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Is Finding a Preschool Worth All This Angst?

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School tours done. Applications sent. Child assessments finished. Parent interviews over. Letters of recommendation in. The private school shopping season has, for most, just about ended. All that's left is the waiting.

Waiting for that fateful day in the third week of March when parents find out whether Johnny or Janie has been accepted, wait listed or rejected. The final notification triggers a collective sound of sighs, sobs and champagne corks throughout parts of Los Angeles.

And we're talking kindergarten.

"You know before you even open the letter by its thickness whether you're in or not," says Marsha Gervais, who went through the grueling process last year.

As more families decide they want a private-school education for their kids, the demand for spaces in the region's tony private schools has far outstripped supply. Or at least that's the perception. The result is a pack of anxious, stressed-out parents who in some cases plan real estate and career decisions around where their 4-year-old gets accepted.

Gervais lived in Laguna Beach while her husband commuted to his legal job near Los Angeles International Airport. They knew they wanted to live in Los Angeles to cut the drive but waited to see where their oldest daughter would go to kindergarten. "We wanted to move for nine months but didn't know where to look," Gervais said.

They applied to three schools; if she didn't get into any, they figured they would move to Beverly Hills, where they considered the public schools better. In the end, Alana got accepted to St. Martin of Tours in Brentwood, rejected by one school and wait listed at a third.

Cyndi and Vince Hung are casting a wider net this year and applying to 10 schools from Newport Beach to Pasadena for Nicole, also 4. They know they want to move out of their Culver City home, which has grown too small since the arrival of their second child. Vince is also establishing a medical practice. So, reasoned Cyndi, "We'll see where Nicole gets accepted, and in March, put all our options on the table and decide where it makes the most sense to move." If Nicole doesn't get in anywhere, they, too, have a public school back-up plan.

The question remains: Is all this vying and sweating for a few coveted slots and the privilege of spending in a few short years what many spent on college necessary?

While many parents clearly believe it is, some educators think that the race to get into exclusive private schools has a deleterious effect on children and that parental anxiety is overblown. Some private schools claim the anxiety is misplaced--that most applicants get in, but that angst-driven multiple applications actually cause the worry. Interestingly, this annual frenzy continues at a time when public schools in California are undergoing major reforms and gaining resources.

A lot of what drives this demand is the psychodemographic profile of this generation of parents, said Heather Hoerle, director of marketing for the National Assn. of Independent Schools in Washington, D.C. Today's parents grew up with a basic distrust of government. They tend to be well educated, often have two good incomes and fewer children. Because they're also part of the consumerism of the times, they're intolerant of poor service.

"This adds up to a portrait of parents who want a voice in a high quality, independent education for their children, and who can afford it," Hoerle said. Tuitions run from \$3,000 to \$12,000 a year.

Los Angeles Board of Education Member Mark Slavkin said--what many are reluctant to voice--that race also drives decisions. At latest count, 86% of children in Los Angeles public schools are considered minorities. Many don't speak English. "If you're white and the school in your area is overwhelmingly nonwhite, you may not feel you fit in. Many people feel isolated socially and culturally in this situation."

Meanwhile, independent schools are working to boost their racial diversity; currently, 21% of students enrolled in California independent schools are students of color, said Mimi S. Baer, executive director of the California Assn. of Independent Schools.

Residents of Orange, Ventura and San Diego counties have an easier time gaining access to private schools. But Los Angeles is no different from other large urban centers across the country, Hoerle said. And as the number of school-age kids goes up nationwide, there's little sign that the supply-demand problem will improve. (Statewide, about 11% of children attend nonpublic schools; that percentage is higher in certain L.A. communities.)

No one knows how many families are denied private school admission because no one knows how many apply. But, surmised Esther Sinclair, a UCLA educational psychologist who counsels families, "Whatever the numbers are, they're conservative. If more people were successful in gaining admission, then that confidence would trickle down and alleviate the anxiety of families entering the system. That's not happening."

And private schools by and large don't get bigger to meet demand, Baer said. "Almost all schools are fully enrolled with a wait list and they're constrained by charter, plant size and philosophy from growing." New schools are few and far between.

Among the reasons parents cite for choosing a private over public school are smaller class size, safety and a greater voice in how the school is run. But public schools are responding to those issues and luring families back in record numbers, Slavkin said. Factors building confidence include more local control through the LEARN effort, charter schools, alternative education programs and especially the state's infusion of funds to slash class sizes in kindergarten through third grade.

