Overcoming PSLE setbacks
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Overcoming PSLE setbacks

Despite not doing well in the Primary 6 exam, they persevered and went on to achieve their dreams of studying law and medicine



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Ahead of the PSLE results being released on Nov 24, two young adults share how taking a longer academic path after Primary 6 did not prevent them from achieving their dreams of studying law and medicine.

While being placed in the Normal (Academic) stream initially felt like a setback, they found personal motivation to keep going and turn their academic challenges around.

Today, one is navigating a demanding university course in medicine and the other, an intellectually rigorous legal career.

They share how resilience and support from dedicated teachers helped them overcome academic hurdles and attain their goals.

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OVERCOMING EARLY STRUGGLES TO BUILD A LEGAL CAREER



Chong Kai Sheng, who is now a legal associate at law firm Siraj Omar LLC, says there is no single pathway to success and what matters is the willingness to put in the work. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Growing up in a modest, Mandarin-speaking family, Chong Kai Sheng describes his younger self as an unmotivated pupil who did the bare minimum for homework and tests.

While he coped well with Chinese, he struggled with his other three subjects.

His weak grasp of English also hindered his understanding of mathematics and science concepts.

"I remember thinking schoolwork was a chore, and I would much rather be in front of a gaming console or computer," says Chong, now 28, and a legal associate at law firm Siraj Omar LLC.

The PSLE was just another exam to him. With an aggregate score of 198 in 2010, he was posted to the Normal (Academic) stream at Bedok Green Secondary School.

"I don't remember being particularly disappointed. I was just happy to pass the examinations," he says.

Chong describes his secondary school days as his "rough-and-tumble days" because he was mischievous and often talked back to teachers.

The implication of being in the Normal stream hit him only in the upper secondary level when he realised he would be one year behind his peers in the Express stream.

"That motivated me to work harder. The onus was on me to catch up and make the best use of my time in that one extra year," he says.

He formed an informal study group with friends, where friendly rivalry pushed him to excel. Over time, that competitive drive grew into something deeper. Instead of studying solely for grades, he found himself genuinely engaging with the subjects.

"I started thinking, 'This is actually quite interesting. Let me try to understand this topic properly'," he says, adding that this spark evolved into a lasting curiosity and appreciation for learning.

His biggest obstacle remained his command of English, a subject he struggled with throughout secondary school.

Determined to improve, he devoted extra time and effort to mastering the language.

"I remember working through assessment book after assessment book on grammar in preparation for my O-level examinations," he recalls.

He is grateful to the teachers who went above and beyond to support him.

His form teacher, Florence Leong, was strict about discipline and would make him stay back after school to address his rebellious behaviour.

Noticing his knack for debating school rules during those chats, she suggested he consider pursuing a career in law.

He paid little attention to the idea, but went on to score nine points for his O-level exams.

He started to consider law after graduating from Meridian Junior College, and he eventually enrolled in Singapore Management University's (SMU) Yong Pung How School of Law in 2020.

He says his time at SMU marked a major turning point when he was given the opportunity to represent the university in prestigious mooting competitions overseas and received rigorous training in legal research, written advocacy and oral argument.

"I learnt not only how to write and speak like a lawyer, but also how to think like one. The experience pushed me far beyond my comfort zone," he says.

Having faced academic hurdles himself, Chong understands the frustration of struggling with complex topics and the value of clear, accessible explanations.

"That perspective allows me to communicate more effectively with my clients and to appreciate the concerns that may not always be immediately apparent from a purely legal standpoint," he says.

Reflecting on his journey, he says a setback at the age of 12 does not define one's future.

"While disappointing results can feel overwhelming in the moment, what truly matters is how you respond to them," he says.

He has friends from the Normal stream who have built successful careers in fields such as private equity and auditing, while others have represented Singapore on the international sports stage.

"Their journeys serve as a reminder that there is no single pathway to success. What matters is the willingness to put in the work," he says.

FROM NURSING DIPLOMA TO NUS MEDICINE



Charmaine Cheng may have taken a detour on her way to her goal, but she is now in her second year of medical school at the National University of Singapore. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Charmaine Cheng also struggled academically in primary school and lacked interest in her studies.

After her father was diagnosed with colon cancer, she started to skip school.

"I wanted to spend more time with my dad, so I used it as an excuse to not go to school," says Cheng, now 22. Her father died when she was 10 and in Primary 4.

She describes herself as a playful pupil. "I didn't see the need to study. At student care, when others finished their work at 6pm, I would still be there doing the same question I was working on since 2pm," she recalls.

Regularly failing tests, she once scored as low as 11 out of 100 for mathematics in upper primary.

Her only goal for her PSLE in 2016 was to outperform her older sister, but her aggregate score of 166 fell short. She was posted to the Normal (Academic) stream in CHIJ Katong Convent.

Her attitude changed in Secondary 1 when she was appointed class monitor, a role that motivated her to step up and take responsibility.

"I realised that someone trusted me, so I needed to not disappoint the person. In primary school, when I failed, it was my problem. But now I had to answer to other people," she says.

Another pivotal moment came when a teacher reminded her class that education was the pathway out of financial hardship.

With her family still working to clear her father's medical bills, she decided to study harder.

To support her family, she began taking on part-time jobs from the age of 14, occasionally juggling two jobs while keeping up with schoolwork.

Over the years, she worked as a tutor, in the food and beverage sector, and later as a basic care assistant in healthcare.

In lower secondary, she narrowly missed the cut-off to transfer to the Express stream by less than a point. Still, she went on to excel in her studies, take on student leadership roles and ultimately scored eight points in her N levels.

In 2021, she enrolled in Nanyang Polytechnic's nursing diploma programme via the Polytechnic Foundation Programme.

She did well and graduated at the top of her cohort in 2025 and began considering a path she once thought was out of reach: studying medicine in university.

She applied to the National University of Singapore (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine that year, leaning on her nursing background during the rigorous selection process. Her practical experience gave her effective communication skills and confidence.

Having secured a spot, she is now a second-year medicine undergraduate at NUS.

Cheng is passionate about geriatric care and aims to become a compassionate doctor who brings comfort to patients during difficult moments.

Reflecting on her journey, she says there are many routes to the same destination.

"There are different routes for everybody. It's okay to take your time to find your route. And it's all right to come from a different background," she says.

She once attended a leadership talk where she was asked to write down her aspirations and learnt that her "why" remains a constant, even if her "how" might change.

"For example, I wanted to go into healthcare, but didn't do very well at first. Why I want to do it remains, but the route to get there is slightly different, and that's okay," she says. "I'm slightly older than my peers. Even if I'm slower in picking things up, we can all get to the same place in the end. Just keep at it."

Years on, the journey that began at 12 matters less, she adds.

"No one will ask you about those early setbacks once you start work. It is how you carry yourself and what you gain from the experiences that define you," she says.

EVERYONE'S DIFFERENT

"There are different routes for everybody. It's okay to take your time to find your route."

CHARMAINE CHENG

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