

Guest Blogger Alice: Getting Into Harvard-Westlake

Description



Harvard-Westlake. It's one of the schools we've all heard about, known for academic excellence, rigor and college placement. If our kids can make it there, they'll make it anywhere! Admit it or not, there are plenty of parents in L.A. that choose their preschools based on their dream of sending their kids to Harvard-Westlake. They believe that Harvard-Westlake leads to Harvard, Princeton or Yale and untold riches from there. Maybe if you can get in.

I think there are better reasons to apply to Harvard-Westlake than plotting where your kid will go to college. It offers an exciting high school experience that is hard to match, not just in L.A., but also in the country. There's an intellectual curiosity in the air and there are kids there doing amazing and inspiring things in athletics, art, film, dance and drama. The energy is palpable. You might be talking to a kid headed to MLB, or about to join an orchestra, or on their way to West Point. There's true variety and intensity. It's fun.

My family has applied twice to Harvard-Westlake, one daughter was wait-listed and chose not to fight the wait-list and go instead to Brentwood. The other got in and went, so I have a little perspective on the application process and what it entails. First, I just have to say a few truths not every parent wants

to face. Harvard-Westlake is really a great school for the right kid. But not every kid is the right kid and those kids who don't go to Harvard-Westlake can have an equally spectacular future ahead of them that will be best realized by finding the right school for them.

We private school parents can be little nuts. We occasionally put prestige and self interest ahead of what type of learner a kid is – how self directed they are, how organized and a myriad of other things. Every admissions officer and lower school counselor will tell you that they want to find the match for your child. It can sound like a blow off when you first hear it, because we know what we want, however, I have three kids ages 22 to 9 and I've seen a hundreds of kids going through the private school system and it's kind of true. You are looking for a match. And it's not just a match for your kid, but for your family.

Location of school, cost of tuition, what's happening with siblings, these things actually matter and admissions officers know that. No school is worth stressing out the whole family, either with an untenable commute, or by putting a family in financial hardship. And if you're only applying so you can get into an Ivy League College, bare in mind there will be a hundred other kids applying to that chosen Ivy from Harvard-Westlake that same year. Your child may actually have a better chance getting there from somewhere else.



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Cut to my second daughter's year to apply. The economy had tanked, people were fleeing to public magnets and Catholic schools. Mirman kids with way worse ISEEs than my eldest were accepted to Harvard-Westlake that year. Never underestimate how much sheer random circumstance plays in this particular game. However, while I believe that my older daughter would have definitely gotten into Harvard-Westlake my younger daughter's year, I also believe my younger daughter would have gotten in any time she applied. You can't stop the right match. And I can say this with some certainty because my husband sort of tried to stop her.

Since our eldest had gone to Brentwood, he thought her sister should too. Plus he'd heard all the horror stories. It's an evil citadel where children are over worked and under appreciated. There are drugs and roving gangs of over privileged kids wandering the halls. (These same stories circulate about all the private high schools at one point or another). So he shows up late to her interview and was ever so slightly combative with the interviewer. But my daughter knew what she wanted and had worked hard to get there. We never had to ask about her homework, it was always done. She had won awards of some substance in theatre. She tested well in mythology and Spanish and the other various ways Mirman academically competed and she'd won the heart of her teachers.

Her ISEE scores weren't perfect but she had one 8 and one 9 so her 6 and 7 could be more easily overlooked. The 9 she had was in English, which matched her academic profile. She was a match for Harvard-Westlake. So much so, that as a graduate she has taught in their summer school and been a paid teacher's assistant twice. Her late application, her parents who give in the hundreds range at annual giving, and her older sibling who had made another choice, nothing could stop the match, she was a Harvard- Westlake kid. She got in.

So if Harvard-Westlake is the dream:

- ISEEs matter. Take a prep course, but only one. Your child simply needs to know the test and how to take it. Studying for years won't change things. There's only much the scores will go up. Some kids with 4's and 5's will still get in, if they bring something else to the table, (music, art, dance, sports) so don't make this the sword you die on.
- Your child should be able to clearly state why they want to go to Harvard-Westlake. What does the school offer that works for them? Don't make it up. If your kid doesn't have a history of caring about science, don't pretend they're suddenly going to love it now. If they love theatre, fencing or Anime, say it, they might be looking for just that kid this year.
- If you're alumni or have a strong connection to the school, play it. These things do matter. The caveat however is that you can't pretend to be a bigger donor than you are. Your history of giving is your history, if you've been giving a thousand dollars a year to your elementary school, no one will believe you're suddenly going to give a million.
- The interview is important. Not for you to talk, but for your kid to. My daughter very clearly articulated why she didn't want to go to the same school as her sister and why Harvard-Westlake was unequivocally her first choice.

- Let your elementary or middle school counselors know what you want and why. But prepare to listen! If the counselor is saying over and over you need to look other places, or they don't think it's the right match. Hear them and start looking seriously at other schools. They are telling you that despite the perfection you see in your kid, their teachers recommendations aren't going to be as great as you think they should be and that you're elementary school which has an ethical obligation to be honest will not be promoting your child as a match.
- If there is an extra recommendation that really is relevant to your child's talents, dedication or enthusiasm then get it and submit. But there is such a thing as over kill. Don't submit three of them, or get random recommendations from the most famous people you know. Getting J.K. Rowling or President Obama to write your kid's recommendation can come off as obnoxious rather than cool.

My short story ends like this. I have one more kid, my son who will surely apply to Harvard-Westlake. He hung out there growing up and loves it in theory. Right now he's 9 years-old. In the end I have no clue if it's going to be right for him or not. My sense is that if he makes it, it will be on sports and not on being a top test taker. I hope it works out, I do love the place, but I'm already compiling a short list of places I'd be perfectly happy sending him. They are smaller, closer and great schools as well. We shall see.

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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