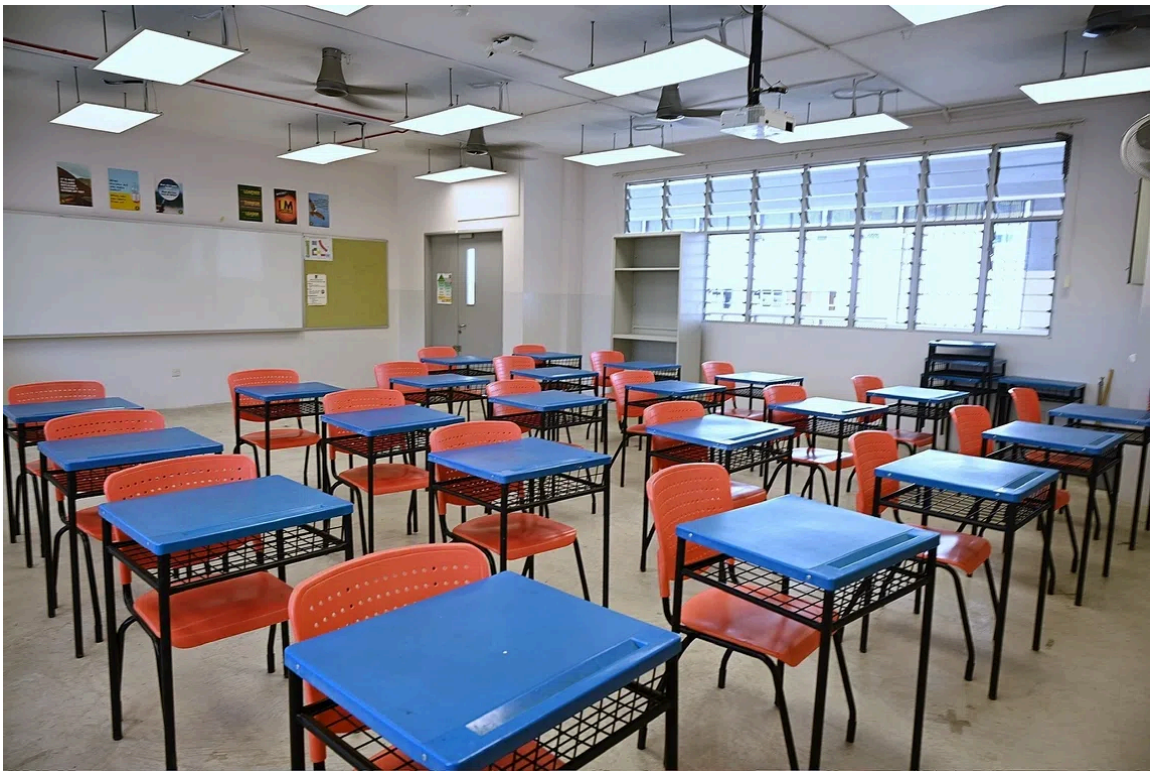
Subscriber exclusive

Long-sighted and colour-blind, his doctors outlined his needs. Yet school remained a struggle

Consistent access to learning support is key for students with special educational needs.

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Continual efforts to increase mainstream accessibility and inclusivity must be paramount, says the writer. PHOTO: ST FILE

Max Soh and Pooja Bhandari

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Thirteen-year-old Sam, who is visually impaired, needed some accommodations to help him learn and thrive in a mainstream classroom. In particular, he needed to sit at the back of the class.

This is because Sam is long-sighted, and prolonged close-up viewing of the board causes him visual and mental strain, increasing stress and hindering learning.

A psychologist and an optometrist prepared a report recommending that he sit at the back of the class. Their report also listed key recommended accommodations for his other disabilities – dyslexia, dysgraphia (affecting how he navigates written language and writes it) and complete colour-blindness.

The recommendations included allowing him to type in class, as handwriting causes him physical pain. Sam's mother gave the report to the Secondary 1 year head, who circulated it among his teachers.

Despite this, Sam's teachers continued to seat him at the front. Providing the other accommodations he needed each day also lacked follow-through. Once, when Sam asked to use his laptop to type, a teacher insensitively remarked: "You cannot always have typing in life."

Sam's mother, who had homeschooled him through the primary years and was closely involved in his education, alerted the school about his needs, but meaningful and lasting change remained elusive. With inadequate provision of accommodations, Sam returned to homeschooling midway through Sec 2.

Now 17, Sam still finds memories of that time painful. He remembers how he felt back then: "It was frustrating. We gave you all this information, how could they not understand? Then it's also like, what is the point of me trying?"

The experience faced by Sam and his mother is still not uncommon today. According to findings in EveryChild.SG's 2025 Mind The Gap report on special educational needs (SEN) inclusion in mainstream schools, 35% of surveyed parents of SEN students experienced dismissiveness from their child's school when they raised concerns about potential learning needs.

Gaps and confusion about including SEN kids

The Taskforce on Assurance to Families with Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) published a report in October outlining its recommendations. One of the recommendations was to strengthen transitions between the schooling years and adulthood. In particular, the report focused on children

in special education (SPED) schools, and introduced measures to help families of children in such schools better prepare for life beyond the immediate steps after graduation.

Such measures are important.

