

Every School Tells A Story

Description



Before too long you'll be touring private schools and filling out applications and caught up in the admissions whirlwind. If you've tried to keep thoughts about all things private school off your mind because its summer, but your mind keeps wandering back to the topic, here are a few things to think about *before* you tour schools. If you pay close attention and talk to other parents, you'll learn things about a school that probably won't be discussed on a tour. They aren't good or bad, but they're some of the most subjective things about each school that may (or may not) appeal to you.

Of course, schools want to impress prospective parents with highlights of excellent programs, outstanding teachers and brand new facilities. But, when you're looking at schools, think about how a school reveals itself in a more subtle or informal way. Pay attention to what the school says in the official publications of course, but also look for the less obvious things about a school you might otherwise overlook. And, give some thought to what the school *doesn't* mention on the tour.

Every school tells its own story. If you look closely as you tour a school, certain things will stand out for one reason or another. There will be things about the school that give you information about its culture, its educational philosophy and other factors the school administrators may or (may not) discuss.

Consider the following:

- **Location.** We've written about location on this blog before because it matters and the location of your kid's elementary school might impact your quality of life if there's a geographic problem. Geography can become a challenge for playdates, drive-time (is it really 3 hours a day?), friendships, ethnic diversity, mandatory carpools and volunteering. If you're thinking about a school's location in terms of its accessibility to your house, that's a good idea. But, you may also want to think about whether a school's location will prevent it from having a diverse student population. Is it too remote for families who live outside the immediate neighborhood to attend? Does it offer a bus? Would it be possible for families with one car to get their kids there and back? Where do most of the families at the school live? A general answer about "we have families from everywhere" should make you look more closely at where the families really live, especially if you think you may live outside the area the school draws from.
- **Feeder preschools.** Most elementary schools will tell you they accept students from a wide range of preschools. But, a quick check will tell you there are "feeder" schools to many of the top private elementary schools in L.A. If you have a sense of the community at the "feeder" preschool, that will give you insight into the culture of the elementary school which accepts the preschool's students. If the "feeder" preschool to an

elementary school that interests you is known to be insular and pretentious, it's safe to assume those elements won't magically disappear once the parents arrive at elementary school. Even the location of the "feeder" preschool(s) can give you insight into where the elementary school families live.

- **Cars in carpool.** Does this sound funny? Silly? Maybe, but the cars in a school's carpool lane can give away a lot about the school! If you get a chance, look at the cars in a school's carpool. Are they super-fancy? Are they a mix of car types? Are nannies picking up kids in Range Rovers? Do kids have drivers? Or do you see a lot of common SUVs, Toyotas and Volvos? Are there Limos? Minivans?
- **Plaques on the wall.** Ah, yes, the "must-see" plaques. Some schools adorn their walls with plaques naming big fundraising donors or even buildings. Would this bother you if you had to see it daily? Would a school that named every empty space after a family at the school annoy you? It might suggest a strong emphasis on fundraising and a "who's-who" at the school.
- **School events.** The type of events a school hosts gives you loads of information about the school's culture and parent-body. If a school hosts an elaborate, over-the-top annual auction at a country club and you despise the notion of membership only clubs, maybe this isn't the school for you. Does the school host an annual camping trip and you hate to camp? Maybe the school is too crunchy for your family. Once you're at the school, it's hard to avoid these events, even if they don't appeal to you. Once you're a parent at the school, complaints about an event being too fancy or too crunch will go unheard or just make you unpopular. Or, you may be handed the entire file and told, "If you think you can do a better job, you do it!" And, you'll be expected to attend the event, fancy or not, crunchy or not.
- **Current parents.** Talk to other parents at the school. Don't be shy, talk, talk, talk, ask as many questions as you can. This is a frequently mentioned tactic for gathering information about a school. That's because it's effective. When you talk to parents at the school, don't be afraid to ask about the other parents, kids' activities, school events and anything else you can think of. A simple, "what are the other parents like?" is a great question, without bias. The question, "I hear that parents at the school are snobbish," will just make the person you're talking to defensive. Another good question is, "Are most of the moms stay-at-home or do they work outside the home?" Any answers you get will ultimately provide you with valuable insight as to whether your child and your family will fit with that school.

These are just a few of the ways a school tells a story. There are definitely other clues that reveal more about a school than what is talked about on a tour. More to come on this topic!

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