

They're Not In Preschool Anymore: Elementary School Different In Many Ways

Description



Now that I've been a mom at a private elementary school for five years, I've noticed that the culture of elementary school is vastly different than the preschools here. I expected some similarities, but really there are very few. Obviously, each school is different. But, as I write this, I'm drawing on my own experience and that of my friends at many of the top schools.

Most preschools attract neighborhood families. At my daughter's preschool, [Montessori Shir-Hashirim](#) in Hollywood, families lived in the Hollywood Hills and Hancock Park. It was easy to get to and from each other's houses and I still have two close friends I met there.

Private elementary schools in LA attract families from far-flung geographic neighborhoods. My kids' school, [The Willows Community School](#), has families from Inglewood to the Palisades and everywhere in between. Getting together is logistically more difficult than it was in preschool. The school days are longer and scheduling playdates is harder.

But, that's not the only difference between preschools and private elementary schools. The cultures of the schools differ dramatically. In preschool, you may have been asked to contribute to school events, either as a volunteer or financially. But, the events were most likely small and the requirements fairly reasonable, both in terms of your time and money.

Elementary school is a different story entirely! Volunteerism is expected. You can't just disappear because you work full time. There are too many parents who work *and* volunteer.

Annual giving is *required* (an unspoken rule.) This is different than it was at both my kids' preschools, neither of which required any financial contributions. (My son attended [It's A Children's World](#)).

Elementary schools expect 100 percent parent participation in their annual giving campaigns. Opting out is not an option. Yes, there is always that one family who refuses to give â€œon principleâ€• that they don't believe in giving beyond the tuition. Guess what? This doesn't go over well with school administrators, who will try to get the family to give \$1 so they can be counted in the annual giving campaign participation. You really don't want to be that family, trust me. We've all heard the term sh** list and that family would be on it.

But, the biggest difference between preschool parents and private elementary school parents is *ambition*. I don't mean personal career ambition (although career networking and social climbing happens.) I'm talking about ambition to chair committees, join the board, secure highly visible volunteer positions. Why?

Hereâ€™s why:

â€œWe donâ€™t really care if a parent baked cookies for the fair, but if a parent has been on a board, thatâ€™s a big deal.â€

â€ Elizabeth Gregory, Director of Admissions at Harvard-Westlake
([Harvard-Westlake Chronicle](#), 2007).

That quote pretty much sums it up. I LOVE that quote!

The determination to do everything possible to ensure your child is accepted into a top secondary school runs deep in the culture of many of LAâ€™s private elementary schools. It has impacted my volunteer decisions and our familyâ€™s financial giving, without a doubt. How could it not?

A friend of mine recently described a meeting she attended at her kidâ€™s school as â€œWWF meets Desperate Housewivesâ€ because of the infighting and elbowing for position among the moms in the room. Iâ€™ve been in those rooms and Iâ€™ve let my sharp elbows fly too (yes, I always regretted it later.). One friend of mine had to deal with a mom who came in at the last minute and re-did everyone elseâ€™s work right before a big event. My friend was livid, but wisely decided to stay out of it. However, the next year when she was in charge of the event, she made sure that mom wasnâ€™t anywhere near it.

I think knowing a bit about this stuff before your child starts school can help you navigate these sometimes choppy waters. If things on the surface seem a bit odd or there seems to be something missing from the story youâ€™re being given about volunteering, ask yourself if ambition is behind whatâ€™s going on. For example, if you sign up for a committee and you never hear back, maybe it has something to do with school politics. Chances are, it might. Last year I offered to get several items donated for the school auction. Since I had previously co-chaired this event, I thought these donationsâ€that had previously brought in several thousand dollarsâ€would be welcome. Nope! Seemed nobody was interested. Hmmm.

Until recently, I had no idea parents lobbied hard for volunteer positions at private schools. I thought you had to be asked to serve.

~~Itâ€™s a good thing I have the personality for this kind of networking!~~

If youâ€™re wondering whether this is a cautionary tale, it is. Take it from me, donâ€™t let petty school politics or infighting ruin your day (or month). Iâ€™ve made that mistake. Now, I select volunteer activities that ensure the elbows fly far away from me.

Are there private elementary schools in LA that donâ€™t have cultures which foster ambition, competition and in-fighting? Of course! I just donâ€™t know of any.

Our goal with this blog is to fling open the curtains on admissions and life at private elementary schools in Los Angeles. Let us know what you think! We welcome your comments, thoughts and opinions.

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