

# Private tuition: Does it help?



■ BY IVAN PNG

■ *Do students benefit by engaging private tutors?*

PRIVATE tuition is a major industry. Singaporeans spend more on private tuition than on school fees.

According to the latest Household Expenditure Survey (2007/2008), the average Singaporean household spends a total of \$118.90 a month on education: \$62.70 on private tuition, \$47.20 on fees for pre-primary, primary and secondary schools; and \$9 on textbooks and other materials.

Before these figures are denounced as ridiculously low, let me clarify that they are an average for all Singaporean households. That average encompasses families with children of school-going age as well as families without. That is why the numbers seem low.

Who engages private tutors and does private tuition help? The only relevant studies are based on data from Hong Kong and South Korea. Mr Percy Kwok, then with the Hong Kong Institute of Education, surveyed students in six Hong Kong schools. He found that a higher proportion of students in higher forms



**A survey shows that the average Singaporean household spends more on private tuition than on school fees. But does private tuition make a difference? ST FILE PHOTO**

received private tuition.

He also found that a higher proportion of students with higher-educated parents received tuition. However, he qualified this finding with the proviso that parents' education might be correlated with household income.

Indeed, the Singapore Household Expenditure Survey also shows that households with higher income spend more on all forms of education – private tuition, school fees and materials.

Now, the key question: Does private tuition make a difference? The best available study is by Professor Changhui Kang, formerly with the National University of Singapore. He studied the impact of private tuition on the performance of South Korean high school students in the national university admissions test.

Prof Kang found that, on average, a 10 per cent increase in expenditure on private tuition improved test performance by 0.56 percentile. One percentile is one per cent of the cohort of students taking the test. For instance, the test score of the 99th-percentile student is higher than that of 99 per cent of the cohort.

(Prof Kang's study was carefully executed. Parents may spend different amounts on private tuition for children of differing ability. So, in a statistical study, it is important to identify whether students did well in the test because of private tuition or because they were just smarter.)

Let us suppose that the same result applies to Singapore's PSLE pupils. In 2008, 168 secondary schools admitted 50,214 students. Say, for instance, each top school admits 250 students, or slightly less

than 0.5 per cent of the entire cohort.

Set against this backdrop, spending on tuition to increase the test score by 0.56 percentile would make a difference. It could amount to the difference between being on the borderline and being at the top of the cohort of admitted students.

Of course, my analysis has focused narrowly on performance in examinations. Whether tuition actually contributes to better education or is just a zero-sum game is another question altogether.

**The writer is the Lim Kim San Professor at the NUS Business School, and professor of Information Systems and Economics at the National University of Singapore.**