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Good Schools Guide

How to prepare toddlers for overseas boarding schools

Enrolling in primary-level boarding schools overseas takes more than good scores

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JENNIFER MA



Many parents in Hong Kong see boarding schools in Britain or the United States as the preferred option, believing they offer an excellent all-round education and can open up opportunities at university level and beyond.

In most cases, 11 or 13 is seen as the best age for admission for kids who will have to deal with the challenges of being away from home for weeks at a time, while also settling into a new school environment and an unfamiliar system.

Recently, though, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the possibilities of getting kids into primary-level boarding schools overseas. And, as a result, education advisers and learning centres in Hong Kong have been kept busy with inquiries about procedures, costs, strategies, and preparing younger kids for admission.

"Those considering top secondary schools - day or boarding - in the UK or US realise it's getting more competitive to gain entry directly from Hong Kong at the most popular age of 13-14 years old," says Jennifer Ma, co-founder and director of ARCH education. "Hence, parents are looking to go through the more extensive junior prep school recruitment channel instead and will consider sending their children overseas at the age of 9-10 or even earlier."

The perceived advantages of such a move include making an early transition to the local curriculum and getting involved in sports and extracurricular activities, which may help to open doors at senior boarding schools. Kids already "in the system" overseas should have a clear head start when it comes to meeting standards and expectations and passing relevant tests.

Ma, though, emphasises the need to plan and research everything very carefully. She advises parents to visit any prospective school - not just to rely on brochures, online videos and meetings in Hong Kong - and to do so with the children concerned. If possible, it also pays to enrol kids in a summer programme to give them a taste of boarding life and independent learning. The teachers there can be a great source of information and general feedback.



"It is really important to ensure children are aware of the environment at these junior boarding schools and are genuinely interested and excited about embracing the opportunity," Ma says. "If they are not psychologically ready to study abroad and be away from family, we do not recommend boarding at an early age."



As part of the process, she adds, it makes sense to talk to professional experts familiar with prep school entry. They can make suggestions about which to consider, bearing in mind the diverse range available in terms of size, culture and academic philosophy, and the need to find the right fit for the child's personality and pastoral care needs.

They can also guide parents through the application and assessment requirements. Most schools have their own registration and test logistics, so it helps to have an expert who knows about things like timelines, profile development, essay writing and liaison with individual schools. For instance, most schools assessing applications from overseas look at standards in maths and English plus reading and reasoning skills. However, US boarding schools pay comparatively more attention to extracurricular interests, which say something about the child's character and potential contribution.

Fluency in English is often a basic requirement. However, for children below the age of nine, some schools will make allowances and offer a differentiated curriculum at first for those who need to work on their English language skills.

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"We always suggest asking plenty of questions and finding ways to talk to former pupils and their parents," says Ma, who notes that fees for the top boarding prep schools can range from GBP20-30,000 a year in the UK and US\$57-68,000 in the US. "It can vary depending on the school's ranking and the student's year of entry."

From the outset, Jeremy Lam, founder and head of admissions at Assurance Education, tells parents to use objective measures, not hearsay, to judge the quality of a school. In the US, that can mean looking at acceptance rates, average SSAT scores or placement at what are considered the best high schools for boarders.

It is also important to examine how strictly rules about mandatory study time and use of smartphones are enforced, who oversees general discipline, and what arrangements are in place for pastoral care, guardians, and local emergency contacts.

"It can take up to 12 months to prepare for an effective application to primary-level boarding schools overseas," Lam says. "Students typically needs strong grades overall and must aim for impressive results in maths and English in the entrance exams, or the SSAT for the US. Since teachers and counsellors in Hong Kong are less familiar with supporting such applications, it is best to give them enough time to draft the necessary letters, statements and grade reports."

When outlining the sort of traits they look for, schools tend to mention independence, effective time management and emotional maturity, obviously with reference to the age of the student.

"If leaving their family at a young age, children must be able to adapt and thrive in a foreign country," Lam says. "In that respect, emotional intelligence can be just as important as intellectual competence."

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Vickie Liu, the founding director of Chinese Academy Peterhouse Kindergarten, confirms that the academic side is only one aspect of the admissions process. US and UK schools are also looking for signs that individual children will benefit from what is on offer and for their potential to make contribution in class and outside. They want to detect different interests and the motivation, whether that relates to computers, science, music, swimming, or drawing manga-style comics.



Now, the perspective of many boarding schools is that a child's unique qualities are their most valuable asset

VICKIE LIU

"Schools do take account of the fact that young international students may not have English as their first language," Liu says. "They may, though, require attendance at a summer school for intensive training before the first term, which then makes it easier to settle in."

She adds that some Hong Kong-based parents think children must be "well drilled" to handle the type of questions expected to come up during the admissions process. When all manner of tests, verbal reasoning exercises, interviews and "informal chats" lie ahead, there is clearly an element of truth to that. These days, though, schools are paying as much attention to qualities like creativity and self-expression and not simply good marks on the academic front.

"Now, the perspective of many boarding schools is that a child's unique qualities are their most valuable asset," Liu says. "They want to see all-round potential and how far students might reach in different areas with the right guidance. It's not only how good they are now that counts."



John Cremer

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