

Guest Blogger Alice: Getting Into Brentwood School for 9th Grade

Description



I used to say that if everyone applying to private schools only met Keith Sarkisian, the then head of admissions at Brentwood (2008), no one would go anywhere else. I must have been on to something because before I knew it, he was made head of Brentwood's Lower School. That says to me, that the school is moving in all the right directions. He was thoughtful, humorous, seemed to still value common sense and serious education. So "another great school, how do you get in?"

One of my daughters went to Brentwood and the other to Harvard-Westlake (H-W). Both went at 9th grade which is a trickier move going to Brentwood than H-W simply because of the numbers game. Brentwood is taking between 15-20 kids in 9th grade and H-W is taking 70. If you have a good student with good grades, excellent teacher recs and solid [ISEE's](#) (I'd say scores of 6 and up), frankly they may have a better chance at H-W simply because of the numbers. But if you know that Brentwood is the school you want to be at, it is still possible.

Probably the most important thing you need to communicate in the application process is that Brentwood is your first choice. If they know you are also applying to H-W and Crossroads and sense that they are your "back up" choice, I doubt they'll be that interested. The year my oldest daughter applied, she was coming from [Mirman School](#) and no one in her class that year really wanted H-W. A "mean girl" had left Mirman for H-W in 7th grade and it profoundly colored how the others felt when applying out in 9th grade. It shouldn't have theoretically, but it did.

Let me put this issue another way. If you know Brentwood is a good choice for your family (think location, serious education, excellent sports and art programs, etc.) then seriously consider applying earlier. I don't know much about their lower school, but I've already indicated I think it's in good, capable hands. If your child doesn't get in at kindergarten, but you're confident it's a match, try again, let the school know how much you want to be there and more importantly why. They will listen. (If on the other hand you've been rejected several years running, then accept they may never agree and move on).

If you've chosen a lower school that works for you and are now looking towards [middle school](#) or high school, you'll have a much better chance applying for 7th than 9th grade. In my opinion if you have a girl, going in at 7th grade will be an easier transition anyway. A lot of the Brentwood girls have been together since kindergarten and teenage girls can be cliquey and difficult, so the sooner the better. They accept about 70 kids into the 7th grade and that allows for lots of other new kids to bond with and gets the child there while there are still shifting groups and friendships.

But if you've waited until 9th grade, as I did, all is not lost. But you have to come in strong. That will mean different things to different families. I've known kids who got in with weak scores and weak grades but were from spectacular donor families. Money talks at every school and anyone who says otherwise isn't speaking the truth. That doesn't mean money can buy a troubled kid, or a kid who is truly unqualified, a spot at any school, but it can give the edge to a qualified candidate. For other applicants it's sports. Brentwood has a great tennis team, water polo and a variety of other sports, if you have an athlete, work it. It can compensate for weaker [ISEEs](#) or grades. My daughter was a drama kid and that is another area in which Brentwood excels. She was also a strong writer.

I will say this, location matters a little more with Brentwood than it does with H-W for example. For one thing, you can get trapped on Sunset Blvd. at certain times of day, which can cause aggravation. Secondly, there are a lot of Westside families that attend the school. If you live out of area, a lot of your child's social time will be spent in Brentwood and you have to think about whether that works for your family. We live in the valley right off the short cut that takes you over the hill to Brentwood and the commute was easy and reverse from normal traffic. So it was a match.

It also worked for our daughter. She was a good student but not a hyper-ambitious one. At 9th grade she didn't know who she was yet, or where she was headed. She was an "all rounder". She liked a lot of things including theatre and music, but wasn't a musical prodigy or aspiring to be a movie star. Because of Brentwood's size it was a great place for her to find herself. She stumbled into the newspaper in 10th grade and discovered she loved it. By her senior year she was editor-in-chief. At a place like H-W if you don't hit the ground running in 9th grade, it will be hard to find a place on the managing staff, much less make EIC by 12th grade.

But don't let the smaller size fool you. If you have an academic kid, you can get every bit as challenging a learning experience at Brentwood as you can at H-W. With the exception of certain math geniuses who really need to be at H-W, most bright kids will find everything they need at any of the top schools. The AP English class my daughter took at Brentwood would stand next to any class at H-W in terms of rigor, excitement and college preparation.

There is one more thing to consider; because it is a westside school there is a lot of money there. I love money, huge fan and always hope to have more of it. Just bare in mind that because of the size of the school, you have a preponderance of families who can afford to live in that area and that ain't cheap. Your children will be exposed to beautiful homes which is fantastic, people who have done great things, and be given many opportunities "all good". The only flip side to that is that a lot of kids go out for sushi for lunch and get new Audi's when they turn 16. Know who you are and what you have and what you think your kids should have. If your family is going to feel deprived and left out and unhappy then find another place. We didn't fit the mold, but my daughter never cared about that stuff and was thrilled with her 1999 Volvo.

(As an aside you have every bit as much extravagant wealth at H-W but because of the sheer size of the school you also have every other kind of family as well.)

To recap: Brentwood is not a back up school to H-W and shouldn't be treated as such. Know why you like Brentwood and communicate it. This is especially true in 9th grade. I'd add that I knew kids who picked the wrong school for them in 7th grade and switched. In fact, I know several examples of kids who transferred out of H-W to Brentwood and visa versa. Finding your match is really the important thing.

ISEE scores do matter to Brentwood, although I don't believe they weigh them quite as heavily as H-W. Grades and teacher recs are critical in all applications, if you know Brentwood is your first choice let the teacher writing your recs know that as well. Know what kinds of clubs and extra curricular

activities etc. Brentwood offers and which ones your kid will want to be a part of. Be mindful of when you apply and the numbers game, there is no point in wearing rose colored glasses. Because it's a smaller and therefore more tight knit community, if you know people in it, tell them you're applying and see if they can help you. Having somebody walk into any admission and saying, "Hey I heard so so in so is applying and they're terrific" will always help. This applies to any school. And of course a great interview. Brentwood has the time and resources to really do great interviews with the applicants and applicant parents. This is where your kid can really make or break his or her application. And it also gives you a chance to say why you think Brentwood is a fit for your child.

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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