



Madam Pamela Yeo, who sends her sons Dominique (left) and Robin to SmartLab, finds its policy of making public previous years' performance records reassuring. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

Transparency and results guaranteed

One tuition centre makes results public, another has money-back offer

BY RADHA BASU
SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

MANY tuition or academic enrichment centres are reluctant to publish performance data, so it is almost impossible for parents to compare one tuition provider with another.

The result is that word-of-mouth recommendation or even advertising is used by parents as a guide when selecting an organisation.

But at least two centres – SmartLab and MindChamps – have become industry pioneers in their efforts to make what is a tricky choice that much easier for parents.

SmartLab, which provides mathematics and science lessons from primary school to junior college level, posts overall performance data on all its students on its website.

The site lists what proportion of students achieve A, A/B, Distinction or A*s in GCE A-level, O-level and Primary School Leaving examinations.

It makes public numerical data on the percentage of students in each subject whose performance improved by more than one grade.

Also, previous years' performance records going back as far as 2001 are up for scrutiny.

SmartLab's founder, Mr Tony Tan, a Cambridge University-educated former

Singapore Armed Forces Merit scholarship holder who joined the Reform Party last year, insists that transparency is vital for parents to make informed choices on behalf of their children.

It also helps the company maintain stringent quality standards.

"This is also our way of being accountable to the parents and students who have trusted us and have selected us to partner them in their journey of preparing for major examinations," says Mr Tan, who founded the company with his wife Hazel Poa, also a Cambridge graduate and former government scholarship holder.

The centre also plans to introduce a "results guaranteed" programme by the end of the year. If students do not improve their performance by one or two grades, as agreed earlier, the centre will offer a full refund of tuition fees.

Executive secretary Pamela Yeo, 39, has been sending her two sons, Robin, 13, and Dominique Goh, 11, for maths and science lessons at SmartLab since 2008.

Their interest and performance in these subjects have steadily improved and, for Madam Yeo, the company's policy of transparency has been "very reassuring and helpful".

"Since they voluntarily put themselves up for scrutiny, you know they will never compromise on quality," she says.

For its part, MindChamps offers parents their money back if their child's exam performance does not improve by at least one grade as a result of its "PSLE Success" courses. Pupils generally need to score between 30 and 74 to qualify. The courses, which run for a minimum of 21 weeks, come with a price tag of \$1,980. A 30-week course costs \$3,080.

The lessons, in maths, science, English and Chinese, are meant for pupils preparing for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

The price tags may appear hefty but the company says they work out to between \$30 and \$35 an hour – a rate many parents are used to paying anyway.

Timothy Lim, 12, is among the 1,055 children who have signed up for the money-back deal. His mother, Ms Tina Wong, 38, says the company's "confidence" in offering the money back guarantee persuaded her to sign up. "We want him to stretch his potential and the guarantee helps prove that MindChamps will try its best," says Ms Wong, who works in a real estate firm.

About 45 per cent of the 616 pupils who enrolled last year received As or A*s. The company plans to have its results audited by an external auditor this year.

Unlike in conventional coaching centres, PSLE Success courses do more than just teach children how to revise the syllabus. "Most schools and coaching centres focus on teaching children what to learn," says MindChamps founder and chairman David Chiem. "We focus on teaching them the art and craft of how to learn."

Last year, the company sponsored 60 "at risk" children, who were failing subjects and came from dysfunctional homes, to attend its programme. One in four ended up with A*s and As. The vast majority improved by at least one grade.

"These were children who were facing multiple problems and had been virtually written off as failures," says Mr Chiem. "The course gave them hope and confidence."

radhab@sph.com.sg