

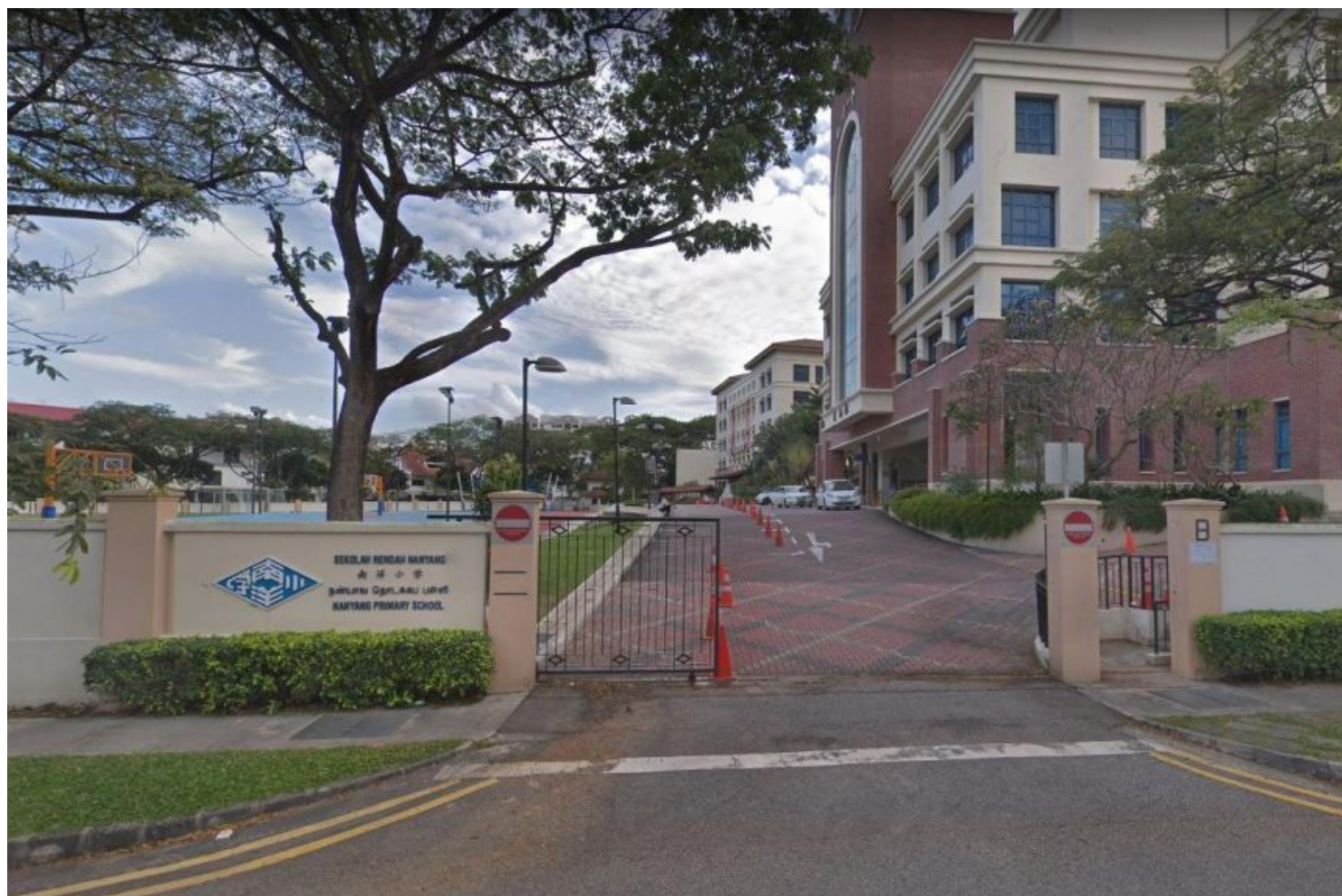
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Going local: Embracing the Singapore education system



Paige Parker



Nanyang Primary School at 52 King's Road. PHOTO: GOOGLE MAPS

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SINGAPORE - Back in mid-2007 when my family first moved to Singapore, I mentioned to friends that my husband Jim and I longed for our daughter Happy to attend Nanyang Primary School (NYPS).

