

Pre-school • Kids in need to get boost

More pre-schoolers from lower-income families are set to benefit from an increased amount of support from NTUC First Campus' (NFC) charity arm, Bright Horizons Fund. From 2025, it will commit \$5 million a year – up from \$3 million currently – to support pre-schoolers in My First Skool centres in four areas: financial, learning and development, health and well-being, and social.

The fund currently supports about 6,400 pre-schoolers in My First Skool centres, which is nearly 30 per cent of enrolled pupils.

With the increase, NFC is targeting to help 7,000 pre-schoolers from 2025, as enrolment is expected to increase with the opening of new My First Skool centres.

7,000 needy pre-schoolers in My First Skool to benefit from more funds

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Charity to commit \$5m a year to support financial, learning, health and social areas

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NTUC First Campus' charity arm Bright Horizons Fund will be increasing the amount of its support by \$2 million a year to benefit 7,000 pre-schoolers from lower-income families.

From 2025, it will commit \$5 million a year – up from \$3 million currently – to support pre-schoolers in NTUC First Campus' (NFC) My First Skool centres in four areas: financial, learning and development, health and well-being, and social.

Mr Heng Chee How, chairman of Bright Horizons Fund, said the fund's four pillars of support for lower-income families are important to help them holistically, instead of just lowering fees for pre-school.

"First, we lower the barrier to come to school. Don't let the fee be the hurdle... Then (come) the professional and technical support interventions," he said.

Mr Heng, who is also Senior Minister of State for Defence, said that it is equally important to work on a family's confidence and social skills, provide family support and form partnerships with the fam-

ilies for the good of the children.

"When they can see that what we're doing is actually value-adding, and they can see the improvement in their children, they can then see the hope," he said.

NFC's chief child support officer Louisa Chng said the fund, which was started in 2008, has evolved from mostly providing financial aid through school fee subsidies and support for schooling essentials such as uniforms, field trip expenses and Kindergarten 2 graduation expenses.

More than half of the money will be used to enhance learning and development support programmes for children.

Ms Chng said that since January 2024, an additional 800 children and their families have benefited from the fund, after support was extended to families whose monthly gross household income is below \$6,000, compared with \$4,500 and below previously.

The fund now supports about 6,400 pre-schoolers in My First Skool centres, which is nearly 30 per cent of enrolled pupils.

NFC is targeting to help 7,000 pre-schoolers from 2025, as enrolment is expected to increase with the opening of new My First Skool centres. Currently, it has 159 cen-



Ms Vishaalini Vasanthanathan, NTUC First Campus' (NFC) development support specialist, and My First Skool teacher Oblena Angela Mari Zulueta engaging pre-schoolers in an activity. NFC's development support specialist programme will be available in 16 My First Skool pre-school centres in 2025, up from eight. It will expand support to cater to 135 children, with nine development support specialists. PHOTO: NTUC FIRST CAMPUS

tres with 26,500 pupils.

NFC's learning and development support programmes include the development support specialist programme, which will be available in 16 My First Skool pre-school centres in 2025, up from eight.

Launched in 2023, this programme sees four development support specialists supporting 60 children who require medium level of early intervention support for developmental delays.

In 2025, it aims to more than double this support, catering to 135 children, with nine development support specialists.

These include children currently attending the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (Eipic), those on the Eipic wait list, as well as those who have yet to be formally diagnosed as needing early intervention support.

In the development support specialist programme, teachers will discuss these children's profiles with the development support specialists.

The specialists will then join the class and guide the teacher on how to engage the child, as well as create a tailored approach for each child's different learning needs.

right Horizons Fund also supports families' health and well-being through various initiatives such as an infant nutrition programme, which provides cash vouchers from \$200 to \$800 yearly for families to purchase essential items, such as diapers and milk powder for their children up to the age of three.

Madam Noratikah Suratman, 26, has three children, aged five, four and two, who are enrolled at My First Skool in Jalan Sultan, near Beach Road.

The administrator in a real estate company told The Straits Times that as the sole breadwinner in her family, she can be overwhelmed by her job responsibilities, parenting and tight finances.

Through Bright Horizons Fund, Madam Noratikah and her children have received support such as the infant nutrition programme, which has helped to offset some of the costs for diapers and milk powder for her youngest child, Nur Bima Fahlevi.

Her eldest child, Nur Aralyn Alisha, was identified by teachers as needing extra support in literacy and numeracy, and is enrolled in the classroom support programme.

"I believe that it helps to in-

crease the students' engagement, and the teachers tailor their teaching methods according to the students' capability. Aralyn's vocabulary has expanded. She knows how to create proper sentences now," Madam Noratikah said.

Ms Karen Lee, 43, who has four children, aged 20, 10, eight and six, is another beneficiary of the fund.

Ms Lee, who works in customer service, is separated from her husband and is the sole breadwinner for the family. All three of her sons were from My First Skool in Jalan Sultan.

She said her family is coping much better now since their financial worries have improved with Bright Horizons Fund's support.

Her youngest son Branson Giam was initially not enrolled in pre-school as Ms Lee wanted to save on enrolment costs and had her mother look after him instead.

But after she noticed that Branson had difficulty with speech, she decided to enrol him so he would receive the help he needed. "They have helped Branson a lot. He goes for therapy and works with the development support specialist," she said.

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