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## Model schools teach a new generation of students

Jade Sacker | Publication date 10 October 2017 | 12:23 ICT

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Students in class at the New Generation School on Sisowath High School's campus in Phnom Penh. © Jade Sacker

A central feature of Cambodia's current education plan is the implementation of New Generation Schools, which aim to provide the Kingdom's abler students with a thoroughly modern schooling. *Post Education* reports on the impact one NGS has made in the nation's capital.

Throughout the eastern wing of Sisowath High School are corridors of new computer labs, science labs, modern wood-paneled classrooms, a multimedia library, and newly renovated administration offices carved above the old meeting rooms like suspended glass cubicles.

On October 2, the New Generation School's first day back in session after Pchum Ben, teachers can be seen calling attendance behind their personal laptops, desks framed with their students' achievements. Colored algorithms, sculptures of DNA sequences, blue veined tests adorned with bright red As. Other teachers walk among their students desks as they lecture. They gesture broadly across rows of computers, they circle clusters of students huddled over the sinks in their chemistry labs.

The activity is a stark contrast to western wing of the school, where the students have not yet returned from holiday. The infrastructure in Sisowath's other sector remains unchanged, and widespread practices, such as in-school private tutoring and bribery, recognized as corrosive to any learning environment, remain generally unchallenged.

Sisowath high school became a host for the New Generation School program, facilitated as a "school within a school", in 2015. The program funded the renovations of Sisowath's eastern wing, which is now a campus housing the infrastructure needed for the New Generation School's information and communications technology (ICT) and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) intensive curriculum.

The New Generation School at Sisowath High School had an open admission policy in its first year What do students and teachers

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### Region in 'learning crises'



A whopping 60 percent of students in the region, including those in Cambodia, are enrolled in education systems that are grappling with "learning crises" and are



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to students at Sisowath entering grades eight and ten. There was no precedent for this type of learning facility in Phnom Penh. The only other New Generation School at that time was in provincial Kampong Cham. Students and their parents were not sure what type of school NGS was. Funding per student was higher in these new schools, yet the admission remained free.

Those involved could see that this New Generation School at Sisowath High School was profoundly different from the standard Cambodian education. The practice of private tutoring during school hours was abolished. People who relied on money for the assurance of academic success were disappointed. Those who couldn't afford to pay for grades in public schools received equal attention to that received by their middle-income classmates. Many students thrived with the increased investment and excelled in response to the curriculum, which focuses on both academic and vital underlying skills such as critical thinking.

This year, the New Generation School at Sisowath received more than 600 applicants from all social classes, with a limited intake of just 200.

In response to the success of the program the admission process has evolved. Entrance into the New Generation School is decided by a balance of entrance exam test scores and lottery tickets that is still being calibrated. As the program extends into its third year at Sisowath, a sense of confusion prevails about what exactly New Generation Schools are, even as places are in high demand from parents who want their children to benefit from the opportunity.

#### **What are the differences between a public, private, and charter school?**

Since the inauguration of New Generation Schools in Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, and Phnom Penh, they have impacted their communities at large by creating a new dialogue about accountability and educational standards within both public and private institutions, challenging them to set a new standard of administrative transparency.

However, there remains underlying confusion among many parents regarding the difference between a public and private school, and in particular, where a charter school fits in Cambodia's current education system. Parents want to know why some kids are receiving this extra investment, benefiting from private tutoring without incurring extra fees, and learning with new technologies.

Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, the Minister of Education, Youth, and Sport explained, "Charter schools remain public schools, but the community can get involved with the poor. The parents can provide contributions. So far, we don't require it, but in the future, the parents, the community, can make some investments to help the school develop. Also, they can tell the management what they want. If they want some change, they should contribute [and] say 'I want to make an investment, but I need more

think about NGSs?"

October 2 marked the first day of school for New Generation School students after the Pchum Ben holiday. Several students and teachers offered their opinions on the impact the New Generation School has made on their learning and their experiences with the program so far.

Grade nine student Pov Sovannarith is currently in his second year at NGS. He compared his experiences at a public middle school to NGS's secondary school. "NGS is a good school, and the teachers here are a lot better than in public schools." When asked how he felt about returning to school earlier than students enrolled in Sisowath High School, which is on the same site, he said, "I feel happy to be back at school, and cleverer for it."

