**SINGAPORE’S EFFORTS TO ENSURE CHILDREN’S WELL-BEING**

**IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

*Submission to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*

The Singapore Government appreciates this opportunity to provide information for the OHCHR’s preparation of its 2021 report to the High-Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals and the rights of the child.

1. Singapore entered a “Circuit Breaker” period from 7 April to 1 June 2020, as a preventive measure to reduce the local transmission of COVID-19. Most physical workplaces as well as schools were closed, and classes were conducted via home-based learning (HBL). Singapore has since eased some of the measures, with schools and workplaces reopening in a careful and cautious manner.

1. Despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, the Singapore Government remains fully committed to ensuring the well-being and safety of our children. We continue to adopt safe distancing measures, enhance services, and allocate resources, to support children’s education and development during and after the Circuit Breaker.
2. ***Support for Children’s Education during COVID-19***
3. Singapore believes that education remains the best way to sustain and strengthen social mobility, and will continue to redouble our efforts to make sure that no child is left behind. Specifically during this COVID-19 period, Singapore has extended additional learning and financial support for students, and has paid special attention to disadvantaged students and students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to ensure there is continuity in their learning during COVID-19.

Learning Support for Students

*Support for HBL*

1. To facilitate continuity of learning during the full HBL period (8 April to 4 May 2020), schools loaned out over 20,000 digital devices and 1,600 internet dongles to students who lacked access to computing devices and internet access for HBL. Students whose home environment was not conducive for HBL or whose parents were not home as they were working to provide essential services could use school facilities for learning, with the necessary precautions in place.
2. To address the associated challenges of online learning observed during the full HBL period and to close the digital divide, Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) is working to accelerate the roll out of personal learning devices under the Ministry’s National Digital Literacy Programme[[1]](#footnote-1) to all secondary schools by 2021, seven years ahead of the originally planned timeline. The devices are kept affordable, and further subsidies are provided for students from lower-income households. The Government will also continue to facilitate low-income students’ application for computing devices and internet access.

*Support for disadvantaged students*

1. The Government worked with corporates and the community to complement school efforts in loaning digital devices for students. For example, Engineering Good – a non-profit organisation – refurbished more than 2,000 donated laptops to distribute to students from low-income families. During the full HBL period and the May school holidays,[[2]](#footnote-2) MOE partnered community organisations to support vulnerable and disadvantaged students. For example, MOE collaborated with corporate and community partners to offer programmes such as online enrichment and tele-befriending to vulnerable students.

*Support for students with SEN*

1. Singapore also worked to ensure that students with SEN were supported by their schools during the full HBL period. Teachers adjusted their materials and pedagogy to engage students online and accommodate their learning needs. Schools ensured that students had access to the necessary equipment and accommodations for learning and provided their parents with strategies and resources to address their children’s needs. A small group of students with very high support needs were invited to return to school for limited services.
2. Students from Special Education (SPED) schools received additional learning support through daily check-ins from SPED teachers or allied professionals in addition to the customised home-learning packages designed by their teachers. They subsequently returned to school in cohorts to benefit from face-to-face interactions with their teachers.

Financial Support for Students

1. Throughout the full HBL period and the May school holidays, MOE continued to provide meal subsidies to all primary and secondary school students on the MOE Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS), regardless of whether they returned to school, and fully covered bus fees for primary school students on the MOE FAS for the month of April 2020. The Government also provided additional temporary cash relief for primary and secondary school students on the MOE FAS during the reopening of schools in June and July 2020.
2. To avoid creating further financial strain on students and their families during this period, government fee increases for studies in schools, the Institute of Technical Education and polytechnics were deferred from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 for citizens. The autonomous universities also deferred fee increases for academic year 2020.[[3]](#footnote-3)
3. ***Health and Safety Measures in the Early Childhood Sector***

Phased Re-opening for Preschools and Early Intervention Centres

1. As the COVID-19 situation in Singapore improved, preschools and Early Intervention (EI) centres[[4]](#footnote-4) gradually reopened from 2 June 2020. This allowed young children to continue their learning and supported parents as they return to work. The gradual reopening eased the transition for children, and enabled preschools and EI centres to ensure that staff, children and parents adhere to the enhanced safe management measures under “COVID-Safe ABCs” – COVID-Safe Access, COVID-Safe Behaviours and COVID-Safe Classrooms.

*Tighten and restrict access when needed*

1. Singapore stepped up precautions to protect our preschool community, including the standardised use of the SafeEntry[[5]](#footnote-5) system to log the check-in of staff and visitors in all preschools. This enables contact tracing to be carried out quickly and effectively. All preschool and EI centre staff were also required to undergo a one-time test for COVID-19 in May 2020 ahead of the phased reopening of preschools.
2. In line with the Government’s measures for most public spaces, strict temperature/health checks are conducted for all staff and children at arrival and again during the day. In addition to health checks for visible symptoms, preschools explicitly ask all children, staff and visitors a series of questions during health checks to help ascertain their wellness. Those who are unwell are not allowed entry and are asked to seek immediate medical attention.

