

Guest Blogger “Emily”: Not Wealthy, Not Connected! Just Two Working Parents

Description



Getting An Early Start

I still can’t believe that it’s over.

I remember distinctly the day it all began. I was standing outside after a preschool fundraising meeting with several other moms, and the conversation turned to private elementary school tours. The first thing I felt was a pit in my stomach. Was I behind the ball, again? We had waited until very late in the game to find a preschool for our son. I was in denial about the fact that he was even old enough for school, and truly in the dark about how [competitive](#) preschools were on the Westside. So, at that moment, one and a half years before my son would start kindergarten, I told myself that there was no way we would be behind the ball on this one. And so it began!

Touring Schools

I started touring schools in February of 2011. The first step was learning about all of the different types of schools out there. Where there good public options? What are these private schools like? I toured them all, privates, charters, magnets, and parochial. I knew nothing about educational philosophies, progressive vs. traditional, charter vs. magnet, or anything about the entire process. I soon found myself creating files, Google doc. spreadsheets, and making calendars to hang on the fridge to keep track of all the tour dates and appointments.

It soon became clear to me that the lottery process of the public charter and magnet options was too random “too much to be left to chance, the luck of the draw. And then when I started to tour the

private schools, I couldn't believe how beautiful some of these schools were, how progressive they were in their philosophies, and how much they had to offer. Most seemed to have two full time teachers in each class. A low teacher to student ratio always appealed to me. I knew that this type of education was something I wanted for my boy, and it became quickly clear that only a handful of publics might offer something similar, IF you were lucky enough to have your child's name drawn out of their lottery fishbowl.



Stress!

As the process unfolded, my poor husband didn't know what hit him. Of course he was on board with getting our son into a great school, but really? Tours, applications, parent interviews, *and* playdates for every school? The process consumed me for over a year. My husband was starting to tune out when I would bring up something about school in almost every *single* conversation we had. I on the other hand loved it. There was nothing I was more passionate about, nothing I was more committed to, nothing I wanted to think about or work towards more.

Written Applications

I found myself [answering questions](#) on written applications for the first time that I had never really thought about, like "what do you want in an education for your child?" Or "why is this school the right school for your son?" And, "How would you like to be involved in our community?" I really had no idea! I just wanted a good education for him and a safe environment. Little did I even know what a "good" education meant, really. Our own education about elementary school education began.

Applying To Five Schools

We decided to apply to five private schools. Anything less than that seemed too risky. I had read about how competitive it was to get into a good private elementary school, and how slim the chances

are of getting accepted. We only had acquaintances at a few of the schools. We did not have connections, we are not in the industry, and we are not a family with deep pockets. *In fact, we were applying for financial aid.* I knew that this made our chances of getting in even worse, as the possibility of getting accepted AND getting aid would be slim. This was all a real long shot.

We kept public school options in the picture, applying to several charters and a magnet school, but drew abysmal numbers in all of their lotteries. This was completely surreal. (Really, you are drawing my son's name out of a hat to determine his chance at a decent education??).

The entire application process was more work than I ever imagined. Just keeping track of parent interview dates, school "playdates", and school events was an organizational challenge, and my husband and I both work full time jobs! Now we literally had a third full time job.

Parent Interviews

The first parent interview was easy "a flowing and interesting conversation that gave us confidence for what was to follow. The next interview was uncomfortable, forced, and formal. Wow, I guess we blew it? "Oh well, we were ourselves," I thought, although it was a slightly uncomfortable feeling, like a job interview where you feel like you didn't nail it. I never felt like we needed to pretend to be something we weren't, or that we needed to over-prepare. If they didn't like us, or think our son was great, then this school was not for us! I truly felt that throughout the process. I never really stressed about how we "performed" as much as I stressed about the numbers (*this* many families applying for *this* few spots?) I stressed that it seemed like an inside game, and that we really didn't know families that went to these schools. I stressed that we didn't have any specific talents, connections, or wealth to bring to the school. We are what you might call a "normal" family. Not wealthy, not connected, not Ivy-League educated, just your average family with two working parents and one beloved little boy.

Staying Sane

I approached the whole thing like it was the project of my life. For better or worse, I am a research fanatic and over-think just about all major things in my life (one might say obsess about). Getting married, buying a house, having a child. This felt like the biggest so far "a crucially important move that could forever shape my son's future. I read [Beyond The Brochure](#), the book and the blog religiously, posting comments and questions whenever I needed advice or just needed to be heard. My friends and family could only help so much. Nobody knew what I was going through except the other moms from school, and we all relied on each other heavily for emotional support and to keep the faith. I found my mom friends to be invaluable during the process, and although we were essentially competing for some of the same spots, we were all super supportive of each other. All of the good mojo, advice, information, and comfort we were providing each other would pay off for all of us! And it did. I kept my

local wine shop in business too.

