

From 2023, every preschool to have 'inclusion coordinator' to identify students who may have developmental needs

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Published MARCH 05, 2021, Updated MARCH 05, 2021



Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development, speaking in Parliament on March 5, 2021.

- An "inclusion coordinator" will be appointed in every preschool from the second half of 2023
- The role involves identifying students who may need help with developmental needs
- Ms Sun Xueling said in Parliament that strengthening inclusion in preschools benefited all children

SINGAPORE — From the second half of 2023, every preschool in Singapore will have an "inclusion coordinator" to enhance inclusivity for children with developmental needs. This coordinator will help to identify students who may need screening for developmental issues and to work with parents.

The new role was announced by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) on Friday (March 5), alongside other initiatives to support preschool children with developmental needs.

Developmental needs can range from sensory issues such as vision or hearing loss to learning issues such as delays in language development.

These inclusion coordinators are part of recommendations by the Inclusive Preschool Workgroup that the ministry had set up in 2019 to better integrate children who have developmental needs with typically developing children.

During the debate on the ministry's budget in Parliament, Mr Masagos Zulkifli said that instilling inclusive values and mindsets early on in life will lay the foundations for a more caring and inclusive society.

The Minister of Social and Family Development added: "This will be beneficial for everyone. Studies show that both children with developmental needs and typically developing children can benefit from greater inclusion in preschools, in areas like developing positive social attitudes and relationships, without compromising their development."

Elaborating on this, Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development, said that the workgroup is adopting a tiered support framework, depending on the level of early intervention support required. The group will release its full report next month.

The appointment of inclusion coordinators is in the first tier of the framework.

The inclusion coordinator will work with other preschool teachers to identify children with potential developmental needs and help to link teachers and parents to early intervention support. In doing so, children will have access to early intervention services earlier and with greater ease.

The Early Childhood Development Agency (EDCA), which regulates preschools here, will work with the country's 1,900 or so preschools to appoint an existing preschool staff member as an inclusion coordinator. In the lead-up to their appointment, EDCA will work with preschools to train and prepare these staff members for their new roles.

"Inclusion coordinators alone are not the silver bullet and we urge all preschool leaders and educators to partner inclusion coordinators in their preschools in this inclusion journey," Ms Sun said.

Details on the training and implementation schedule of the inclusion coordinator will be released at a later date.

Besides the inclusion coordinator, MSF will also expand its "Development Support – Learning Support programme" for children requiring low levels of early intervention support.

This is the second tier of the framework established by the workgroup.

As of last year, the programme was offered in about 600 preschools, which enrolled more than 40 per cent of resident preschoolers aged five to six.

The Government plans to make the programme available to 60 per cent of preschoolers within this age group by 2025, and 80 per cent eventually.

In the third tier, a pilot programme to support integrated early intervention and early childhood services will also be rolled out at selected preschools at a date to be confirmed. This will be for children aged three to six who require medium levels of early intervention support.

For now, most children who need such support attend multiple intervention sessions at early intervention centres each week, on top of attending preschool.

By bringing together both services under one roof, the pilot Inclusive Support Programme will reduce the logistical strain faced by caregivers of having to shuttle children between preschools and early intervention centres, Ms Sun said.

As part of the pilot, preschools will have full-time professionals doing early intervention work as well as visiting allied health professionals. These professionals will work closely with early childhood educators in the schools to help children take part meaningfully in school activities. More details on the pilot will be released later this year.

Ms Sun said the workgroup also recognised that there are children who require higher levels of early intervention support, who remain best served in a separate specialised early intervention setting.

ECDA will study integration opportunities for these children at the fourth tier.

"Ultimately, strengthening inclusion in our preschools will benefit both children with developmental needs, and typically developing children, with enhanced teacher training, and development of stronger social skills from a young age," Ms Sun said.

Read more at <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/2023-every-preschool-have-inclusion-coordinator-identify-students-who-may-have>