

Analyzing Singapore's Mid-Year Exam Cancellation in Primary and Secondary Schools: Implications for China

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doi:10.56397/RAE.2023.06.04

Abstract

Drawing on prior experience with canceling mid-year examinations for select grades in recent years, Singapore's Minister of Education, Chan Chun Sing, announced on March 7th, 2022, that all mid-year examinations in primary and secondary schools will be eliminated by 2023.

This article examines the impact of Singapore's decision to cancel mid-year examinations in primary and secondary schools and the inspirations that China can draw from it. The analysis demonstrates that eliminating mid-year exams in Singapore can mitigate students' academic stress, foster their all-round development, decrease teacher workload, and enhance parent-child relations. Nevertheless, it may also lead to some adverse consequences, such as declining academic performance, challenges in assessing teaching effectiveness, and shifting parental attitudes. This article further presents reform proposals, comprising the management and supervision of examination, exam reform, curriculum innovation, and augmenting the significance of teacher professional development, to empower students to develop more effectively and respond positively to challenges.

Keywords: Singapore, primary and secondary schools, cancellation, mid-year examinations, implications

1. Research Background

1.1 *A Brief History of Education in Singapore*

1.1.1 The Early Nation-Building Period (1965 to the Early 1980s)

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, it confronted a formidable economic and social crisis, even an existential one. Under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, head of the People's Action Party government, a unique development path was forged. Through sustained efforts, Singapore has evolved into a global metropolis, and its accomplishments owe much to its distinctive education system. Given its population's ethnic diversity and the need to bolster its international competitiveness, Singapore has embraced bilingual education, which has become one of the pivotal drivers of national unity and economic progress. In the early years of independence, Singapore constructed a lot of schools, and its industrialization necessitated the creation of a substantial export-oriented skilled labor force. The primary educational objective was to train skilled workers for Singapore's industrialization, with vocational and technical education as the focal point (Tan et al., 2016).

1.1.2 Education Reform Phase (1980s-1990s)

In the 1980s, Singapore made remarkable strides in economic development, and the government initiated educational reform. While vocational education was given due attention, basic education was also prioritized. Under the leadership of the then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, Singapore launched the New Education System (NES), which redefined the fundamental objective of education in Singapore as laying a strong foundation of literacy and numeracy for future learning (Swee, 1979), and emphasized the enhancement

of language proficiency in the first three years of basic education. Subsequently, the streaming system was implemented, and English was designated as the primary language of Singapore's education system. By the mid-1980s, with the establishment of the People's Action Party Community Foundation (PCF), the Singapore Government initiated a comprehensive preschool education program (Choo, 2015). The government also allocated more resources and support to schools to enhance the quality and efficiency of teaching. As time progressed, the government also introduced more technological tools to aid teaching, such as computers, the internet, online databases, and other resources.

1.1.3 Contemporary Education Period (1990s to the Present)

During the 1990s, the widespread use of the internet and the acceleration of the global economy posed new challenges to the demand for talent. Singapore responded with a series of education reform measures aimed at improving the quality of pre-school education and focusing on the overall development of students' abilities. (Boon & Gopinathan, n.d.) In June 1997, Singapore introduced the vision of "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation," which emphasized the importance of a collaborative spirit, innovative thinking, lifelong learning, value education, citizen education, and information skills, as well as active citizenship. To meet the diverse needs and interests of students, the entire education system, from preschool to university, offers a variety of schools and curricula, and invests heavily in training to improve the professional competence of teachers and provide them with continuous professional development plans. Furthermore, Singapore's education system introduced international standard examinations to better integrate with the international community and enhance students' international competitiveness. During this period, Singapore's education encouraged self-directed learning and the cultivation of 21st-century skills.

