Guest Blogger Jenny: Tuition Blues

Description

L.A. Private Schools: Expensive,
But Worth The Cost

Once I realized that private school was in my childâ€™s future, I accepted the fact that tuition just comes with the territory. Yes, Iâ€™d be forking out thousands and thousands of dollars per year in tuition. Most LA. private elementary schools raise tuition somewhere between 4-8 percent annually. And that doesnâ€™t cover additional costs like books, possibly uniforms, maybe a bus expense, silent auction items bid upon and won, perhaps a hot lunch every day, and the annual giving donation.

So, the first year I was in sticker shock. These are some monster checks. Still, when I realized what a great education Anna was getting, it eased the pain slightly. I relax. The damage was done, no one died, no oneâ€™s starving (yet), and there is peace on earth.

Sometimes thereâ€™s luck, and the school doesnâ€™t raise tuition at all for a year. That was nice. That was consistent. I could handle that.

But then the next yearâ€™s tuition packet arrived, and there was an increase. It was a small increase, but it was enough to remind me of a brutal, hard and cold fact: prices rarely go down, they almost always keep rising.

Thereâ€™s a big jump between a Lower School tuition and an Upper School tuition, around a two to three thousand dollar increase. But even if your child has just started, donâ€™t get complacent, since tuition rises every one to two years anyway.

I decided to check the regular increase stats for myself, in the most unscientific way possible, by just looking at one school, a top tier school for girls. Rated as one of the best (if not the best) private schools in L.A., it has always boasted tuition to match its hefty reputation. In fact, back in 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* even wrote an article about how this schoolâ€™s tuition had reached the crazy amount of $25,250 per year. This seemed a milestone, an impossible number, a number almost matching tuition at a private Ivy League university.

The Times has stayed strangely silent since that article in 2006. I guess it felt it had enough to report about, with the economy tanking and no one having any money anymore, plus an historic election and all. But if the *Times* decided to write an update to that 2006 article, it might be shocked to learn this: that schoolâ€™s annual tuition increased six thousand dollars over the last six yearsâ€¦to $31,200.

Looking at these numbers makes me want to run screaming like a lunatic. Letâ€™s say I want to send my daughter (now in 5th grade at Mirman) to this school, and sheâ€™s lucky enough to get accepted. If the tuition keeps rising at its $1000 per year rate, it will be $33,200 by the time sheâ€™s in 7th grade. By the time she graduates, tuition would be $38,200 just so she could walk through the front gate; thatâ€™s not counting giving and uniforms and all the various and sundry private school costs Iâ€™ve previously mentioned.

Iâ€™m trying to figure out how a school justifies a 20% tuition increase over a six year period, especially during a recession in which many peopleâ€™s earnings took a massive dive. I suppose itâ€™s just simple supply and demand: there will always be enough wealthy people to pay full freight, with others fighting it out for financial aid (currently, this one school has 14% of its students receiving financial aid). I suppose that if you can afford thirty grand a year, whatâ€™s another grand or so on top of that, anyway?

But, for the rest of us (I get help from my family to pay my share of the tuition), this â€œrace to the topâ€• is unsustainable. Perhaps a parochial school, that still offers a good education and is less money, is in Annaâ€™s future. Maybe other private schools (new and untested, with no college acceptance rates) will emerge. Although, since the tuition bar has already been set so high, whereâ€™s the incentive to offer a lower price? The so-called â€œtop tierâ€• schools will all charge the same crazy tuition, and the lower tier schools will always aspire to the same.

In the end, prices never go down. They only go up.

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Date Created
February 20, 2012
Author
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