

"Is Your Daughter Smart?" the Principal Asked

Description



My Sweet, Funny, Kind (and Smart) Daughter

This is a somewhat warped tale about class, geography, race, wealth and bureaucratic bungling. As a private elementary school mom, Iâ€™m often asked why the Los Angeles private elementary school admission process is so competitive? Why are schools that charge up to \$30,000 per year, per kid for elementary school receiving hundreds of applications for every open spot? Is L.A. really overflowing with parents who are carefully orchestrating plans to steer their kids to the â€œrightâ€• private schools and then on to the Ivy League? Why are parents doing everything in their power (some of which is substantial) to get their kid admitted to a good private elementary school in L.A?

Depending on when you live in L.A. the public school system isnâ€™t up to many parentsâ€™ standards. There are definitely some excellent public schools, but they vary by geographic location. Recent, severe public school budget cuts and scandals of epic proportion have driven even more parents to look at private schools as they confront increased class size, teacher layoffs and cuts in essential school services. The public school crisis has been one of the biggest factors keeping private school admissions competitive, despite the recession. I could easily turn this into a discussion about why too many public schools are failing our kids, but much has been written on that topic and I certainly donâ€™t have the answers.

As a product of L.A. public schools, I am intimately familiar with its many challenges. I experienced bullying, incompetent teachers and an uneven education. Naturally, I was seeking something better for my kids. I repeat, there are some excellent public schools in our city, it all comes back to the question of where you live. Does it make sense to buy a house you canâ€™t really afford just to send your kid to public school in Bel Air?

The year before my daughter started elementary school, I wanted to put my public school memories behind me. After all, who had a great middle school experience anywhere? So, I decided to look at our local public elementary school. It was three blocks from our house in Hancock Park, had high student test scores and seemed like a real possibility for my daughter. When the schoolâ€™s computer lab was broken into the year before, I made a generous donation based on a letter sent to neighbors by the school. I was trying to keep an open mind, despite the fact that I only knew one neighbor who sent their kid there.

Another mom at our preschool and I set up an appointment with to meet with the principal and tour the school. The day of our appointment we arrived on time just to learn that the principal was â€œunavailable.â€• So, we

waited, politely sitting in the front waiting area. Finally, after about 20 minutes the receptionist told us the principal wouldn't be able to meet with us. We asked if a teacher could show us the school. A very nice kindergarten teacher gave us a quick tour and told us the principal was now available to see us in her office. We sat down and introduced ourselves. The principal seemed uninterested in us and bored with the conversation. We asked about class size, hot lunch and homework. Waving her hands and practically shouting us down, the principal didn't answer our questions. Instead, she aimed a pointed question at me, "is your daughter smart?" she demanded to know. She didn't ask the other mom the same question. My response was, "I live in your district." In other words, you have to enroll my kid, whether or not she's smart. I refused to answer her question. I found it offensive. We asked to see a 1st grade class. The principal said no. As we were leaving, the kindergarten teacher told us, "just be quiet, I'll show you the 1st grade class." We peeked into the 1st grade class and I suspected the reason why the principal didn't want us to see it. It was a Korean-language immersion class. None of the kids in the class spoke English. The principal was also Korean. *Could she have been subtly trying to discourage me from enrolling my daughter in the school?*

A few months later, I went back to the public school again during a school community fair. I tried to like it, but with 1000 elementary students, I felt my shy daughter might be lost in the crowd. And, I knew I wouldn't be able to deal with the principal's personality. The mom from our preschool who toured with me decided to enroll her child. Her perception of the school was vastly different than mine. Then again, the principal never asked if her white daughter was "smart." That question was reserved for me, the African American mom.

Despite living in a "good" public school district, my husband and I decided private school would be the best option for our kids. And so began the hellish, ultra-competitive process to get our daughter into a top private elementary school in L.A.

In September 2005, we embarked on a time-consuming whirlwind of tours (10 schools), applications (\$100 each), parent interviews, kid testing days, parent coffee chats, and then the agonizing waiting period in late March, as we held our breath to find out if our daughter had been accepted to private school. *The LA Times* dubbed the day the letters arrive as "Black Friday" because there are so many rejection letters received, so much bad news for families who applied. On "Black Friday," parents begin obsessively checking the mail, email, phone messages for any sign of admission letters. A fat envelope signals an acceptance. A thin, flat letter means rejection, or so the rumor goes. Stalking the mail truck, going to the school, drinking large quantities of wine, eating everything in sight and spending hours on the phone with girlfriends are just a few of the survival tactics my friends and I used until our letters arrived. When they ripped open their letters, overjoyed parents have admitted to running crazily into the middle of the street shouting to everyone they know that their kid got into private school. A bunch of "no" letters sent one mom friend of mine into the closet for a tear-filled, drinking binge, devastated that her child was denied admission everywhere she applied. I felt the process was very personal. You've put your entire family on the line for admissions directors to evaluate. The parent interviews are like a job interview that includes your 4 or 5 year old's resume.

"You have to work it" to get your kid into private school, I heard over and over from everyone. What did that mean? I filled out the applications, dragged my husband to the interviews with a strict warning to leave his sarcastic sense of humor at home, had my daughter tested, attended school events. What else could I do? Well, there was more to do, I just didn't know it. About two weeks before letters arrived, I found out through the parent grapevine that there is an "behind the scenes" process that is happening during admissions season. Parents who told me, "I'd never ask a parent at the school where we're applying to write me a letter of recommendation" were not telling the truth. Everyone was getting letters from anybody they knew who was remotely connected to the private schools. Some parents have been known to go up the food chain seeking letters from U.S. Senators and Ambassadors. These types also send fancy gifts to admissions directors. Upon learning this, I scrambled to asked several families we knew to write letters on our behalf. Luckily, they wrote the letters, which at minimum eased my mind and at best helped my daughter get into all three schools we applied to.

My daughter is now about to enter 5th grade. Was all the stress of admissions worth it? Absolutely. But, private schools aren't perfect either, although their challenges are different than public schools. They are insanely

expensive and tuition rises 4-8 percent per year. On top of tuition, there are other costs, like annual giving and “extras” for your kid. There is also elitism and privilege like I’ve never seen before. Not surprisingly, there are very few working class or lower middle class families. The term “I’ll give you a ride” doesn’t necessarily mean a car ride. It can also mean a ride on somebody’s PRIVATE JET.

Because the admissions process was so stressful and there was so much “off the radar” networking happening, I collaborated with two educators (one of them is my step mom) to write a book about navigating the private school process. I also blog about it because I believe parents who want a private school education for their child should have access to information that is accessible to some families, but not all. In order to play the game, you must understand its hidden rules.

I’m grateful my kids are at a progressive urban private school. I know we are fortunate to be able to pay the cost of their education. We also make this a financial priority in our family, in part because of my negative experience in LA public schools. My husband attended top public suburban schools outside Philadelphia so he doesn’t completely grasp the idea that public school isn’t an option. We contribute to our school’s scholarship fund to help finance diverse families who can’t pay the full tuition. On days when I’ve come across a particularly entitled, snobbish parent, I wonder if I made the right choice. Then again I don’t think the suburbs are for me.

Six years after the public school principal demanded to know if my daughter was “smart” I can tell her she didn’t need to worry. The answer is yes. She’s also sweet, funny and kind.

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1. Beyond The Brochure

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Author

admin