

Why A Private School's Culture REALLY Matters

Description



If you've been reading this blog for a while, you've probably read my posts about [a school's culture](#) or a school's vibe. That's because I think it is one of the most important things to know about L.A. private schools. Ideally, you'll learn as much about the school's culture as possible before you enroll your kid. Figuring out what a school is really all about—not just what they want you to see—isn't always easy. Unless you have a close friend at the school or know someone who works there, it can be difficult to figure out what a school is really like for kids and for their parents.

So many factors go into creating the culture of the school. Some of these things are accidental or subjective, others are carefully planned and cultivated. Things like geography or location, school size, school leadership, age of the school, educational philosophy can all influence a school's culture.

When we were choosing an elementary school, the things I cared the most about were finding a sense of community at our school and the quality of the education. I didn't care whether parents worked in a certain industry or if kids were interested in becoming movie stars. It was important to me to find

parents who felt the school was an extension of their community and treated it that way. I hoped to find families with similar interests to our own. I didn't want a commuter school, a place where parents dropped off their kids and avoided other families whenever possible. Unfortunately, that wasn't my experience at The Willows.

So, what can you look for to figure out whether a school's culture will be right for your family? I say family because when you're dropping off your 6 year-old at somebody's house, you need to feel comfortable. If the family's nanny opens the door to let your kid in, without even inviting you inside and the mom is nowhere to be found, this isn't the kind of community I'm talking about. *A sense of belonging can only happen if the school helps facilitate a sense of community.* It's not enough for a school to assume parents will meet each other eventually. L.A. is too big and fragmented for that to happen. If the school takes that approach, it will take a lot longer to schedule playdates or plan a mom's night out, possibly even years. After all, are you going to go down the roster and start cold-calling? I don't think so!

I've been candid about the fact that the culture of The Willows School was wrong for my family. The school's culture, in my experience, wasn't friendly or inviting. Instead, it was kind of like a commuter school where parents dropped off their kids and left. The lack of community left me wishing for a true community school, one where parents were friendly and cared about the school community rather than just the people they already knew. Scheduling playdates was difficult. For the most part, a lot of parents weren't interested. Or, they'd cancel or flake at the last minute, leaving me to explain to my kids what happened. Board members and the head of school strutted through the halls speaking only to other parents they deemed "worthy." The head of school created a board and top staff filled with unqualified or marginally qualified cronies. No issue was too small for them to micro-manage. Any issue that negatively impacted them or their friends was ignored, shoved under the rug. The offending complainant was snubbed, considered disloyal. [Volunteering](#) there was one of the most unprofessional experiences of my entire life. Screaming matches between parents, stony silence, an absence of staff to demand professionalism from volunteers. I'm not blameless. This all brought out the worst in me. I shouted back. I stopped speaking. This type of culture, I might add, starts at the top with the school's leadership. It is a cultivated way of behaving, not a mere one-time oversight. As my husband, Barry, pointed out, "A fish rots from the head."

In contrast, Viewpoint School is professional, friendly and expects parents to behave in a civilized manner. This culture fits my family so much better. We appreciate and respect the school for creating an environment where if I email a parent I don't know personally, he or she will most likely respond. I would have never thought something like this would matter until I didn't have it.

So, how can you discern what a school is really like from the outside?

- Ask around. How do parents get to know each other when they're new? Are there school welcoming events? Host families? Probe further. Do most of the families come from the same preschool? Will your kid be entering a class filled with more than fifty percent siblings? If so, how will you and your kid schedule playdates or get-togethers?
- Look at the school's events on the website. If the events don't appeal to you, think carefully about how they reflect the culture of the school. Do the events scream "status"? If so, look for schools where the vibe is more low-key, a camping trip or something more accessible.

- Schools have a reputation for a reason. When somebody tells you the school is “country club” or “entertainment industry” or “rich-hippie” it’s because that’s what most of the families are like, influencing the school’s culture. If that’s not you, think about whether it will work for your family.
- Look at the school’s annual report. It will tell you a lot about the school’s priorities, financial aid and categories of giving.
- Examine the qualifications of the head of school, the board and the next level of administrative staff. Do they bring professional skills? Or, do they appear as if they are there because they are friends with the head of school? This has implications for whether issues like bullying are handled fairly or with favoritism. Every private school needs trust fund families on the board, but there should also be real estate experts, lawyers, finance people, educators and others with specific skill sets.
- Figure out if the school draws from a wide geographic area or from just one or two communities. This has implications for everything from playdates to volunteering and finding your community.
- Go to as many school events as possible. Pay close attention to the annual fundraiser and where it is held, ticket prices, the number of events held at country clubs or exclusive locations. These all give you an idea of what the school values.

Ultimately, what you see is sometimes not what you get. And then, there’s that school where what you see really is exactly what you get. Hopefully, you find the latter. Like we have at [Viewpoint School](#).

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