

The Lowdown on L.A. Private Elementary School Tours by Alice

Description



Photo: Flickr/[Brad Flickinger](#)

If it's your first time through the private school gauntlet, [the tours](#) are everything. As a family you are trying to make a decision that could impact the next six to twelve years of your lives and no other form of reconnaissance replaces boots on the ground. Even if you've seen the brochures, or have driven by a particular school countless times and even if all your best friend's kids go there and they've given all the inside scoop, it still doesn't replace [the tour](#).

For me the campus was never exactly what I pictured. No matter how eloquent my friends were, or how well photographed a campus was, really walking around it was irreplaceable. It's seeing the kids and their enthusiasm or lack thereof. It's feeling the buzz in the air, the way and where they eat, where the backpacks get tossed, the lockers, the fields, the size of the campus, how it's maintained. All of these little vignettes come together to paint a picture. For most of us, it's a feeling we get, that our kid would be happy, or not, in any given school.

It's also really the best time to get your questions out. The "evening" that many of the schools sponsor specifically for Q & A's with kids often feels staged and overly prepared. As my friend Karen said about one evening in particular, "The kids felt like they'd been too coached. The headmaster at the time stood off to the side. If questions went in a direction he wasn't comfortable with, he'd jump in and steer things in another direction."

Particularly if you get lucky and get a student led tour, even if your student guide is extremely well prepared and rehearsed, you're going to have a chance for real interaction and get a more candid insights into what your guide loves about his or her school. For that reason alone, I'm a fan of student led tours.

However, many tours of K-8 schools are done by admissions officers and that's still a good opportunity not only to see the school and ask questions, but to see if it's a personality match. Don't panic if your child is a total dolt through whole tour. Admissions people have seen it all. For most kindergarten classes they are looking more at the family than the child (assuming the child is not an outlier).

There are some schools that are so exclusive it's hard to get a tour. I tried to tour John Thomas Dye and Curtis for my son, but I waited until September to call and apparently I was too late!. If you don't get on the tour/application list over the summer at those schools you're out, and there's no getting back in.

Also buyer beware. Most schools do a good job of touring and your little one may fall in love. My son fell in love with Oakwood on the tour, but I had an early sense Oakwood wasn't in love with us and I was right. He didn't get in, so don't let a five-year old's emotions play too big a role in your decision making and what eggs you are putting in what baskets. The family and school have to be a match and that really isn't going to be determined by the tour. You will learn things. You may decide [a school is or isn't right](#), but a lot of other things have to line up between the tour and an acceptance letter.

Final note, one woman I know got pretty offended when she was being toured by an admissions director only to look around and see the Headmaster touring another family. Why them and not me she thought? The truth is there could be a million good reasons, including they are his relatives. Let it go and enjoy the tour. It really is about you. It's about your chance to see the place and get the feel for it and then all the other posturing, planning, applying, interviewing, waiting and suffering can take place.

God Speed.

Mother of three, Alice attended east coast private schools as a child and has been in the private school world as a parent for nearly twenty years. Her kids attended Mirman for elementary, then Harvard-Westlake and Brentwood for high school, with one still to go. She is a writer working in film, TV and for various magazines such as Family Fun, Wondertime, Glamour and Brides.

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