Keo Chanith is a physics teacher at NGS. She said the information technology at NGS allows for the use of more multimedia resources. "At NGS you have different administration policies than those at a public school. There are many ICT systems to teach students, and the administration can draw research and knowledge from resources on the internet, like YouTube. The administration here focuses on teaching students critical thinking. We want them to expand on their ideas and create new things. I like NGS's policy, and I think New Generation School students will benefit from the accountability and knowledge within the administration."

Voleäk, 14, is in the ninth grade, her second year at NGS. Her favorite subject is chemistry and she aspires to become a fashion designer. When asked how NGS differs from other schools she said, "The rules. Teachers have a lot of experience and the



**Language skills can bloom early**



**Civil society filling need for pre-schools in rural areas, but state catching up**

LOOK, I want to make an investment, but I need you to do this and that.' So that is called a charter school, meaning it's flexible and parents have a say in how their students should be trained, with what kinds of methods."

In regard to the education system prior to the introduction to New Generation Schools Kurt Bredenberg commented, "The current, two tiered system, private and public, poor and wealthy, is not good for society. What is happening now is that the middle classes are coming back to public schools."

With the middle class retuning to the public education system to take part in the new charter school system, Dr. Naron thinks this will help foster equality in generations moving forward, "In terms of social equity we created a social fund. I think for equity, if the parents are rich, they should share with those who are poor. And if the poor students cannot pay, then the government should pay so as to have that equity within the school, while at the same time, ensuring quality."

...of experience and the testing is different. I just want to say, NGS is better than other schools."

Mathematics teacher Puthy commented on the cross-curricular nature of education at NGS, which reflects current best practice in the sector. "Before, I never considered English and ICT [in mathematics], but here, we need to know how to include both."



NGSs alter teachers' approach to their profession, with paid tutoring frowned on during school hours.  
Photo Jade Sacker

### **What are the criticisms and how are they being addressed?**

New Generation Schools are still a new model and have not been implemented without criticism. Representatives of KAPE and New Generation Schools are open to addressing these criticisms and effecting feedback in their ongoing strategy to promote social equity within this new school system.

Kurt Bredenberg explained, "Colleagues in other NGOs have been a little bit critical of what KAPE is doing because, at KAPE we are committed to helping poor kids, our main goal is not to help the middle class, but we do believe in supporting middle class people and poor people together. I think it is very healthy for society. But in saying that, when you have an entrance exam, poor kids are probably going to be at a disadvantage in taking that exam. So maybe, a lot of the kids admitted through the entrance exam are not from poor backgrounds. This is less of a problem at the beginning of the program, when it is completely free."

Speaking of the lottery used to select students, he continued, "Every year, every parent, rich or poor, gets a number and we have a draw. If you're lucky, you get in. So we are very aware of social equity issues."

He responded to comments from some observers that NGSs are elitist. "We get some criticism from colleagues and other NGOs, saying we are forgetting our mandate. So

we are trying to address this through experimentation like lotteries and maintaining quotas.”

“This is not an elite program. We have a lot of poor students who are benefitting from the government’s reforms. Schools are getting amazing services. So we need to remind people of that. This is the criticism, that New Generation Schools are elite. And I can see we have an entrance exam, but we are trying to address these issues with lotteries.

“So it is a danger, I agree that it is a danger for NGSs to be kind of an elite model. But I think that we are aware of it. The criticisms have been constructive. These are not elite schools, these are schools for everyone. But we provide a very high-quality standard, and we expect very high-quality standards from teachers and managers.”

#### **What does this mean for the future of Cambodia’s education sector?**

The Cambodian government hopes the New Generation School program will provide a clear path for the next generation of leaders to guide Cambodia into the 21st century and create the human resources needed to ensure a future of stability and prosperity across society.

The investment in STEM and ICT skills will be essential to Cambodia’s future economic growth. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron explained, “Because we are in the 21st century, technology develops very fast. I think, to make Cambodia advance to the status of a developed country with an increased income, we need to create new industry, we must focus our students’ training in STEM.”

The Ministry of Education plans to expand the program from its current three schools to seven next year, facilitating new programs in two primary schools and three additional secondary schools. Eventually, the Ministry of Education and KAPE would like to see the program maintain a presence in two schools in every province.



STEM subjects are a high priority at Phnom Penh’s New Generation School. Photo Jade Sacker

Reflecting on the impact of the New Generation School on its students, Education Minister Dr Naron continued, “After one year of visiting Sisowath, I could see that the students had changed as a result of the altered teaching method. I think they have curiosity, they want to learn, and they want to explore, to have dreams.

