

School Spotlight: How SJI shapes character through holistic education

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(From left) St Joseph's Institution students Darren Lee, Sakthi Muralikrishna, Rickey Khine and Luke Low. ST PHOTO: JASEL POH



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SINGAPORE – Is my child suitable for the integrated programme (IP)? Will the lack of a national exam at Secondary 4 affect my child's motivation?

These are questions that may cross the minds of parents of Primary 6 pupils who are navigating the secondary school selection process.

The IP provides academically strong students with a seamless six-year track to a pre-university qualification without sitting the national exams at Secondary 4.

There are 17 secondary schools offering the IP, including St Joseph's Institution (SJI).

SJI principal Justin Pierre says parents should look for an environment where their child can become the best version of himself or herself. He adds that the right pathway is the one that gives a child the best combination of challenge, support, opportunity and flexibility.

"I would encourage parents not to see the IP simply as the 'more desirable' route. Choosing a school should not be about finding the most impressive pathway on paper," says Pierre.

Parents should bear in mind that children change considerably between the ages of 12 and 16. For instance, their interests mature, their strengths emerge and their aspirations can change, he says.

“Parents should therefore consider not only what their child is capable of academically today, but also the environment in which he or she is most likely to grow in confidence, independence and character,” advises Pierre.

Alongside the IP, SJI also offers a non-IP pathway. The four-year programme culminates in the Singapore-Cambridge Secondary Education Certificate, the new national exam that starts in 2027 and replaces the O-level exams.

There are students more suited to this pathway, even if they may qualify for the IP, says Pierre.

“A national examination at the end of Secondary 4 provides students with a clear milestone and also preserves the opportunity to make a fresh decision about their post-secondary pathway, based on their interests, aspirations and development at that point,” he says.

SJI’s IP students move on to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme after four years, while its non-IP students move on to various post-secondary pathways, including the A levels, polytechnics and the IB diploma.

As the school offers both tracks, students from both pathways join the same co-curricular activities, outdoor adventure camps, leadership development and enrichment programmes.

Students on the non-IP track have a chance to move to the IP track at the end of Secondary 2 if they are assessed to be suitable.

The selection criteria include consistent academic performance, a general ability test, their portfolio and an interview.

“The pathway that is appropriate for a boy at age 12 need not necessarily define his entire secondary school journey. If he demonstrates the readiness and right dispositions for the IP, there is an opportunity for him to be considered,” says Pierre.

IP creates space for learning experiences

The time freed up from not having to sit a national exam in Secondary 4 provides students with opportunities for broader learning beyond the academic curriculum.

The ArtScience Programme, for all Secondary 3 IP students, gets them to combine creative thinking from the arts with the analytical problem-solving aspects of science. The students try to solve real-world problems with mentorship from external experts.

Secondary 3 student Sakthi Muralikrishna, 15, researched declining bird biodiversity in Singapore and concluded that birds are moving out due to habitat destruction. His team came up with a solution to develop modular panels to attract birds back here.



Sakthi Muralikrishna, 15, took part in the ArtScience Programme. ST PHOTO: JASEL POH

He was guided by Temasek Polytechnic lecturers through the process, which involved research, ideation, pitching and designing a prototype.

Rickey Khine, 16, says he found time to take up track and field as a complete beginner and reached the semi-finals for the 200m event in the National School Games.



Rickey Khine, 16, says he gained from picking up track and field. ST PHOTO: JASEL POH

Through the experience, he had to balance schoolwork with training. “IP gave me a bit more time, so I decided to direct this time into track and field because, before this, I was very academically oriented. I wanted to test my limits in a new area,” he says.

Rickey says he has built mental resilience through the experience.

“No one can force you to juggle both sports and academics, but having that personal desire to want to excel in both areas benefits me,” he says.

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Connecting students to the real world

Every Secondary 3 and first-year junior college student in SJI takes part in an overseas learning journey to gain cultural insights, develop global perspectives and participate in community service.

“International education at SJI is not reserved for a select group. It is part of the formative journey we seek to provide to all students, IP and non-IP,” says Pierre of its international education programme.

Each November, students, accompanied by teachers, embark on overseas learning journeys across Asia and the ASEAN region, including in Bangkok, Beijing, Hanoi, Seoul and Manila.

Luke Low, 16, is a Secondary 4 student who went to a parish organisation in the Philippines that provides a safe learning space for children who live in the slums. He was involved in activities like playing sports with the children and repainting walls.



Luke Low, 16, went to the Philippines as part of the international education programme. ST PHOTO: JASEL POH

He says he learnt life lessons from the children, including how to be content. “It was amazing to see how they can be happy despite the conditions they lived in. It is not something you can learn in the classroom,” he adds.

Pierre says such experiences are part of SJI’s aim to provide a holistic education that develops the whole person, “where academic rigour goes hand in hand with character formation”.

He adds that service is an important dimension of these experiences as students contribute to environmental sustainability and community initiatives.

“They learn that global citizenship is not simply about understanding the world, but also about recognising our responsibility towards others,” he says.



Secondary 3 students conducting a lesson for pupils from a village school in Thailand. PHOTO: ST JOSEPH'S INSTITUTION

In 2023, the school started the work experience programme for every Secondary 4 IP student before they progress to junior college.

They are attached to organisations and industry partners for two to three weeks to experience professional life, interact with people from different fields and gain first-hand insights into the working world.



SJI student Jack Wigmore working with silicone moulds at the NUS Materials Science Laboratory. PHOTO: ST JOSEPH'S INSTITUTION

In 2026, a total of 72 organisations and companies provided 246 placement opportunities across sectors like healthcare, engineering, tourism, law and information technology.

Darren Lee, 17, a first-year junior college student, did a three-week attachment at a finance firm.

He says he expected a serious, adult working environment, but instead found a collaborative culture working alongside other interns.

“Even though they are young, they had more experience than me and they gave me advice, including how to prepare a resume to enter the industry and how to prepare for the interview,” he says.



Pierre says the programme is about exploration, self-discovery and connecting their learning to authentic, real-world settings. It is not about asking a 16-year-old to decide what he wants to do for the rest of his life.

“It is about helping each student to begin thinking purposefully about the contribution he hopes to make in the world,” he says.

SJI has consistently been one of the top-performing schools in the world for the IB exam, but Pierre says strong academic outcomes are just one dimension of a much larger education journey.

“We want our students to be confident, compassionate, adaptable and resilient, with the skills, mindsets and dispositions to flourish in a rapidly changing world,” he says. ◆

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[Jane Ng](#) is a senior correspondent who covers parenting, education and lifestyle stories. She writes a regular column, Minor Issues, where she mulls over her parenting dilemmas.

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