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Sep 4, 2010

Case for a tuition watchdog

Best if \$820m industry regulates itself, vetting standards, qualifications

By Radha Basu

A FATHER hires a private tutor from an online agency to provide twice-weekly lessons to his child. After just two sessions costing \$126, the tutor begins cancelling pre-arranged lessons.

The father wants to terminate the contract, but is told he cannot - unless he coughs up \$240 in agency fees.

A mother pays a language centre \$720 for 18 Chinese idiom classes for her two daughters aged eight and 13. The centre puts both girls in the same class. When she decides to withdraw her children, the centre refuses to refund the fees.

A Primary 5 pupil on the verge of failing signs up for maths tuition at a well-known centre. Within a year, the centre changes tutors five times. Her marks do not improve.

A Straits Times report last week revealed that Singapore parents spent \$820 million on private tuition in 2008, up from \$470 million a decade earlier.

There are, of course, many satisfied clients and many qualified, dedicated tutors. But it is not rare for parents and students to encounter empty promises and downright unqualified tutors.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has long advised a buyer-beware approach to hiring tutors. Parents should conduct their own checks before choosing a tutor, it has said.

But with thousands of tutors and hundreds of tuition agencies, that is no easy task. Recommendations from friends can go only so far. In the absence of regulations, customers depend on a tikam tikam (trial-and-error) method to finding tutors.

This needs to change. The industry needs to be regulated better. In any case, some parents may not be able to do their own checks.

Thousands of less-educated parents painstakingly save a big chunk of their income to pay for tutors for their children, hoping to give them the opportunities they lacked.

One father I met spent \$300 every month on private tuition for his sons in primary school. The former technician, who dropped out of school at 14, wasn't sure if he was getting his money's worth. 'The centre must be good, lah,' he added. 'It is registered by MOE.'

What parents like him don't know is that the MOE website states clearly that registration does not in any way represent 'an endorsement or accreditation' of the quality of the schools, the courses offered or the tutors.

To register with MOE, a tuition centre must have 10 or more students, meet building and fire safety requirements, and have a school management committee. MOE also wants 'evidence that the teachers possess the appropriate educational qualifications required to teach their proposed courses or subjects'.

What this means is that tutors need not have teaching qualifications, but must have knowledge of the subjects they teach. Registration with MOE is no guarantee of quality.

This is why there is an urgent need for an accreditation scheme for the private tuition industry.

Some want the MOE to take this role on board. But the ministry's mandate has to do with mass education.

It may not be fair to ask it to accredit private educators as well.

It is better for the industry to self-regulate. This can be done with an industry body that can vet qualifications and curriculum, set standards, maintain ethics and address grievances.

This approach has been successful elsewhere. The Australian Tutoring Association (ATA) was formed in 2005 after a national survey overwhelmingly supported the need for minimum standards in the tutoring industry there. It now has more than 6,000 tutors and 380 tuition agencies as members, serving over 100,000 students.

All members must abide by a rigorous and detailed code of conduct which maintains national benchmarks for tutoring. All tutors need to be trained, and must be tested annually. Members must provide information on the qualifications of the tutors to clients, and show their programmes and curricula on request. Written contracts stipulate fees. There is a transparent refund policy and a ban on misleading claims in advertisements.

The costs for such regulation are not high. Members pay the association A\$198 (S\$240) per year for membership privileges.

A similar set-up makes sense in Singapore, where the per capita spending on private tuition is about thrice that in Australia.

Who should start the ball rolling?

There is every incentive for the bigger, more established agencies with good track records to start the process. A self-regulating accreditation system would help separate the professionals from fly-by-night operators out to make a quick buck. Such a move would be good for the industry, good for parents and good, above all, for students.

Meanwhile, the MOE and its teachers also have to do more to rein in tuition excesses. Some teachers have been known to encourage parents to send under-performing children to tutors. This is wrong.

If schools begin to assume that all children have tuition - and treat it as a crutch - teaching standards will surely slip. Tuition should supplement rather than become a substitute for school education.

The MOE or the National Institute of Education should also conduct scientific studies to see if tuition aids academic performance. The last study conducted a decade ago showed no direct link between a child's examination scores and how much tuition he received.

Has that changed? Is the startling increase in tuition spending a sign that our schools are not doing their job? Or is it a sign of the fabled Singaporean kiasu-ness? Are children who don't have private tuition losing out? These are questions that need to be answered.

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