“They study in clubs, they organize everything themselves. I think they can apply this knowledge to real-life situations. So I think that the intention is to develop that kind of critical thinking, soft problem solving skills, and I think that NGS, with the improved teaching methods, the support for teachers, the learning community, the sharing of knowledge among teachers, will achieve that.

“Through the New Generation Schools, through knowledge, through improved teaching methods, we are educating attitudes. But changing attitudes takes time. We

teaching methods, we are educating attitudes. But changing attitudes takes time. We must give them time, and also support them. I am optimistic that, in five to ten years, we will see the improvement.”

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## What are New Generation Schools?

New Generation Schools are part of a government education reform program, a new development track within the current education system that enables the creation of autonomous public schools. The concept is similar to the charter schools pioneered in the United States in the 1990s and subsequently in the U.K. These schools have greater leeway in spending their funding allocation.

The idea for the education reform was initially conceived by the Cambodian Action for Primary Education (KAPE), the biggest in-country NGO focused on Cambodia’s education sector, and was later fully adopted and funded by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. Their pilot program, the Beacon School Initiative, was implemented in 2014 in Kampong Cham province, and as the program expanded, they became the New Generation Schools.

The goal of NGSs is to create public schools that maintain maximal education learning standards through higher investment. NGS focuses on enforcing transparency and accountability by changing the way schools are managed. This is a departure from the government’s traditional method of distributing all funds equally.

If there is no accountability in the way schools are managed, new facilities such as science labs will be underutilized as many teachers practice private tutoring instead, systemically favoring students who supplement their state salaries. New Generation Schools confront this issue by abolishing the practice all together. Teachers are carefully selected and receive incentives such as scholarships to encourage teacher integrity. They are finding that in these new environments, where teachers no longer compete for student customers, there is a greater sense of positive reinforcement.

Kurt Bredenberg, a senior advisor at KAPE, stated in an informal interview, “This is a very incremental approach that is working, that has made an impact. We really see the change in people’s attitudes.

“People really want to be in the school, and we find that another important lesson learned is that when you bring like-minded people together, they reinforce each other. Someone who is dysfunctional, there are a lot of sanctions against that person, that you shouldn’t be doing that. I think the important thing about NGS is that positive people reinforce each other, and you have a dynamic that just gets stronger and stronger and it really makes the school a wonderful place to work.”

New Generation Schools are also built on the involvement of the students’ parents. “If parents do not feel the school belongs to them, they don’t care as much. The parents have responsibility now and can advocate for their children’s best interests. All people have to be aware and work together,” said Phan Bunnath, Sisowath NGS’s operations manager.

To explain this dynamic, Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, the Minister of Education, Youth, and Sport stated, “The New Generation Schools provide a mixed management model that allows the community to participate in the management of the public school. And the school can have a flexible implementation of the curriculum.”

He continued, “I think, with this in mind, that’s why we decided to entrust KAPE with the New Generation School Program, because they teach 21st century skills, knowledge and literacy, but also ICT skills, foreign language skills. They should also have life skills, soft skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills. They should also have a good attitude, like good organizational skills, to help them become good national citizens, but also good global citizens. [Students need] to know about global warming and terrorism, and how to address these issues.”



**HUN Many 'surprised' by Singapore leader's remarks**

HUN Many, a National Assembly member for Kampong Speu province, said he was “beyond surprised” at recent remarks by Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong regarding the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia following the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Many was responding to comments



**Eat 'Khmer noodles of solidarity,' PM urges**

Prime Minister Hun Sen on Monday urged his supporters to eat “the Khmer noodles of unity and solidarity” in response to members of the Supreme Court-dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) gathering to eat the popular dish as a form of protest. He also attacked



**PM calls out diaspora in Europe**

Prime Minister Hun Sen on Monday called on Cambodians living in Europe – both supporters and those against him – to prepare for his upcoming visits to Budapest next week and Geneva in early July. “I would like to tell all brothers and sisters in Europe, both





### **Can Khmer noodles ease tension?**

Analysts have said that while recent calls by Prime Minister Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy to their supporters to eat Khmer noodles together may ease the situation at the local level, relations between the long-standing political rivals were still tense. Hun Sen on Monday told



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