However, the task force's report did not discuss the gap that Sam's example highlights – the need to improve accessibility and inclusion within mainstream schools, where close to 80% of students with disabilities or SEN reside, according to data from the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Today, while MOE's Professional Practice Guidelines establish a broad framework under which classroom accommodations can be granted, EveryChild.SG's 2025 report also found notable confusion about what types of accommodations a child with SEN can qualify for. Findings show that parents and professionals perceive that eligibility criteria for classroom accommodations vary by school, and that some mainstream schools are more willing than others to support children with SEN.

In practice, this often means that access to the support these students need to reach their potential in daily learning – whether it's a laptop, or a particular seating arrangement – can be easily withdrawn by individual teachers or administrators who have decided in the moment that such support is "too much work" or "not really necessary". This inadvertently results in inconsistent and arbitrary methods, instead of the use of concrete and objective criteria to facilitate necessary support for daily learning in the classroom.

There have been efforts to improve mainstream school access and inclusivity. Increases in the number of SEN officers in mainstream schools and the introduction of the TRANsition Support for InTegration (TRANSIT) programme have the potential to improve inclusivity in mainstream classrooms, if implemented well. TRANSIT is an MOE school-based programme aiming to better integrate Primary 1 students who have additional social, emotional and behavioural needs.

However, as findings from EveryChild.SG's report show, experiences are still inconsistent at best, and more measures are needed to ensure that important adjustments and other support for daily learning in mainstream classrooms are not left to chance – or privilege.

A guarantee, not a privilege

When learning aids and other assistance and accommodations are not guaranteed, which children are most likely to receive them, and which children are likely to pay the price as they grow up and head into adulthood?

Recent conversations held by the Disabled People's Association with young adults with disabilities who attended mainstream schooling reveal important insights.

Sarah (now 19) and Jessica (now 21) both struggled with sensory overload, public meltdowns and wandering attention during primary school. Neither were popular with teachers, who frequently labelled them "bad", "disruptive" or "not a team player", and neither performed well academically.

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Yet after primary school, their lives diverged significantly.

After a poor PSLE performance, Sarah's parents saw a private specialist, who diagnosed her with severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She was enrolled in one of Singapore's international schools, where an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) guaranteed 25% extra time at exams, breaks as needed, testing in small groups and permission to type.

Her academic improvement was rapid and impressive, with her Maths performance rising from the 74th to the 99th percentile after these accomodations were implemented. Sarah was highly intelligent – she simply needed the right scaffolding to demonstrate it.

She also needed the emotional security that comes from learning in an environment where adults did not stigmatise support.

“Pretty much my entire international school life, my relationships with my teachers were pretty strong. I was able to get a lot more one-on-one time with them,” she recalled.

Jessica, meanwhile, remained in mainstream secondary school. By her own account, her grades were “always sub-par”. Her relationships with her classmates were always strained, as her sensory overload was perceived as “bad behaviour”. Things were also tense at home, where her parents assumed her meltdowns were “on purpose to throw a tantrum”.

Throughout Jessica’s education, nobody ever recommended her for SEN screening, and she says she was unaware of SEN officers until a few years ago, after she had already left school.

It was only at age 19, when Jessica, like Sarah, was diagnosed with severe ADHD (an autism diagnosis followed shortly after).

“Looking back,” Jessica reflects, “I could have had teachers checking in on my progress. I could have received after-school tutoring, or someone checking up on me, helping me through my academic journey.”

Like Sam’s account, Sarah and Jessica’s experiences are still happening today. Findings from EveryChild.SG’s 2025 Mind The Gap report show that it is not uncommon for parents to be told that their child was merely misbehaving, and that they should “wait it out”, only for them to later obtain a formal diagnosis for their child.

This highlights that such early professional “reassurances” – though probably well-meaning – can delay appropriate intervention for the necessary, life-changing accommodations to be made.

As the accounts show, proper accommodations are essential, not only on occasion or for examinations, but also for everyday learning. For SEN students, proper accomodations for daily learning lead to an optimised learning experience in their schooling years and give them the best chances for success as they head into adulthood.

These accounts pose an important question: If access to accommodations are indeed necessary to support SEN students’ daily learning, as paediatric professionals say they are, should this really be a privilege and left to chance? Shouldn’t access be guaranteed throughout one’s education?

What Singapore can do

Continual efforts to increase mainstream accessibility and inclusivity must be paramount.

Unlike many developed nations, Singapore does not have a formal statutory framework governing daily mainstream classroom accommodations. Parents report inconsistent experiences, even when children share similar diagnoses and professional recommendations. Clearer guidance and requirements, as well as greater consistency around accommodations are needed, particularly for everyday learning.

There also needs to be a clearer review process for disputes. At present, parents who disagree with schools over accomodations may feel uncertain about where to turn.

More transparent and formalised review processes could help build trust, while also providing greater clarity for both schools and families.

More structured collaboration between schools, families and professionals could take the form of IEPs, similar to those used in SPED schools, to ensure that all stakeholders share a common understanding of the child's needs and support strategies.

And we need smaller class sizes. Currently, many teachers lack the bandwidth to implement accommodations.

A clearer, more consistent, public-facing framework for accommodations would help ensure that students with disabilities or SEN needs receive equitable support regardless of where they study, enabling each to achieve their full academic and career potential while truly providing assurance to PWDs and their families.

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