1.2 Historical Background of Mid-Year Examinations in Singapore

The history of mid-year examinations in Singapore dates back to 1959 when Singapore achieved self-governance and adopted the British education system, including the British examination system. (Hairon, 2022) In order to evaluate student learning outcomes and teacher teaching quality, Singapore immediately implemented mid-year examinations for primary and secondary schools. In the information age of all-round development of high-quality talents under globalization, in order to improve the quality of education in Singapore, and to relieve the pressure on students and parents so that students can have more time to learn and develop other skills, since 2018, Singapore has gradually phased out mid-year examinations for Primary 3, Secondary 1, Secondary 3, and Secondary 5. Schools are now adopting more scientific evaluation forms to assess students' academic performance and overall abilities, and are paying more attention to students' all-round development. These measures have had a positive impact and, on March 7, 2022, Singapore announced that all mid-year examinations for primary and secondary schools will be abolished by 2023. (MOE - CNA, n.d.)

2. Positive Impact of Cancelling Mid-Year Examinations on Singapore

2.1 Aspects of Society

2.1.1 Reducing Exam Costs and Preventing Wastage of Educational Resources

Each school examination requires a certain amount of expenditure. Comprehensive budgeting and planning must be carried out to ensure the smooth conduct of the examination and the rational use of educational resources. This includes the production of examination papers, examination costs, examination security, examination room rental costs, and the recruitment of invigilators, markers, and security staff. The decision to abolish the mid-year examination can significantly reduce exam costs and reduce the wastage of educational resources.

2.1.2 Reducing Social Anxiety and Promoting Overall Well-Being

According to the annual report of UK charity Childline for 2018/19, a total of 250,281 calls were received throughout the year, with 45% of them being about emotional problems and happiness. This shows that contemporary students are under increasing pressure from external factors (Childline Annual Review 2018/19, n.d.). Examinations are a means of evaluating learning, typically through quantitative scores that measure learning outcomes and teaching effectiveness. However, the pressure of exams can decrease students' overall life satisfaction (Yuxuan, 2022). When exam results become a critical symbol of a student's success, it can create significant learning pressure for students, as well as educational pressure for parents, schools, and teachers.

2.2 Aspects of Students

2.2.1 Beneficial to Students' Mental Health

Stress from exams can manifest before, during, and after the exams, impacting not only students' test scores but also their health and mood (Pduraru, 2019). While a suitable level of stress can provide motivation for learning, excessive anxiety can negatively impact students in various ways.

2.2.2 Enhancing Students' Interest in Learning

Irrespective of a student's age, learning content, or location, interest plays a crucial role in learning, serving as a mediator that influences learners' self-efficacy, self-management, and learning goal setting (RENNINGER and HIDI, 2011). The cancellation of mid-year examinations can relieve students from the pressure of exams, allowing them to participate in self-learning and focus on learning itself. Students can choose their preferred learning methods based on their mastery of knowledge and select the content they are interested in to unleash their potential. They become more proactive in exploring knowledge and thinking about problems, thus enhancing the learning effect and stimulating their interest in learning, which is also conducive to cultivating innovative abilities.

2.2.3 Facilitates All-Round Development of Students

The elimination of mid-year exams may not directly promote the all-round development of students. However, it grants students more time to concentrate on learning and exploring knowledge, which can enhance their language skills, communication skills, innovation skills, and teamwork skills. Fewer exams can also enable students, teachers, and parents to pay closer attention to students' learning processes and methods, instead of constantly pushing them to achieve high grades, which is more conducive to an all-round development of students.

2.2.4 Establishing an Equitable Learning Environment

Various external factors such as family background, regional disparities, school differences, race, gender, national policies, and institutions can all impact educational equity. Therefore, academic performance is a multifaceted factor, and it is not comprehensive enough to evaluate a student's ability solely based on examination results. Each student's development has individual differences, and the full potential of their abilities may manifest earlier or later, with differences in their ability structure. Students' individual differences in their development are also among the factors that influence their academic achievement (RENNINGER and HIDI, 2011). The abolition of mid-year examinations will allow students to study at their own pace without the pressure that comes with examinations.

