

Large Envelope, Big Decisions: True Tales of Private School Admissions

by
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Exhale with relief. Leap in the air. Parade around the playgroup. Bid farewell to hand-wringing months of Independent school admissions. Now that the confetti has settled, the real party begins.

Wealth Of Riches

When showered with multiple acceptances take a sober moment to reflect: As the real estate agents say, “Can you see yourself living here?” Allow the school’s past performance and anecdotal reputation, combined with your parental instinct, to serve as your divining rod. A caveat about first impressions – Families who brood over ‘fitting in’ at the new school frequently evolve into the “hail, hail, cheerleader” type after a year or two of immersion. Effective school communities foster a diverse and dynamic student body. Take the risk. Just make sure it’s an informed one.

Look Under The Hood

Resist the urge to brag (Grandparent exemption here). Before signing the contract and sending off that deposit check seek out current and former families of similar values to your own. Especially informative are the experiences of parents of exiting students who have survived the honeymoon period of the early grades and can offer a clear-eyed perspective on the school’s responses to conflict and crisis. Therein lies the true test of a thoughtful and responsive school body.

The Elephant In The Room

Weighing the financial investment of an independent school education for four, six or up to fourteen years should be daunting. As with any big-ticket purchase, think ahead. Independent schools keep admission and financial aid departments separate for a reason. You received that acceptance letter based on your family’s merit and not your ability to sign the monster check. Recognize that, in general, scholarships of all sizes are determined annually. Most schools follow the “returning families first” policy when allocating assistance. If money is no issue for you, prepare yourself to give and give big. Large endowments broaden your school’s admission pool and will pay off by increasing the value of your child’s well-rounded educational experience.

The Wait List Is The Hardest Part

If you’re waitlisted call the admissions director - who mysteriously heads out of town on spring break the day after notifications are mailed - and determine your place on the list and the odds of securing an open spot. You may have to put a deposit down on a distant choice for safety sake. Spaces have opened up as late as a few days before the beginning of school. Review that mythological creature known as the “deposit refund policy”. It doesn’t hurt to ask about it discretely without pronouncing, “Well,

we really want to go to school X, but I guess we’ll sign with you in the meantime.”

Cut The Cord

Taking a definite pass on the school? Do everyone a favor and send your regrets early. The waitlist crowd will thank you for your selflessness. See above.

A Little Perspective Goes A Long Way

Didn’t make the final cut of your dream school or any independent school for that matter? Take a cleansing breath and repeat. They don’t deserve you! The test of a resilient family is how it rebounds after a disappointment. Note that I didn’t use the word tragedy. Put it in perspective. Send a kind thank you note to the admissions director expressing your interest for next year and prepare to go at it again. Older children will take their cue from your attitude. If this decision was the “end all and be all” of your self worth, check your sincerity quotient and hire a pricey therapist. Debrief with your consultant or confidante and move on.

The “Magnet” Field

This year Los Angeles Unified Schools wisely upped the notification date for students selected in the Magnet lottery allowing applicants time to consider the public education options before independent school contracts are signed. If you missed the December application deadline, you’re out of luck for the 2011-12 school year. Enrollment in local, non-magnet schools is on-going.

A Leap Of Faith

There is no perfect school in Los Angeles. That being said, there probably are several nurturing and engaging learning communities for your family. If entering at the DK or Kindergarten level prepare to reassess your decision in another five to six years. Yes, this applies even if you were accepted to a DK-12 campus. There are far too many undetermined factors such as your child’s learning styles, strengths and interests to presume that you can predict the appropriate fit for secondary school or - yes, I’ve heard this - their entitlement to a place in Yale’s doctoral program. Enjoy these years watching your child develop, make mistakes and scrape their knees and egos. You’re not marrying a school; just shacking up for a few years.

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