

Do's and Don'ts For Applying To L.A. Private Schools by Sanjay Nambiar

Description



Hi Friends,

I'm so happy to welcome [Sanjay Nambiar](#) back to the blog! His advice is always excellent and it's based on firsthand experience. Along with his wife, Priya, Sanjay runs [Nambiar Advising](#) and they are parents at [PS1 Pluralistic School in Santa Monica](#). —Christina

Why Didn't Someone Tell Me I Wasn't Supposed to Do That?!

Applying to private schools in Los Angeles can be stressful for so many reasons. Selecting schools, writing essays, prepping for interviews, coordinating open house visits — all of it can be overwhelming to even the most savvy applicants.

But when you add judgment calls to the mix, the whole application process can be downright maddening. It's amazing how many people have asked us if it's okay to make donations when they are applying, or to have famous people call the admissions on their behalf, or to submit 10 letters of recommendation, or any number of supposed strategies to help them get in. And while these situations are straightforward for admissions officers, many applying families simply become befuddled by the options.

And that's okay.

We can't expect families to know the subtleties of the admissions process. It can be very confusing. To help demystify some of these situations, however, below are a few suggestions on what families

should do, and what *not* to do, when applying.

Do . . .

Have 1-2 people contact the school, but only if they know your child/family well

First of all, if you do not have contacts at a school, do not worry – it's not essential. It's a myth that you must know someone to get into a school, and that false premise creates a lot of undo stress for families.

But, if you have a close friend who knows your child well, and if that friend is associated with the school you're applying to (current parent, alumni, Board member, etc.), then by all means ask them to send an email to the admissions office on your behalf. The letter should be short but insightful, with meaningful observations and praise for your child.

Also, one to two additional letters of recommendations (beyond required letters from teachers or school administrators) will be more than enough. Many admissions officers have been inundated and annoyed by families submitting five, 10, and even more recommendations. It's overkill and unnecessary.

Send a 1st Choice letter

If you love a school and absolutely would send your child there, then send a nice, short email to the admissions office stating why the school works for your family and that you would absolutely matriculate if given the opportunity. It's helpful for admissions officers to know that you'll accept – it differentiates you from another applicant who might be just as qualified but more interested in another school.

If you do send a 1st choice letter (i.e., email), however, *only* send it to one school, and then fulfill that promise. It's incredibly bad form to send a 1st choice letter to multiple schools, or to deny an acceptance and go elsewhere after you've sent such a letter.

(Caveat: Many admissions officers like 1st choice letters, but some state that they don't need or want one. Nonetheless, it can be beneficial for families.)

Be nice to administrative & custodial staff during tours

This should be obvious, but it's unbelievable how many parents (and sometimes kids) are rude to administrative and custodial staff at schools. We know many anecdotes where a child would have gained acceptance but was denied because a mother or father was rude to a front desk receptionist or parking attendant. Always keep in mind, a school is not just accepting a student, but also his or her parents and family. They are building communities. No admissions officer wants to bring difficult, rude, or entitled people into that environment.

Have parents prepare for interviews as well

As mentioned above, applying to schools is not just about the student, but about the family as well. It's worthwhile for parents to prepare for interviews, and to make sure they are on the same page with each other (when applicable). It's awkward when a student shines but a parent comes across

as disinterested and uninformed about a school, or when two parents seem to disagree about what's best for their child.

Don't . . .

Have people contact the school just because they are prominent or connected

If you happen to know someone important or famous " and if that person doesn't know your child very well " having them send an email or letter probably won't help. In fact, it could hurt your standing. Admissions officers are not impressed by big Hollywood names or Senatorial/Gubernatorial/Presidential letterhead. They've seen it all before, especially in Los Angeles. This is particularly troublesome when the recommendation is cursory and doesn't demonstrate a meaningful knowledge of the applicant. In those cases, it seems as though the family is trying to drop names, and that leaves a negative impression.

Donate to the school

Please don't do this during the admissions process. Seriously. It may seem like a nice or generous gesture, but it looks like the donating family is trying to buy its way into the school. You can donate once you are accepted and matriculating!

Have assistants or nannies call/contact on your behalf for logistics

People in L.A. are busy. Many are important. Yet, some of the biggest names and wealthiest parents still find the time to call an admissions office themselves to ask questions or coordinate appointments. If they can, everyone else should be able to as well. Having an assistant or employee call instead of yourself can come across negatively.

Keep It in Perspective

Beyond the specific situations listed above, there are a couple of other points we like to mention to clients. The first is to not get caught up in the race for a "bumper sticker school". Many families become fixated on specific schools because of a reputation within a community, or competition with other families attending the school, or many other reasons. Sure, the bumper sticker of that school might make a parent proud or boost social status in some circles, but at the end of the day what matters most is how a child responds to his or her environment. The fit is always the most important element, in our opinion. If you focus on how and where your child will thrive, the potential of a happy child starts to take priority.

Additionally, if possible, do try to relax and have fun! We know this might sound crazy. But we have seen many families who have learned new insights about their children and themselves through the application process. It can be part therapy, part introspection, part discovery. And that can be beautiful.

**Priya and Sanjay Nambiar run Nambiar Advising, a consulting practice that shepherds families through the private school admissions process, from helping clients find the best-fit schools for children to application support, essay editing, interview preparation, and more. Priya has spent more than 20 years in education and was the Associate Director of Admissions at the Brentwood School in Los Angeles.*

She earned a B.A. in Education from Brown University and an M.Ed. from Harvard University. Sanjay is an entrepreneur and professional writer who has written several award-winning children's books. He earned a B.A. in Economics and Neurobiology from U.C. Berkeley and an M.B.A. from UCLA. To learn more, please visit www.nambiaradvising.com.

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