent volunteer scheme.

These are vital first steps, and we support efforts to encourage the success of the policy change, including parent education and transportation arrangements.

A DEBATE ABOUT FUNDAMENTAL VALUES

But tweaking the rules within existing parameters cannot substitute for a more fundamental cultural debate.

Some have asked: Why not think bolder? For instance, some have proposed eliminating rules that grant priority access to school alumni and parent volunteers. Anecdotally, others have suggested removing the golden pipelines linking affiliated primary schools with affiliated secondary schools that super-charge competition into the former.

Before we can consider these, we must first confront a fundamental question about the balance to strike between a “me-first” competitive impulse and a “we-first” collective ideal.

Within the P1 registration framework, the two are at odds in a very literal way: Priority rules that grant certain families a leg up necessarily reduce the odds for other parents without connections and capital, thereby carving up school-based social networks along lines of wealth and privilege.

If we agree that our schools serve a larger collective purpose than our individual need to get ahead, they ought to be places where children can interact with others from backgrounds different than their own.

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 25 September 2026

Headline: Commentary: Parents want the best for their child, but P1 registration cannot be only about 'me first'

Early cross-class friendships turn unfamiliar others into familiar peers, building the cognitive flexibility, empathy, and social trust that are essential for long-term social cohesion and national resilience.

There is much at stake. In the end, a society of growing social distance between groups is a deeply fragile one.

Do not misunderstand. Pointing out the existence of privilege and “parentocracy” is not about moralising against individual parents, who act out of natural care for their children within the rules they are given.

It is about exercising the intellectual courage to inspect and rewrite those structural rules. If bringing together children from different backgrounds to share a common experience is part of the public mandate of primary schools, then that should carry greater weight in deciding how those rules are written.

If Singapore is to flourish, our primary school gates must no longer be guarded by the private advantages of parents, but opened wide as the common starting point of every Singaporean child.

Jacqueline Ho is assistant professor of sociology at the Singapore Management University.

Jason Tan is associate professor of policy, curriculum and leadership at the National Institute of Education.

Vincent Chua is associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore.

Source: Channel NewsAsia