

Globe Life

Family & Relationships

EDUCATION

Enter the admissions prodigies

Parents looking to prep their children for elite schools are turning to kids who have already made it



Ambassador kid Adam Lam, 12, who scored in the 99th percentile in the standardized admissions test, gives tips. JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

TRALEE PEARCE

The basket of stress balls outside the door is the first sign that this morning's gathering is more work than play.

Inside, parents eyeing private school for their children are mingling with experts in a speed-dat-

ing-style flurry. Held in a balloon-festooned room at the Ontario Science Centre, the event has been arranged by Prepskills, a Toronto firm that has been grooming kids for admission to elite schools for almost a decade.

Admissions gatekeepers are offering advice on how to get their

attention. French immersion schools are pitching the benefits of having a second language. And others are wooing kids who excel in sports. But parents are making a beeline for another kind of expert: the child who got in.

Adam Lam is one of today's rock stars. He'll be attending the

University of Toronto Schools for Grade 7 this fall and parents are queuing to hear how the 12-year-old did it. For starters, he scored 2,097 out of a possible 2,130 on the standardized test used to screen candidates, the Secondary School Admission Test.

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Prodigies: Parents 'want to know any behind-the-scenes information'

» “Most of the parents are asking me about the admission process and how long the prep course was,” says Adam, a bright-eyed boy who spends most of his morning squeezing a soccer-patterned stress ball.

While students do act as ambassadors at private school fairs or during open houses, the idea of students sharing their tales from the trenches is new.

In an era of intense competition for private school admission, many parents have already done their homework and know the merits of various schools. What they're really looking for is the inside scoop on how to ace the SSAT and win a coveted spot. Enter the admissions prodigies.

“In general, parents are very anxious about the SSAT. They want to know any behind-the-scenes information,” says Agatha Stawicki, the publisher of an annual guide to Canadian private schools, *Our Kids Go To School*, and a sister site, *ourkids.net*.

Today, Adam delivers. In both one-on-one chats and in a short speech to the crowd, he says that before the SSAT, he'd never taken a three-hour test. He did 11 practice tests, revisiting his mistakes and learning the material. After making the first cut-off, he signed up for a second round of tutoring to ace further tests and interviews, saying he wanted to be “battle-ready.”

Francine Xu is one of the parents who waited for her turn to buttonhole Adam. Ms. Xu has her eye on UTS for her daughter, Sandy, who is 11. “My philosophy is very simple. It's the only school I'm interested in,” she says, adding that it will ultimately be her daughter's decision.

She says she was happy to hear about Adam's interests outside of academics, which include tae kwon do and swimming. The fact



Tammy Ghajar, left, and her son, Sina Doost, get pointers: Ask the child to call the admissions office in person for more information if they've made it onto the wait list. JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

that he seems very comfortable talking with a roomful of strangers was also a relief.

“Academics is just a small portion, in my opinion. People skills are very important,” Ms. Xu says.

For his part, Adam says he's telling parents to make sure their children aren't overworked en route to their dream schools.

“It's like when a computer overheats; it's too much,” he says.

Caroline Wu is another kid expert holding court. The 15-year-old Branksome Hall student has been fielding questions about what it's like going to an all-girls school and whether there is “work-life balance.” Then, she says, the conversation shifts to the benefits of the international

baccalaureate program, or IB.

“I tell them it's difficult and challenging, but it's really worthwhile, especially when we're applying to American universities,” Caroline says.

And she may have eased some parents' minds about the admission process. Like Adam, Caroline also had private prepping for the SSAT. But she describes the interview process as being low-stress.

“The staff was really nice. They said bring in what you want,” she says, adding that she brought in some of her artwork.

While it may look to some like an attempt to game the system, for many, networking and prep courses can be a way to demystify the admissions process.

es necessary to get them to that next level.”

As Ms. Xu says of her daughter's potential, “If she got into university in the U.S., I'd sell my house.”

Industry experts say parents who are zeroing in on the success stories risk forgetting a key element in the process: whether the school you're clamouring to get into, to crib that famous Groucho Marx idea, is one that you'd actually want to belong to.

“You really want to find that right match,” Ms. Stawicki says, “the family should be interviewing the school, too.”

Garth Chalmers, the director of admissions at UTS, says that his school declines to participate in events such as Prepskills' because they don't want to appear to favour any particular prep course – or prep courses in general. But he calls the use of kid experts such as Adam an “interesting phenomenon. ...

“Because there's so much emphasis on the first stage of our process, the SSAT, parents are very interested to find out what's required to do well. Certainly kids who've gone through the process would have some useful feedback for them,” he says. “Do I think it's the right or wrong way to approach it? I don't know,” he says. “There's no magic bullet.”

He understands that parents are hungry for information, but points out that he can share the same information with any parent who calls him. “It's a transparent process that way.”

After hearing about the moment all of Adam's hard work paid off, parents at Saturday's event could be forgiven for taking detailed notes. “I couldn't believe my eyes when I received my 99th percentile SSAT score in the mail,” he says. “I raised my hands in victory and jumped up and down for joy for the longest time.”

One parent at the event told Joanna Severino, the founder and president of Prepskills, that her child had made it onto the wait list at UTS and she asked what she should do now.

“It's almost like they feel these institutions are untouchable. ‘I can't call them, I can't touch them,’” she says, adding that one idea may be to have the child call the admissions office in person to ask for more information.

This can be especially true for newcomers to Canada, who make up a larger proportion of the families represented at the event. “I do see more and more of that,” Ms. Severino said. “Families coming in who want the best for their kids and will make all the sacrific-