My Son's Visiting Day

The [playdates](#) or [visiting days](#) were the next big stressor. My son has always struggled a bit with separation, and I thought for sure that one of the visits would end in screams and tears. He even told me before one that he did not want to go and that he would "scream the whole time." Awesomely ironic, I thought. Luckily they all went flawlessly and his threats were idle. Besides, if a school doesn't understand that kids have meltdowns and bad days, and that the whole thing is just strange to them, then we don't want to go there anyway! That took the pressure off for me.

Leaving Nothing To Chance

After the interviews and visits, we really started to feel the vibe of each school. It was becoming apparent that some felt more comfortable than others, that some continued to impress us more, and some didn't feel quite as right for our family. Our favorites were rising to the top. I diligently wrote thank you notes to the admissions directors and after every event we attended (my budget for thank you cards skyrocketed!). I asked acquaintances we barely knew to put in a word for us, which was slightly uncomfortable at first, but what did we have to lose? I had to get over my fear of rejection quickly.



We were really uncomfortable with the whole "first choice" thing. Did we really need to pick one and tell them those words? (YOU are our first choice!) My husband and I had different top three lists (mine based more on gut feeling and reputation, his more on commute and school administration). This was so hard, the thought of picking a top choice and communicating that to the school. This was something I agonized over incessantly towards the end. We decided to not tell any school they were our top choice specifically, but to sincerely express our strong interest to each. How confusing!! (I told friends I felt like a serial dater who cannot commit!)

Our Financial Aid Applications

The financial aid piece was another huge part of the puzzle. For us, an offer of enrollment without aid would be no offer at all. The paperwork required was extensive and detailed. Each school had different forms and a slightly different deadline for submission. If you are applying for aid, start early by putting together a budget – how much comes in and how much goes out. You will have to submit this to the school, and it is not necessarily something that is easy to pull together overnight (including the documentation they require).

As the March 23rd “D-day” loomed, I started to feel remarkably calm. There came a point where we had done all that we could do, and fate would handle the rest. Besides, I had read time and time again, being waitlisted is not a death sentence to entry, right? I DID stalk the postman and check my e-mail incessantly that Friday and Saturday.

Getting Our Admissions Letters

The first e-mail arrived early Saturday morning. Wow, it was a letter of acceptance from a highly coveted Westside school – the one where we thought the parent interview as a disaster! What a surprise! Then, the next one rolled in – offer #2 from one of our top choices. This was unexpected. Really, we got into more than one?

When the mail finally arrived at noon, we could not believe our eyes when we saw four large envelopes and one small one. We got into four out of the five schools to which we applied! YES! We did! As we opened each envelope, we started to read the details. “We are happy to welcome you to Wildwood! However, due to X, Y, and Z, we are unable to offer you financial aid at this time.”

A Financial Aid Twist

Four offers – but only ONE accompanied by an offer of AID. This was something I NEVER expected. If they didn’t have aid to give, and we applied for it, why wouldn’t they just send us a rejection letter? Hmmmm, we started to think. Is this a test? Do some families apply for aid, don’t get it, and then come up with the money some other way? We concluded that this must be the case. But for us, there was no plan B to finance this deal.

My gut to apply to five schools was solid. I knew that the combination of getting in, AND getting in with aid would be tough. I had heard that the number of families applying for aid was on the rise because of the economy, and at the same time, there were fewer funds available for aid because of the economy.

Making A Very Important Phone Call

For a moment, we thought, well thatâ€™s it! The ONE school that offered us aid is the one that chose us. And we really liked this school! But it was not one of our top choices. After thinking about it and talking to friends and family, we thought, why not call and see if this is negotiable? Is the rejection of aid a done deal? Or is this something that can be revisited? Discussed?

Good News!

I contacted the school that I just could not turn my back on. The one that in the end, really felt like my top choice. I had a wonderful conversation with the school director, and the door was open. We thought this school was an amazing choice for our son and absolutely loved it from day one, but without financial assistance, it was impossibility. Monday was the deadline. We had one great school that offered us aid, and my number one choice couldnâ€™t let us know until Monday afternoon. This was insane! I was literally working from home that day, waiting for the call. Was I driving a deposit check over to school A, or to school B?



Happiness

The call came at 1:30 p.m.. Our top choice school was able to revisit the situation and offer us aid! It was an amount that made it feasible for our family (albeit still a big stretch!). I took a deep breath, got in the car, and drove a check over to my sonâ€™s new school. I was shaking filling out some of the paperworkâ€¦. I couldnâ€™t believe this was finally happening! Was this for real? The school we ultimately chose and that my son will be attending this fall, was a school that seemed like the ultimate long shot in the beginning. We are thrilled with the outcome and still in disbelief that not only is the search over, but we got *our* little boy into *that* amazing school.

And now, a new chapter begins.

“Emily Summers” is a Westside mom who will have a son attending a popular Santa Monica private school in September.

* names and identifying characteristics have been changed due to the sensitivity of financial aid.

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