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Like other administrators, Ray Michaud, headmaster of John Thomas Dye in Brentwood, believes too many parents sell the public school system short. "The myth that all public schools are bad is just not true."

Perhaps. But as Cyndi Hung put it, "When it comes to your child, it's just not a social experiment you want to take."

"It's sad," said Lori Coulter, an Encino mother of two. "I really wanted my child to learn in a real-world environment." But when she sat in the kindergarten class of her local elementary school, she didn't like what she saw. "The disruptive kids took away from the well-behaved children."

She eventually applied to three private schools and got her older son into her last choice for kindergarten. Her first choice, Curtis School in

Bel-Air, eluded her. She tried again and this fall Andy started first grade at Curtis.

Another reason parents go to such lengths is for "insurance." Though headmasters deny it makes much difference, many parents perceive that children who go to private elementary schools have a better shot at private junior high and high schools, and those kids get into better colleges.

Acceptance also greases the track for siblings. For the most part, schools don't accept children, they accept families. The 4-year-old's fate can determine not only where the family will live, work and go to school, but also its social circle and access to higher learning.

"Your biggest fear is that you'll spend a lot of time in the application process and not get in anywhere," said Laurie Dubchansky of Brentwood, who applied to eight schools when trying to place her oldest daughter. "That seems like a very real possibility when a school tells you they have six openings and 400 applicants."

But headmasters hasten to add that far more families get placed than might appear. "When we look back at our wait list," said Michaud, who each year accepts only 120 applications--the first 60 boys and the first 60 girls--for 18 kindergarten slots, "almost everyone has been placed in a school they like." While each school does receive a lot of applications, most are multiple applications, so the process works itself out.

"As parents and schools make appropriate decisions, many more families are accommodated than one would initially believe," said Reveta Bowers, head of the Center for Early Education, whose school usually has eight kindergarten slots before siblings are placed. From there, it divvies up the openings among the 180 to 200 families applying. "If they don't get into a private school, they may end up in a magnet program or a parochial school. But the great majority end up in what they would consider a good situation."

Still, Michaud concedes, "It's definitely easier to get into college."

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Another fear parents share is that the day of the child assessment, their 4-year-old will hold her skirt to her chin, put her finger in her nose and call the assessor a stink bomb. Parents realize they can't pump their kids too much or it will backfire.

"Kids do what they want to do when they feel like it," said Gini Roberts, director of Bel-Air Presbyterian Pre-School.

Hard as they try, parents can't keep their feelings of disappointment from their kid, she says. "It's bad enough when a parent feels his child has not met some standard, but what do you think that does to the kids?"

For most, the drill begins in the fall. Parents call for applications, then make appointments through the end of the year for school tours, child assessments and parent interviews. If they apply to six schools, that means 18 visits and as much as \$600 in application fees.

When asked to rate child assessments, parent interviews, money, recommendations from former teachers and letters of recommendation in degree of influence, school officials agreed that child assessments were No. 1, followed closely by parent interviews. Somewhere in the middle were preschool teacher recommendations, and way down the list were connections and money.

Parents tend to rate the factors in reverse, but Coulter, the Encino mother, spoke for most parents when she said, "It all counts."

School officials say they look for families who understand and support the school's philosophy, which may range from a school with ungraded classrooms to traditional schools with a lot of structure. All claim to look for socioeconomic and ethnic diversity.

Still, some in the business think this clamoring for admission is much ado about nothing. "We all want the best education for our kids, but for many parents getting into an exclusive private school becomes much more of a social issue than an educational issue," said school board member Slavkin, the parent of a first- and fourth-grader.

"The life and death attitudes I see in some parents are really overblown. A parent's socioeconomic and education level have a much greater influence on a child than where he goes to school. If parents are involved with their child's school life, help with homework, read to the kid and buy him a computer, that all counts much more."

And, after all the anticipation, heartbreak and excitement are over, some parents who made the cut actually wonder whether the struggle was worth it. One mother, who wanted to remain nameless, spoke for several when she said, "What really bugs me is right after you pay a hefty tuition they send you a letter asking how much you plan to contribute to the building fund."

GRAPHIC-DRAWING: ("Is Finding a Preschool Worth All This Angst?"),
PATRICIA MITCHELL / For The Times

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