

16 April 2010

Dear Fellow Josephians,

With reference to the recent media discussion on SJI's future, the school would like to take the opportunity to explain and clarify the issues raised during the discussion.

### **Recent Media Discussion on SJI's Future**

In the recent media discussion, some Old Boys had raised a number of broad issues. They include:

- SJI has become an elitist school.
- SJI should go back to the "old days" when the school was not elitist. It had been proposed, therefore, that SJI should lower the PSLE cut-off T-score for the affiliated primary schools to 220 and to reserve 75% of places for boys from our affiliated primary schools.
- SJI should follow the examples of other Band 1 schools that had set a low PSLE cut-off T-score for their respective affiliated primary schools but had continued to achieve Band 1 results.
- SJI has moved away from its mission of caring for "the last, the lost and the least".

### **No Aspiration to be an Elitist School**

SJI was not elitist in the past and does not aspire to be elitist now or in the future. SJI today admits boys of a much wider range of abilities than many top schools. SJI's PSLE T-score cut off point for affiliated students is only 238 and mean PSLE T-score only about 242. The "top" schools typically have PSLE T-score cut off points of about 260 and mean PSLE T-scores at above 260. SJI's mean PSLE T-score is at around the average or bottom half of the Band 1 schools. About 10% of our current Secondary 1 intake has PSLE T-scores of less than 230 and was admitted on non-academic factors. For example, this year, SJI admitted a Catholic boy from SJI Jr who has a PSLE T-score of only 217. The school made the effort of assembling a panel comprising an educational psychologist, a science education academic and two senior educators to make an assessment. Consequently, the boy was assessed to be able to benefit from an SJI education and was admitted. Another example is a boy from St. Stephen's, who has a PSLE T-score of only 219 and is a son of an Old Boy.

As the Board of Governors had pointed out recently, SJI is proud that the school is serving a wider range of academic abilities than most other top schools. With a wider range of academic abilities, SJI is able to provide a diverse and rich learning environment where every boy is inspired to develop to his fullest potential, regardless of his academic abilities.

But SJI does aspire to be a Catholic school of choice to both Catholic and non-Catholic boys. As Old Boy, Minister George Yeo, had pointed out on his *Facebook*, the issue is one of balance. So, SJI is aiming to achieve a good balance between

attracting a fair share of high ability boys and other boys from both affiliated and non-affiliated primary schools.

### **Lowering PSLE Cut-Off for Affiliated Primary Schools is not the Solution**

Contrary to the impression that SJI admits only a few boys from the affiliated primary schools, boys from the affiliated primary schools form about 40% of the secondary 1 intake. SJI certainly welcomes more boys from our affiliated primary schools if they qualify for admission based on their PSLE results. Furthermore, Catholic boys form about 25% of the secondary 1 intake, which should be seen in the context that Catholics comprise only about 5% of the total Singapore population.

Also contrary to the impression that SJI had raised its PSLE T-score cut-off for the affiliated primary schools recently, the PSLE T-score cut-off was raised from 200 to 230 as early as 1995 and is now 238. We kept to this PSLE T-score cut-off in 2010. Despite the increase in PSLE T-score cut-off points, the number of SJI Junior students enrolled in secondary 1 at SJI rose from a low of 40 in 1999 and stayed at about 70-80.

As to the proposal to lower the PSLE T-score cut-off for the affiliated primary schools to 220, it is not a solution to increase the number of affiliated school boys admitted into SJI. We want to encourage boys from the affiliated primary schools to work hard and try their best in the PSLE examinations. We would then use our criteria for discretionary admissions to admit deserving boys who may not have met the PSLE T-score cut-off.

In a typical year, the secondary 1 intake into SJI is about 380. There are about 1000 boys from affiliated primary schools. It is thus impossible for SJI to admit all of them. The solution is for a family of secondary schools to cater to all boys from the affiliated primary schools.

### **Different from Other Band 1 Schools with Affiliated Primary Schools**

It has been suggested that SJI should follow other Band 1 schools with affiliated primary schools that had been able to keep their PSLE T-score cut-off for their affiliated primary schools as low as 201 but still managed to achieve Band 1 results.

