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Commercialising Education

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Kindergartens are charging a fortune, yet parents go to great lengths to put their kids in prestigious schools.

"HAVING a child means being poor for seven years," says a Thai proverb that parents here are all too familiar with as the schoolyear starts this month.

Indeed, Thais go to great lengths in their struggle to give their children a decent education. For this reason, pawnshops in Bangkok and other provinces have each set aside some $ 120,000 to $ 280,000 to deal with the needs of clients who pawn their possessions to raise funds for tuition at this time of the year.

But for well–off Thais, the start of the schoolyear means quite a different struggle. It sets off frenzied competition for whose children—those from three to five years of age—get a slot in the most prestigious kindergarten.

Young children learn a range of things from socialisation to golf in these schools, where tuition fees are far more expensive than those for public university.

The average annual expense for kindergarten in 457 schools in Bangkok is about $400, but some of the most exclusive kindergartens charge in excess of $12,000. Likewise, public university students pay only from $240 to $280 dollars a year, or 42 times less than kindergarten students.

But the race for limited seats in expensive chidlren's schools is fired by the belief, common among middle class parents, that private primary schools are better than public ones.

"I spend $1,600 a year for each of my children and spending for three of them makes 20 per cent of my salary," said Piroj Wangpokin, a company ewxecutive. He added: "The money for one of my children per year equals what I used to spend in school for five years, but I think it's worth it. My children started reading faster than my neighbour's children who go to average schools."

Parents say expensive schools can provide children with better social backgrounds. "I want my child to have good social life when he grows up," said airline worker Takeng Sappakij

In the quest for better' education, affluent thais are sending their children to school at a younger age. Thai children are required to start school at seven years of age, but top-class kindergartens begin taking them in at three to five years old. All Thai kindergaten are privately run, though they have different curricula. And because of the large investment in such schools, executives say they have to charge high fees.

"We admit that our tuition fee is high. It is because we spent much money investing in many things which will help their children in getting more development than older generation students," said Dr. Rasmee Kleebbua, owner of Rasmee Kindgergarten, one of the most famous kindergartens in Bangkok.

Rasmee's tuition fee is $6,000 a year for each pupil. Like other well-known kindergartens, it has a system of advance reservation that has parents seeking a slot at least one or two years in advance—in many cases before their child is born.

Beyond early reservations and being able to pay tuition fees parents know they need to prepare sizable amounts of "donation money" to seal the reservation made in a Grade A kindergarten. Donations, to top-class kindergarten range from $10,000 to $120,000 dollars, and parents who write down smallers amounts in the "donation" category of schools' application forms take the risk of failing to get a slot for their child.

Good connection also come in handy. Toasak, a compnay employee, said an affluent acquaintance of his wife was able to get his four–year–old daughter into a kindergarten despite their small "donation" of $1,200. Other parents normally pay 10 times or more that amount.

The competition is such that many businessmen parents liken it to tough negotiations they undertake in business deals. "I paid $4,800 for my kid in the first year. But for the second year it was only $2,400," said businessman Tanit Tangpitakwong. "The negotiation with the school is the same thing as a business deal. If they cannot give what they promised, they have to reduce the cost. For example, if my kid learnt how to play golf in the first year but school officials couldn't give the lesson in the second year, I have to ask them to consider lower tuition."

But many child education experts say sending children to school at a too–young age may be unwise. Pibhop Dhonhchai, one of the founders of Foundation ofr Children, says pushing children to learn too much without Knowing if the are ready and the pressure from the entrance examination process can destroy their ability to learn in the long run.

"It is okay to teach them English or computers or horse riding and golf, as long as the children are ready to learn. But usually children are different from each other, and not all of them are ready to learn the same thing at the same time," he said. "Academic studies say to much pressure put on children by strict curriculum and examinations can lead to bigger problems, such as drug and violence when they grow up," he pointed out.

Pibhop's Foundation for Children is well known for its alternative school "Mu Baan Dek,", or Children's Village school, which has been around for more than 10 years. He blames the trend toward expensive chidlren's schools on parents' twisted attitude toward believing the social surroundings they pay for is good social training," he said.

"But on the other hand, kids will have less chance to understand what the reality of this society is," Pibhop said. He also says the commercialisation of education is likely to continue, unless the concept of education is changed. Abnd perhaps this is already happening.

Late last month, parents of students in a school in Pattalung province down south of Thailand found they were required to pay $1,200 in "donations" on the first day of the semester.

The requirement provoked protests from the parents, majority of whom were farmers or low-income civil servants. In the end, school executives had to accept whatever amount of money the parents could "donate".

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