2.2.5 Improving the Ability to Retain and Apply Knowledge in the Real World

While exam results from test questions can provide practical guidance and reference, there are also some drawbacks. The questions often emphasize memorization, and students tend to focus on memorizing test-taking strategies to pass exams, rather than applying knowledge in practical situations and developing all-rounded qualities. To better comprehend and retain knowledge, it is crucial to connect it with real-life situations and consistently explore and apply it. Through this process, we can strengthen our ability to retain and apply knowledge in the real world.

2.3 Aspects of Teachers

2.3.1 Alleviating Teacher Workload

Each examination requires a significant amount of work from teachers, including creating exam content, setting exam rules, and monitoring exams. Additionally, teachers must organize students to systematically review material prior to the exam, address any knowledge gaps, and help students consolidate key concepts.

2.3.2 Devoting More Time to Addressing Students' Needs and Strengths

Without the pressure of exams, teachers are free to develop systematic and long-term teaching plans based on course content and the students' needs, with the goal of imparting knowledge rather than solely improving test scores. This creates a more relaxed and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, rather than one focused on exam preparation and rushing through material. When examination results are no longer the sole criterion for evaluating students, competition among teachers for high-performing students is reduced, and more attention can be devoted to improving teaching quality and enhancing students' overall qualities. Teachers will have more time to focus on individual students' needs and learning progress.

2.3.3 Fostering Professional Development Through Increased Learning Opportunities and Activities for Teachers

Canceling mid-year exams can provide students with additional time to attend training, and offer teachers the opportunity to master the latest teaching theories, skills, and knowledge. This extra time also allows teachers to focus more on teaching content and methods, leading to improved teaching abilities and outcomes. Through continuous learning and growth, teachers can update their own knowledge and skills, enhance their professional value, and increase their overall career satisfaction.

2.4 Aspects of Parents

2.4.1 Alleviating Parental Anxiety and Stress

In today's rapidly changing information age, parents face the challenge of balancing family, work, and their children's education, which can lead to significant pressure and anxiety. The pace of knowledge acquisition is

swift, social competition is intense, and educational expectations are high. Parents hope that their children will attain successful careers and social status in the future. Excessive testing can prompt parents to over-intervene in their children's growth and education, further exacerbating their own anxiety.

2.4.2 Fostering Family Harmony

While every parent wants their child to excel, test results are only one aspect of their life. Children's growth is characterized by ups and downs, and frequent testing can negatively impact the parent-child relationship. If parents place too much emphasis on test scores, it can increase children's test anxiety (Ba Shi Aslan, 2022). When a child's test results are not satisfactory, parents may feel disappointed and frustrated, leading to disputes between family members. This can create disagreements between parents and children, ultimately resulting in increased tension and dissatisfaction within the family. Such issues can disrupt communication and interaction within the family, ultimately impacting family harmony.

3. Negative Impact of Cancelling Mid-Year Exams on Singapore's Primary and Secondary Schools

3.1 Social and Cultural Aspects

3.1.1 Potential Rise in Cheating and Plagiarism

If examinations are a regular part of learning, it can be beneficial for cultivating disciplined habits. Students are required to genuinely understand the knowledge during their regular studies in order to confidently handle frequent exams. The costs and difficulties associated with cheating also increase, and the phenomenon of "swot up just before an exam" tends to decrease (Laverty et al., 2012).

Furthermore, reducing the number of exams can increase the weight of each final exam. The elimination of mid-year exams may lead students to prioritize their final exams, resulting in heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Consequently, some students may resort to improper methods to achieve higher scores, thereby increasing the occurrence of unethical behaviors such as cheating and plagiarism.

3.1.2 Challenges in Timely Assessment of School Performance and Teacher Effectiveness

The primary function of schools is to produce skilled and knowledgeable workers who can contribute to society's growth and development. The quality of education is directly linked to the future and progress of a country. Hence, it is essential for schools and teachers to be accountable to society through objective assessments. Examinations serve as a relatively objective assessment method of evaluation as they are designed based on the teaching objectives and content, providing an accurate reflection of students' knowledge and abilities. They also assess the teachers' effectiveness and reflect the overall teaching quality of a school. Timely evaluation of students' academic performance can encourage schools and teachers to improve and enhance the quality of education continuously. However, the cancellation of mid-year exams can make it challenging for government agencies to identify issues in schools and teachers promptly, ultimately affecting the quality of education.