*Strengthen public health awareness*

1. Keeping the preschool and EI community safe is a collective effort. To instill the “COVID-Safe ABCs” into the daily routines in preschools, ECDA dedicated the first two weeks of reopening to strengthen public health awareness and build a culture of COVID-Safe habits among staff, children and their parents. ECDA conducted regular visits to preschools to support the preschool community, provide guidance and ensure compliance with the necessary measures (e.g. enhanced cleaning and disinfection of premises, no inter-mixing of groups, down-sizing classes, staggered drop-off and pick-up times).

Resourcing Support for Preschools and EI Centres

16 During the Circuit Breaker period, preschools and EI centres were required to suspend their general services and parents were strongly encouraged to keep their children at home. Home-based activity resources developed by various preschools were shared with other preschools and parents to support the children’s development while at home. Although general services were suspended, preschools remained open to serve a limited group of parents who were working in essential services and unable to find alternative care arrangements. Priority was given to children of healthcare workers and children with both parents in essential services, who had no alternative care.

17 Besides the distribution of donated Personal Protection Equipment supplies to preschools and EI centres, ECDA also works closely with industry associations such as the Association of Early Childhood & Training Services and other sector stakeholders to identify tools and equipment that will help preschools to put in place safe management measures. To further support the implementation of “COVID-Safe ABCs” in preschools, ECDA also provided one-off funding support, under the COVID-Safe Preschools Fund, for tools/equipment purchased by preschools and EI centres during the Circuit Breaker period and in June. Eligible preschools can also qualify for up to 80 per cent subsidy from the Government’s enhanced Productivity Solutions Grant till end-2020 to implement pre-approved learning management and visitor management systems including automated temperature screening.

1. ***Support for Children Exposed to Violence***

18 During the Circuit Breaker period, safe distancing measures were put in place to limit physical interactions between households. Singapore stepped up its efforts to support the safety and well-being of children who are in the care of the State.

Initiatives for the Continual Access of Children in Foster Care

19 Singapore’s Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) continued to facilitate interaction between foster children and their natural parents during this period, to maintain family ties and to facilitate the children’s eventual reunification with their families.

20 In line with the safe management measures, caseworkers and foster families continued to facilitate access virtually through video-conferencing or phone calls for the children to maintain regular contact with their natural families. Caseworkers also had more frequent virtual check-ins with the children to ensure their well-being.

21 After Singapore exited the Circuit Breaker, children in foster care were granted home leave to visit their natural families in their homes, with measures to ensure the safety of both the children and their families. The natural parents must declare the health situation of the family before any visit, and there must not be any household member feeling unwell, or under a Home Quarantine Order, Leave of Absence, or Stay-Home Notice. Caseworkers also request for periodic updates on the natural family’s health.

Initiatives for Vulnerable Children

22 To ensure the safety and well-being of children under the care of MSF Child Protective Service (CPS)[[6]](#footnote-6) during the Circuit Breaker period, CPS arranged for checks with the children regularly through video calls or phone calls. This included training volunteers to work with CPS to conduct checks with families over video calls, look out for unusual behaviours and provide psychological support. CPS also worked closely with preschools and schools, and community partners such as Family Service Centres and Child Protection Specialist Centres to check in with families regularly and keep the children safe. In addition, for children who required close monitoring during the Circuit Breaker period, CPS made arrangements for them to continue attending schools or childcare centres so that they remained visible in the community. For urgent and critical cases, CPS and social workers from community organisations continued to make home visits to provide help, whilst practicing stringent safe distancing measures. These efforts helped to ensure that the safety of vulnerable children was safeguarded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

23 Special programmes were also planned for residents at MSF Youth Homes during the Circuit Breaker, when external activities and visits were put on hold as a safety precaution to minimise infection risk. To help the residents better cope with disappointment and ensure their well-being, while tackling the challenges presented by COVID-19, the Youth Homes’ staff initiated meaningful activities, such as regular check-in sessions, weekly themed engagement activities and sports programmes. Through creative arts and group programmes, the youths were also given a chance to learn about the rationale behind the safety measures, and show their appreciation to front-line workers who were battling the pandemic.

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1. This programme enhances the Ministry’s efforts to strengthen students’ digital literacy and equip them with digital skills required to navigate the digital age. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The mid-year school holidays, usually in the month of June, were brought forward to 5 May to 1 June 2020, to coincide with the extended national Circuit Breaker period. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. MOE also suspended the repayment and interest of government education loans for all university and polytechnic graduates for one year from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. EI centres providing the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC), and the centres providing the Enhanced Pilot for Private Intervention Providers (PPIP) scheme also reopened from 2 June 2020 in phases. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. SafeEntry is a national digital check-in system that logs the identification numbers and mobile numbers of individuals visiting public venues, workplaces and essential services. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Child Protective Service (CPS), under MSF, provides statutory intervention and supportive services to protect and ensure the well-being of children and young persons. Child Protection Officers conduct social investigations and provide case management services for children and young persons who have been abused or neglected by their parents or caregivers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)