A handful laughed, while others exclaimed: "What? We're trying to find ways out of this demanding system, while you're striving to get in. That's madness!"

Shrugging off the comments, we insisted we wanted discipline, academic rigour, and superb Mandarin, all offered at NYPS. More than a decade later, with two daughters in SAP schools, speaking a mother-tongue, which I, the mother, cannot, it seems that was indeed sage counsel from friends.

Singapore's system is incredibly challenging! My children, Bee, who is 11 at NYPS, and Happy, 15 at Nanyang Girls' High School (NYGH), work hard to thrive in school, like most children here, save for the brilliant outliers who excel without much effort.

As parents, when we all recall our own youths, we might agree it was easier back then. Jim and I both grew up in small southern towns in the USA. We never laboured too hard - with no Tiger parents roaming - yet did well enough in school. I participated in oodles of extra-curricular activities and Jim spent his afternoons playing in the neighbourhood until sunset.

During my formative years, my career-consumed mother believed being an all-rounder was my ticket to success. You name it, I did it: student council, Model UN, book club, dancer (ballet, tap and jazz), cheerleader, flautist, singer, pianist, gymnast, oratorical contest winner, Junior Miss, and certainly more I have forgotten.

In contrast, my daughters spend much of their free time either studying, completing homework, or attending tuition classes. It's certainly not what I envisioned, but this system, which I worked mighty hard to get my daughters into, mandates copious work outside of school in order for our children to flourish - aka good grades - in school. Endless debates exist on whether the system needs tweaking, but I shall leave that to the Ministry of Education (insert emoji wink).

Life, on almost every level, is best lived by managing expectations.

In the local system, we expect good performance and marks from our children; thus, many of them strive and attain, becoming well prepared for the uncertain future, as AI, apps, and tech take over our lives.

But what of those children who do not blossom in the high-pressure system? Not every child will be Top Girl or Top Boy, but she or he may well be an excellent swimmer or actor.

As parents, we need to nurture the gifts of our children, while Tiger parenting their uniqueness, which, likely, is not solely academics. Each child has a special voice, sometimes silenced by circumstances they feel no control over, and as parents, we must listen.

It took me a few years to find my groove as a Tiger Mom. When Happy began at NYPS, I pushed her extremely hard. When she was in Primary 3, I visited the principal's office after she lost two points on a science paper.

I believed Happy had proven she understood the Venus fly-trap question and answered it properly; but the principal explained: "We are prepping her for PSLE. She has to use the key word or points will be deducted." So - I enrolled Happy in science tuition to learn how to test better. Like many parents, I was not satisfied with a 98/100.

In hindsight, that was ridiculous. I was so caught up in Tigering Happy to be the best academically that she missed out on a meaningful life - the things that electrified her.

Now, as I better understand Happy's strengths, that self-imposed mandate I carried, pushing for full marks, has toned-down. She is in Secondary 4 at NYGH, where she gained entry through Direct School Admission based on academics. Although she's smart, she will not be Top Girl, but she is inquisitive, engaging, well-read, confident, and more importantly, capable of taking charge of her life to create an exciting future. Persistence, resilience, determination, and contentment carry people further than full marks, I dare say. Sure enough, throw in some brain power to become a real super star.

These days, I try to feed the souls of my daughters.

For Bee this means voice lessons, along with Chinese speech and drama class; for Happy, it's Chinese debate team and little jogs with our beloved labradoodle Bella.

Yes, plenty of homework and extra classes remain to keep pace with their schools' academic rigour, which I welcome, but I just want to smooth out the edges so my girls will be wholly fulfilled, not purely bookish.

We are fortunate in Singapore to have our children exposed to high expectations: they learn the rewards of hard work and are driven to take a pragmatic view of things.

I credit and appreciate the local system for this. I wonder what the dreamy younger me might have become had I been brought up more this way, which leads me to commit to remaining a Tiger Mom, but one who also supports my daughters' desires outside of the classroom, shaping them, hopefully, into productive, accomplished, joyful beings.

That's all we really want for our children, right?

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