

The Biggest Private School Rat Race of Them All?

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During the late fall and early winter, from the Upper East Side of Manhattan to the tony enclaves of Los Angeles, light dinner party conversations almost inevitably turn to talk of private school applications. Well-heeled parents mingling over cocktails might banter about their top-choice destinations, feign shock at the tuition costs (some are upwards of \$80,000 a year per child), or when to expect an acceptance letter.

But, gone are the days when this type of cocktail chatter was reserved for the stress of prep school or college admissions. In today's wealthy circles, parents are hand-wringing—and backstabbing—over their 4-year-olds' future kindergarten placements.

“There are so many people who are just desperate,” says one L.A.-based mom, who recently enrolled her oldest in a highly regarded private school for kindergarten. “It entails a lot of jockeying and kissing up to the big donor families to try and get a leg up.”

When parents in cities like New York and L.A. apply for a coveted spot at schools like St. Ann's in Brooklyn, Columbia Grammar in Manhattan, or Crossroads in Santa Monica for their children, their first step is often to ask for a letter of recommendation from a high-profile or well-connected friend. (It doesn't always end well. Remember when Citigroup chief exec Sandy Weill allegedly tried to secure two spots at the 92nd St Y preschool for analyst Jack Grubman's twin daughters?)

Yet, even with top connections, landing a spot in a highly-coveted kindergarten is statistically low. For example, if a school has 60 seats,

“Twenty will go to siblings and 20 will go to legacy families and alumni. So there theoretically are only spots for 10 boys and 10 girls in that Kindergarten class,”

says [Wendy Levey](#), an educational consultant for 2- to 18-year-olds, based in New York City. If the mix of siblings and legacy students heavily overlap on a particular factor (such as location, race, or gender) any new students admitted will need to check different boxes.

In addition to the ever-soaring cost of private schools, there's also now the time commitment that comes with the application process. Along with multiple-page applications for each school (some parents apply to more than ten), the child will have an interview and the parents will also have at least one, sometimes multiple, interviews with the admissions staff. There may also be additional work such as essays, letters of recommendation, or smaller playgroups where children will undergo observation. Parents from Brooklyn to Santa Monica, including, to a lesser extent Chicago and Washington D.C., seem to echo the same story: "From October to December, this becomes our full-time job."

"It's so ridiculous," says one parent of a public school elementary student in Hollywood. He and his partner opted out of the private school race completely because "it's just all about who you know and who you can get to put in that phone call or write you that letter."

The L.A. mom admits she and her husband shelled out a lot of time and money to prepare their child, including enrolling him in Mathnasium and Kumon classes and hiring a private coach for the interview process.

But for some parents, giving their kid the best chance at acceptance goes beyond tutors and letters. "No matter how well your kid tests, the billionaires are going to get the first look," the L.A. mom adds. Meaning, for everyone else, "it all gets very vicious and backstabby."

She witnessed “despicable behavior” from desperate adults, including talking down about their first-choice schools to other parents (“to make it less appealing and less competitive for their own kid”) and watching people “lie to their best friends about the fact that they hired a coach for their kid” to make it seem like an unnecessary step. (“Everyone I know who paid for private interview coaching got into their first choice of school,” she adds. “The people who didn't get the coach ...didn't get in anywhere.”)

The stories out of New York have a similar ring. “My daughter needed to take an FLI [the First Look Insights exam, an online assessment which some private schools use to evaluate academic readiness for Kindergarten] for admission to Hill School,” one Manhattan mom explains. “So we hired a tutor for her. There are always people who will hire coaches to get their kids ready. But it’s an interview with a 4-year-old ...you never know how it's going to go.”

The Manhattan-based mother (she’s a Horace Mann alumni and ended up sending her daughter there as well) was less phased by all the hubbub, having been through it herself. “A lot of people do forget that the interview is also about the parents.”

Meaning all the Knives Out style tactics may not be worth it. “I’m about fit, not brand,” Levey explains. “So I start with my clients by saying, ‘Not everyone can go to Harvard nor should everyone. I help parents understand the difference between an 8-year and a 12-year school, Progressive versus Traditional. That way they can narrow schools down by what fits them. The parents won’t necessarily be happy somewhere just because it has a top name.’”

Not to mention, the kids.

“I’ve had students describe one of these highly-competitive schools as ‘soul-crushing.’ Is that really what parents want?” asks Levey.

“If you are tracking a kid for a highly competitive top college and they are at the bottom of the class of the top school, they could be passed over for Ivy Leagues. Sometimes you’re better off going to a slightly less competitive school and standing out.”

The Horace Mann mom agrees. “A really big part of the decision is what kind of school is good for your kid and what fits with you as a family. I don’t think it’s all about wealth and status. It’s about building community,” she says. “Our kids will have these lifelong friendships and we can build relationships with the parents in our schools. That’s more important to us than an Ivy League track.”