3.2 Aspects of Students

3.2.1 Decline in Students' Academic Focus

A reduction in the number of tests does not necessarily result in lower academic performance; however, it can indirectly affect test scores. Without frequent assessments and the pressure of exams, students' self-discipline may decrease, ultimately affecting their ability to learn effectively. Examinations provide students with timely feedback, allowing them to identify areas for improvement and study harder. By reducing the number of exams, students may lack the necessary feedback and assessment to make timely adjustments.

3.2.2 Challenges in Keeping Motivation of Students to Study

While exams can be stressful for students, they can also foster active learning. Moderate pressure can stimulate students' interest and motivation, encouraging them to study with greater enthusiasm. Students may work harder to achieve higher grades, and the elimination of mid-year exams could lead to a decline in the pursuit of academic excellence, ultimately leading to a lack of motivation to study.

3.2.3 Challenges in Preparing Students for Higher-Level Examinations

Students who aspire to excel in their academic and professional pursuits must pass rigorous selection tests. Examinations can instill in students scientific study habits and methodologies, promoting effective learning and time management skills. Reducing the number of examinations may deprive students of the necessary practice and regular training to enhance their learning abilities, skillsets and exam skills.

3.3 Aspects of Teachers

3.3.1 Challenges in Accurately and Timely Assessing Students' Academic Levels

Exam results serve as an accurate reflection of students' subject mastery. Reducing the number of exams may pose challenges for teachers in assessing students' academic levels, tracking their progress, and identifying their

strengths and weaknesses. Teachers may find it difficult to detect problems in a timely manner, provide targeted guidance, and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly.

3.3.2 Challenges in Managing Increased Work Pressure for Teachers

As an alternative to mid-year exams, teachers are focusing on preparing students for final exams. However, without the performance of other students in the class and community as a reference point, teachers may need to spend more time and effort evaluating student learning. This can significantly increase their workload and stress levels.

3.4 Aspects of Parents

3.4.1 Heightened Concerns of Parents

Cancellation of mid-year exams has left many parents accustomed to measuring their children's learning abilities through test results unable to keep track of their children's progress. As a result, they may experience heightened concerns regarding their children's academic performance.

3.4.2 Challenges in Timely Tracking of Students' Learning Status

Parental involvement is a significant factor that impacts student achievement. By reducing the number of tests, parents may find it difficult to stay up-to-date with their children's learning progress and track their academic status, therefore cannot keep track of their children's academic status.

4. Conclusion

In summary, although the cancellation of mid-year exams in Singapore may have some drawbacks, the overall impact is predominantly positive. Students may experience a short-term decline in their academic performance. However, in the long run, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. It not only reduces students' stress but also allows them to focus more on learning and acquiring knowledge. While this measure may pose certain challenges in assessing students' academic progress, alternative methods such as classroom performance, group activities, and discussions can be employed to evaluate students comprehensively and scientifically, thereby gaining a more holistic understanding of their academic abilities.

5. Implications for China

Singapore's decision to cancel mid-year examinations is a step towards encouraging students to focus on learning and cultivating 21st century skills. This approach not only eases academic pressure, but also promotes students' all-round development by reducing the emphasis on tests and scores. As a result, teachers have more time to focus on teaching, and students have more energy to explore, allowing them to learn and master knowledge more deeply. China can learn from Singapore's example by improving the management and supervision of examinations, strengthening examination reform, reducing the difficulty of examinations, and increasing the diversity of examination content. This will enable students to better develop their potential.

