

With so many school options, confused parents now are hiring consultants to help them pick the right educational answer for their children

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When the time came for Arthur Thompson, a single father in Westchester, to pick an elementary school for his daughter, he never even considered strolling over to the nearest public campus and simply signing her up.

Instead, he hired a consultant to help him navigate the confusing maze that has become education in Los Angeles.

"What's a charter school? What's a magnet school? What's the difference? It's overwhelming," said Thompson, who works for a talent agency. "I'm a busy guy, and I don't have a lot of time to do research. It seems like there are so many options that you don't even know where to start."

The varied and confusing education options have opened an entire business for educational consultants.

Parent aides

For a couple of hundred dollars, professional school finders will help parents lacking either time, money, or both, to sort through L.A. school options and come up with a shortlist of schools that best suit their children.

For a couple of thousand, they will hold your hand through the entire process, from cradle to classroom.

Some consultants focus on preschools, and some target private schools only. Clearly, parents are clamoring for the service; at least three local companies promising to simplify school choice have cropped up in the past year or so.

"We saw that there was a big need for this," said Jamie Nissenbaum, a teacher at Westwood Charter School and co-founder of startup L.A. School Mates. "The craze over how to get into these schools is just overwhelming. People think the moment you get pregnant, you have to call."

She said the main cause for feverish school hunting is that the general decline of the region's public school system has created a situation in which there aren't enough quality schools to meet demand. That has pressured private school admissions and given rise to the charter system - and the need for consultants to help sort it all out.

"Families are willing to not vacation for a year or two to do private schools ... or move to Manhattan Beach or Calabasas for the public schools."

Critics of the nascent industry say most of the people starting the companies are part of a passing trend.

"There are a number of people doing this who found it easy to get into," said Paul Vaughn, an educational planner in Van Nuys with a master's degree in psychology who has been practicing for 27 years.

"A lot of consultants in California have heard of Harvard, but they don't know it's in Cambridge."

Focus on the student

Vaughn said his approach is different and his practice is aimed at ensuring a positive educational experience for a particular student. The new consultants tend to have teaching backgrounds, and they are selling themselves more as practical guides to the L.A. school systems, he said. A counselor like Vaughn might work with a student for years, whereas the startup consultants offer more of a one-time informational boot camp.

L.A. School Mates charges from \$250 for a one-hour consultation up to \$3,500 for the full treatment, which includes home visits and arranged meetings at the schools. The company also wants to sell group consultations, "almost like a spa party, but an educational consulting party at \$100 per person," Nissenbaum said.

Because of the cost, the consultants have tended to cluster in the wealthier areas of West L.A. and Malibu. But there's an emerging need from the San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys, said Christy Bergin, a mother and former teacher who runs Best Fit School Service, a consultancy for private preschools. "I'm looking for someone to help me grow in the (San Fernando) Valley and Pasadena," she said.

Money well-spent

Arthur Thompson, the divorced father in Westchester, ultimately decided on The Willows, a private school in Culver City. He said the money he paid for his school finder was a good investment.

"You're paying all this tuition, plus the \$100 to \$200 it costs to apply to these schools, so \$500 for five or six years of happiness is well worth it."

The consultant whom Thompson hired, a Venice mom named Kim Hamer, says she wants to help parents take a deep breath and relax. Despite her company's name, GetIntoPrivateSchool.com, Hamer said her goal is to bring sanity back into the decision making and calm competitive parents' nerves.

"Not getting in to the school of your choice is not the end of the world. This decision is not going to make or break your child."

That sounds good on paper, but the reality is that in hyper-ambitious and affluent areas of Los Angeles, parents really do think the kindergarten they choose will determine their kids' success. And it's that fear that has fueled demand for education consultants.

"It's a service that you wouldn't use in smaller places, but it's very relevant for the competitiveness in this city," said Mary Kumble, a client of L.A. School Mates. "In the same way you would go to a specialist for a myriad of other things, they are the specialist for this."

The West Hollywood mother - who has a 3 -year-old and an 18-month-old - started working with L.A. School Mates because she wanted more details on which elementary schools tend to be more artistic and which lean toward the traditional academic. She's still undecided, though she is leaning toward private.

"I haven't looked at too many of the charter schools because there aren't any really close to me," she said. "As far as public schools, never say never."

Indeed, getting kids into prestigious private schools such as Harvard-Westlake, John Thomas Dye or the Center for Early Education in West Hollywood certainly defines the majority of educational consulting clientele. But L.A. has some wonderful public schools, and parents need to consider them, too, Nissenbaum said.

"A lot of people feel guilty about abandoning the public school system. ... We're in this panic of, 'public schools are failing,'" Kim Hamer said.

Mania over schools

Still, she said her first advice for new clients is to go and visit the public schools in their area. "We all think we know what a good school looks like, but we can't articulate it."

Opting to go public doesn't exactly simplify the process. With charters, magnets, lotteries and permits, L.A.'s public system is downright Byzantine. It has become so complex that Tanya Anton, a mother and musician in Mar Vista, decided to write a book explaining it after getting involved at her daughter's preschool.

The handbook, "Westside Guide to Public Elementary Schools: Navigating Magnets, Charters, Permits & More," is a nuts-and-bolts guide to public school options. It grew out of Anton's observation that parents were filled with questions but had no good source to answer them all.

One thing she has learned from her experience is that parents have very different ideas about what makes a school desirable.

"I have people renting into a neighborhood so they can get into Westwood Charter. They'll rent a business office address to get into a neighborhood.

"And then other people live there and say, I would never send my kid to this school."

Anton's own daughter will start this fall at Walgrove Elementary, an LAUSD school in Mar Vista that suffered from low test scores in the past but is making a comeback with the support of very involved parents. She describes the school as only a parent familiar with educational jargon could.

"It's open-court with an influence of Reggio and co-constructivism," meaning the school is a mix of traditional curriculum and several more progressive educational philosophies.

Whatever its philosophy, the point is that public school quality soars when parents get deeply involved, and vice versa. Anton said she would love to see Angelenos return to their neighborhood public schools. Of course, that might put the educational consultants out of business, a prospect that doesn't seem likely any time soon.

"So much can change when parents get involved and local businesses get involved ...," she said. "That's what I would love to see happen."

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