In reality, unlike SJI, these Band 1 schools are able to attract significantly higher number of high performing students from their affiliated primary schools as well as non-affiliated primary schools. For SJI, many of the top boys from our affiliated primary schools chose to go to other top secondary schools. In relative proportions, these other Band 1 schools have a much higher proportion of high performing students compared to SJI. Hence, the solution is to help our affiliated primary schools to produce more high performing students and to encourage more of these students to select SJI as their secondary school. Even then, some of these other Band 1 secondary schools have found it necessary to raise their cut off points for affiliated students by 20 points in the last few years.

## **SJI Remains Faithful to its Mission**

There are several concerns expressed by some Old Boys that SJI, in seeking to attract a fair share of high performing boys, has moved away from its mission. SJI has become overly focused on getting good academic results for the school. Because of this pursuit of academic excellence, unlike the past SJI, the current SJI has not been providing value-added education for the late developers and that the achievement of academic excellence had been at the expense of the development of values and character. SJI's mission, as a Lasallian school, should focus on "the last, the lost and the least" and, therefore, should focus only on admitting late developers rather than seeking to attract high performing boys into SJI.

We would like to assure you that, in our wanting to attract a fair share of high performing boys and in seeking academic excellence from them, SJI does not compromise on the development of the whole person, which is the sound basis of a Lasallian education. SJI has been a Gold Value Added school since 2005. This means that, on average, boys admitted into SJI with a certain PSLE T-score, performed much better at O-levels than were predicted by their PSLE T-scores. In other words, we were able to value-add to the education of the late developers that we had admitted. As a recipient of the MOE School Excellence Award in 2009, SJI is recognized by the MOE for offering a high quality education that is balanced and holistic and not one that is overly or solely focused on good academic results only.

Is SJI becoming less Lasallian in character because we seek to achieve a good balance in admitting both high performing boys and other boys into SJI? Must Lasallian schools cater only to students who are "the last, the lost and the least" in academic abilities? If all the places of Lasallian schools are taken up by such boys, would we not be denying the brighter boys the benefits of a Lasallian education? Are they not similarly deserving of a Lasallian education?

Bro Collin Wee FSC, in his response, acknowledged that the educational landscape has changed and that SJI is now in a "different playing field". SJI is part of the larger family of schools to cater to boys with differing needs that had been "confided to our care through a family of schools". He also stressed that "the value of a Lasallian education cannot be restricted to SJI alone".

I also had a chance to meet Bro Charles Kitson FSC, an American La Salle Brother, who is the International Secretary for the Worldwide Lasallian Family and is now based in Rome. Bro Charles officially visited SJI recently and I shared with him about the recent media discussion on the school's future. He shared that, in his personal ministry, he had spent most of his time working with the economically poor children and "street kids" in the US schools. But, in the US, there is wide range of Lasallian schools that cater to different spectrum of academic abilities including schools like SJI which have a relatively high proportion of academically bright students. In all these schools, they, like SJI, are faithful to the Lasallian principles of education in that they offer a balanced and holistic education of the whole person based on the Catholic faith tradition. An example in the US of a prestigious Lasallian school is **St. John's College High School** (<http://www.stjohns-chs.org/cms/index.php>) in Washington DC, which is an independent and co-educational secondary school that is as old as SJI. Another example is **Christian Brothers College High School**

(<http://www.cbchs.org/>) in St. Louis, Missouri, which is an all-boy school founded in 1850. There are many more of such Lasallian schools. While we in Singapore may not be familiar with Lasallian schools catering to high performing students, it is very common, in many countries, to have, in their respective education systems, a range of Lasallian schools catering to students of different academic abilities including academically bright students.

## **Conclusion**

On behalf of SJI, we would like to thank all of you for your interest and passion in the discussion of SJI's future. It shows that we all care very much for the school because we have all benefited from an SJI education. The Board of Governors, the school and all of us agree that we do not want an elitist SJI.

It is also the Board of Governors' hope that we can all work together to help all our affiliated primary schools to help more of our affiliate boys to qualify for SJI and to encourage our high performing boys to choose SJI as their secondary school.

SJI remains committed to offering a balanced, holistic and inclusive education that emphasizes character and leadership development for all boys entrusted to our care. SJI will continue to seek a good balance between attracting high performing boys as well as other boys from both our affiliated and non-affiliated primary schools to provide a diversity of abilities for a rich Lasallian learning environment where every boy is inspired to develop to his fullest potential as a person, regardless of his academic abilities

Ora et Labora.

Your Fellow Josephian

Dr Koh Thiam Seng (Class of 76)  
Principal