5.1 Improving the Management and Supervision of Examinations in Primary and Secondary Schools

On December 28, 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education and eight other departments on the issuance of the "Measures to Reduce the Burden of Primary and Secondary School Student," which stipulated that in Chinese primary schools, grades one and two could have one unified exam per semester, while other grades could have no more than two unified exams per semester (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). On August 30, 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued the "Notice on Strengthening the Management of Examinations in Compulsory Education Schools," which required schools to significantly reduce the number of exams. It stated that grades one and two in primary schools would not conduct written exams, while higher grades would organize one final exam per semester. For junior high school, one mid-term exam could be arranged based on actual circumstances. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021) After the policy was introduced, schools across the country actively responded to it, relieving the learning pressure and workload for lower-grade students. However, in a recent random anonymous survey of parents from seven grades in compulsory education, with 63 respondents mainly from five provinces in China, most of whom were parents from two cities of Jiangxi province of lower-grade students, it was found that 88.89% of students had to take final exams, 80.95% had to take mid-term exams and unit tests, and 30.16% had to take monthly tests, as shown in the table below:

Table 1.

Options	Total	Percentage
Mid-term exam	56	88.89%
Final exam	51	80.95%

Month exam	19	30.16%
Unit test	51	80.95%
Number of valid responses	63	

This survey indicates that some schools in China have not yet adapted to the teaching model with reduced exams, as many schools still organize various forms of paper-based exams. China should strengthen training for school leaders, regulate school behaviors, enhance awareness of quality education, improve the supervision and management of exams, and establish a three-tier supervision mechanism consisting of parents, society, and education departments. These efforts will tangibly reduce the burden on students and create a better environment to promote their all-round development and healthy growth.

5.2 Cancelling Mid-Exam at the Junior High School Level

In addition to the eight cultural courses of Chinese, mathematics, English, physics, chemistry, biology, history, and geography, junior high school students in China also need to study music, art, and physical education. Junior high school is a critical stage for entering a higher school, and families pay more attention to their children's grades. If they want to get good grades in exams, students need to spend a lot of time and energy preparing. In order to reduce the learning burden and pressure of junior high school students, China can also completely cancel the mid-exam in junior high school, so that students and teachers can have more energy to focus on learning itself.

5.3 Lowering the Difficulty of Examinations

The level of difficulty in a task is inversely related to the level of autonomous participation demonstrated by students. As the level of difficulty increases, students tend to lose interest and enthusiasm in autonomous learning. This decline in enthusiasm can further impact the students' self-efficacy, drive, and academic performance. (Lynch et al., 2019) The primary aim of primary school education is to equip students with fundamental knowledge and skills that form a strong foundation for future studies. The scope of examination must prioritize the examination of basic knowledge to avoid overly challenging or off-topic questions, thereby safeguarding children's learning interest and self-confidence while also reducing exam pressure. During regular teaching, teachers can delve into important and complex subject matter while ensuring that students have a firm understanding of basic knowledge. By adopting this approach, teachers can also provide in-depth explanations of challenging concepts.

5.4 Broadening the Diversity of Examination Formats

China's examination system has traditionally placed significant emphasis on grades, and the content of exams has been relatively narrow. China can learn from Singapore's experience of canceling mid-year exams and gradually reform its education examination methods. If the exam content remains singular, focusing solely on knowledge recall and mechanical application, it fails to truly measure students' comprehensive qualities. By diversifying the forms of assessment, a better evaluation of students' abilities and levels can be achieved, promoting a fairer assessment of their learning achievements. In addition to written exams, incorporating practical experiments, skills assessments, and oral expression can provide additional examination formats. Relying solely on book knowledge should not define a student's entire learning journey, as "bookworms" may not adapt well to the development of modern society.

5.5 Advancing Curriculum Reform and Enhancing Teacher Training

In Singapore, the abolition of mid-year examinations was accompanied by significant curriculum and teaching method reforms, with a focus on cultivating students' "21st-century skills" that align with their interests, abilities, and development. By doing so, students are better equipped to adapt to the rapidly evolving contemporary society. China can learn from Singapore's experience and enhance curriculum innovation and practical teaching, promote curriculum diversification, and establish a more diversified education system.

However, implementing examination and curriculum reforms requires teachers to possess more education skills and professional knowledge to improve the quality and effectiveness of their teaching. Therefore, schools should provide systematic and targeted training opportunities to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge.

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