

The Only Admissions Letter That Mattered

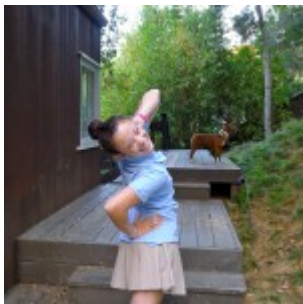
Description



First day of school



First day of school



Off to their new school!



First day of school



The admissions packet!

As many of you know, my kids happily entered Viewpoint School in Fall 2013 after 7 years at The Willows Community School. We knew it was time for a change after so many years at one school and my daughter was ready to begin 7th grade at a bigger school. So, we set out to find the right school for her. Twists and turns during the process last year left us feeling like weâ€™d chosen to apply to the wrong schools. What seemed right at the time felt completely wrong for our daughter midway through the process. But, we pressed on, thinking that weâ€™d finish the process and make our decisions then. Iâ€™m keeping things intentionally vague to protect the privacy of my 13 year-old, who is keenly aware of a lot of the things her mom writes. I know you understand.

As you may have guessed, [applying for private middle school in L.A.](#) is serious business. Itâ€™s also fickle because youâ€™re dealing with a tween/teen. At one school where my daughter spent the day, they didnâ€™t have enough chairs so she had to stand during several classes. This upset her, so she hated the school. We didnâ€™t apply there. She loved another school because she had friends on the tour. We didnâ€™t apply there either.

There are only a few top-tier schools for huge numbers of applicants, coming from both public and private elementary schools, including gifted magnets and charters. Points of entry for middle school are 6th grade (if there is one at the school), 7th grade and then for high school, 9th grade. The middle school admissions process is rigorous.

There are tours, parent interviews, student visiting days (long ones), an interview for the kid, letters of recommendation, lengthy applications (one written by the student and one by the parent). I do a lot of writing, but my portion of one written application still took me seven hours to complete. There are tons of prospective parent events and even more if youâ€™re a minority family. There is the ISEE test and it is a very BIG DEAL that involves an ISEE tutor and at least a few months of tutoring (unless your kid already knows the material, which happens). Then thereâ€™s the 4-hour ISEE test on a Saturday. It is a mini-SAT. Of course, whether your kid plays sports is a huge deal.

We initially suspected that our interests and those of the incumbent school would not align. The Willows has a middle school and they want kids to stay through 8th grade for a variety of legitimate

reasons. However, our daughter's world had become too small and she needed a change. Still, it was our backup plan. We had a daughter with all As, who was in 6th grade, but was taking 7th grade math and who had never had a discipline issue. Somewhere in the process we realized our son needed to move to a new school too. The pressure doubled. During our time at Willows we had donated the equivalent of the annual GNP of a small island nation over and above tuition. Still, we anticipated, that wouldn't be enough to ensure a smooth exit from the school. So we knew we'd need a contingency plan. But, we didn't know what it would be. *What we did know was that we were ready to move on* "with or without their support. _

When a parent representative from one school where we applied called me during dinnertime to invite me to an African American parent event and then kept me on the phone for 30 minutes talking about her daughter's basketball prowess (my daughter doesn't play sports), I was about to lose my mind. Her voice droned on, as she asked me yet again whether my daughter played sports. I tried politely to end the call. I was exhausted from the hours the process required and at that moment I realized this particular school was completely wrong for my daughter (who was totally dejected after spending an entire day there) and for our family. The call from Pompous Mom was the final straw. I didn't attend the event for prospective African American families. The mere thought of it made me cringe; I pictured a bunch of *prospective* black parents standing around sipping cocktails, pretending to be comfortable, but really freaking out inside, while *current* black families talked about how fabulous the school was. No thanks. If Pompous Mom was any indication of what the evening would be like, I'd skip it. I didn't attend the event, knowing it could be a deal breaker for our application. People are climbing over each other to get into this school and I'd just declined to show up at a black family event after a call from Pompous Mom and several emails from the school.

I also unwittingly made a terrible blunder during the admissions process at this school by not asking a friend's kid to host my daughter during visiting day. To do this, I would have needed to contact the school and request her kid, a current student. The message I got from my friend accused me of upsetting her kid "and worse. Confused and rattled, I had no idea that visiting day at this school is really a popularity contest and the kids who have a visitor assigned to them get public recognition by the school. I hadn't meant to hurt her kid, I just didn't know what other moms at her school already knew (but kept quiet for fear that their child wouldn't have a visitor). Internal school politics that play out in the admissions process is how I'd sum this up.

Our parent interview at the same school can only be described as ridiculous. A 20-something admissions assistant who was brand new at the job conducted our parent interview. The interview consisted of her reading off a checklist to confirm that what our daughter said in her interview sounded correct. "Yes, that sounds like our daughter," we nodded, making a mental note that our daughter hadn't said anything inflammatory or immature. Once the checklist was completed, the interview was finished. The scenario in the waiting room was like something out of a cheesy movie; families dropping names, bragging ostentatiously about how rich they were, hurrying to coach their kids to make sure to say XYZ in the interview. When the admissions director emerged from her office, she got a big over-the-top hug from the family she was about to interview. Their kid was the cousin of a current

student who “happened” to stop by at that moment to say hi. They’d mentioned this to us as we waited. Sitting in the claustrophobic waiting room, Barry and I whispered to each other, “We misread this one!” What we saw”and what we’d seen during the tours and events“ was not what we wanted. Nor did they want us, it turned out (we were wait-listed, but opted not to remain on the list). And that was a good thing, although stressful at the time.

Then, the most amazing thing happened: [Viewpoint School](#). We toured, spending half a day there. Our kids loved it. Barry and I knew this was the right school in so many ways. Big academics (6 grads went to Stanford this year) and big sports, with a remarkable professionalism and warmth that starts at the top with the Headmaster, Dr. Bob Dworkoski. It seemed ideal for both our kids. We couldn’t believe that luck, serendipity, a few smart decisions, some quick thinking, advice from those in the know and a gut feeling about the school would result in both our kids getting in. The admissions director, Laurel Baker Tew was gracious, knowledgeable and welcoming. We connected with her in a way we hadn’t with admissions officials at the other schools. On the car ride home, we sensed the day had gone well, but we didn’t know what Viewpoint thought. We’d have to wait.

Then we got the only admissions letter that mattered. Acceptance to Viewpoint! For two kids. Cheers and hugs in our family. Calls to friends and family. A dinner celebration with our kids. The admissions process had worked, although not in the way we’d anticipated it would play out.

This school year at Viewpoint has been incredible for so many reasons. My daughter is pushed and encouraged academically—she works hard and has a lot of studying and homework in a traditional college preparatory environment. She also has a chance to try new activities like journalism, which she loves. She was selected as one of the editors of the middle school newspaper. She placed second in a middle school writing contest. She’s planning to audition for Jazz Lab (she plays guitar). She’s received Highest Honors for both quarters because she’s worked hard and has classes with teachers she adores. Many of the academic skills she learned in elementary school have served her well in the transition from progressive to traditional school. She has a wonderful group of friends. She’s happy because she’s at the right school. I’m not even going to pretend I’m humble-bragging. I’m just really proud of her (and my son too). I know you understand.

Our family is at the right school. It’s an awesome feeling.

I truly hope your family ends up at the right school too. Even if the route there is unpredictable. *Good luck!*

Hereâ€™s a link to some of our most popular previous posts about getting in, not getting in and being wait listed. Also, once you have acceptance letters, how do you chose? Itâ€™s all [here](#).

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admin