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Private School Parents Confess

by *Kathleen Kingsbury*

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Scheming, bribing, brown-nosing—parents of toddlers and teens alike confess the absurd measures they've taken to get their kids an elite early education.

Over the next two weeks, tens of thousands of nervous New York parents will hover by their mailboxes waiting to hear whether their child has secured one of about 2,500 spots at the city's top private schools. Parents in other cities are doing the same—an annual ritual that, for the lucky few, sets their young charges on the road to the Ivies via elite institutions like Dalton, Brearley, Trinity, and Collegiate. These schools claim to accept about one in ten applicants, and they report that despite economic woes, demand to pay upward of \$30,000 a year to attend their hallowed halls hasn't fallen at all. As such, parents have vigorously schemed, bribed, and brown-nosed the admissions offices of their first-choice schools, including the kindergartens. Now it's time to find out if their efforts paid off—pencils down.



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The Daily Beast spoke to parents, teachers, and admissions consultants about how far parents go to get their children the most impressive education money can buy.

On Preparing to Apply

“So first you have to pay for your child to take the ERB test. They must score at least a 90 to 95 for the top schools. My daughter was just in a funk that day, so I gave her as much sugar as I could just to get her ready. Of course, she still didn't do well enough, and we didn't get into Horace Mann or Trinity. Now, I wonder all the time what's going to happen to her now because she had one bad day.” — *Manhattan mother who applied to kindergarten last year*

“In better times, four [children] became the new two in certain New York circles. Demand hasn't lightened at all. Everybody wants to go the same 15 schools, but they don't have 500 kindergarten places. They have 30 to 60. The smartest, nicest family will get rejected. Most schools have so much demand, they don't even consider whether you're a sibling or legacy anymore. With public schools now cutting budgets and so many teachers, it's only going to get worse in the coming years. Parents will pay their last dime to get their kids into Dalton or Trinity or Horace Mann. It's a nightmare. Sometimes I feel like a war profiteer.” — *Amanda Uhry, a Manhattan-based consultant who charges \$15,000 to help families through the admissions process*

"Last fall my husband wanted to check out [Packer Collegiate Institute] as a pre-K option for our daughter. I told him, 'You don't just check out Packer on a whim.' Sure enough, we were about two years too late. We quickly learned because we'd waited, age-wise she couldn't fit into the class. You have to send your kid there at great cost and inconvenience for the lower grades out of fear they will never get into the higher grades." — *Brooklyn mother of a 4-year-old girl who went on to attend a local public school*

"You have to start early. I tell my girlfriends, if you want your child to go to private school, don't have babies in August, September, or October. They'll never get in. The schools have firm cutoff dates of August 31 for kindergarten, and most seem to not like to take the older kids the next year either. You're screwed." — *Upper West Side mother with two children at a top-tier school*

"Letters of recommendation are very important at the San Francisco schools. People I haven't heard from in 20 years will call me to ask me for one. When you meet someone new, you have to worry about saying your child's school name because you never know if they'll ask you for a letter down the line. It doesn't matter if it's at work or at a birthday party. I'm inundated with requests." — *San Francisco private-school mom*

On Parents

"The worst part is the other parents. There's a never-ending, intense dialogue about how hard it is to get in. There are no spaces for boys, or too many girls applying. My heart starts racing and my hands sweat whenever I even see another mother who's applying now, too." — *Brooklyn Heights mother of two children awaiting admissions decisions.*

"Last fall another mother confided in me that she was having an affair with her husband's business partner. I'm horrified, but my first thought was, 'Should I tip off her husband? Collegiate frowns on divorce, and her kid's a shoo-in otherwise.' And I consider this woman a close friend." — *Upper East Side mother awaiting admissions decisions for her 4-year-old son*

"San Francisco has a very 'Free to Be You and Me' vibe—like, we don't pressure or torture our kids, we're laid-back. But there are all sorts of covert tutoring that happen. More than one family I know has said they didn't have a tutor, but were running home to drill their child anyway." — *San Francisco private-school mom*

"What's common sense to me is not common sense in this process. I tell parents: Never bribe admissions directors. Of course, people aren't going to give money until they get in, but since Jack Grubman [*In 2002, Grubman, a Wall Street analyst, admitted to changing stock research so that Citigroup boss Sandy Weill would help get his children into 92nd Street Y, an exclusive nursery school.*], it's generally best to convey you're open to giving through another family in the school's community." — *Victoria Goldman, New York mother and author of Manhattan Family Guide to Private Schools and Selective Public Schools*

"So many families in LA are worried about, 'Oh, we're just another Hollywood family in a sea of Hollywood families.' But you don't want to stand out in a bad way, and that's where it is so often taken. One admissions officer likes to tell the story of how one family sent her a talking picture frame. It was a photo of their child telling her how gifted he was and why he should get into the school. That doesn't work." — *Jamie Nissenbaum, Los Angeles-based admissions consultant who charges \$350 an hour*

"I tell my clients: don't lie. Don't say your kid is Mozart when they can't even pound out *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. Don't say he's reading Shakespeare if he's not. Don't promise donations you can't give. Because I've seen plenty of parents do it, and it doesn't work. You'll get caught." — *Amanda Uhry*

"I've heard that children in my school [ages 2-5] have taken classes in Chinese because their parents think it will be important for them to know Chinese when they inevitably enter the business world. If we recommend a child receive some sort of support services [such as speech and language therapy or occupational therapy], the parents almost always prefer to pay for this out-of-pocket rather than go through state services—one of the main reasons for this is so that it doesn't appear on their child's record. Additionally, I know we have been asked to leave information out of reports before." — *Upper East Side preschool teacher*

"The worst part about participating in the admissions process is when parents badmouth other families. This mother drinks a few too many cocktails with dinner. Or this little boy isn't really potty-trained. Or this dad may have some legal troubles. Meanwhile, it's like they've forgotten their own child's name." — *Private-school teacher in Philadelphia*

On Politics

"In Portland, it's not as hard to get in, but lately there's been some weird jockeying to prove how liberal you are. Our neighbor put up a John McCain lawn sign, and I almost had a heart attack. What if someone on the admissions committee drove by and confused the houses? My wife had to stop me from asking him to take it down." — *Portland, Oregon, dad who's awaiting private high-school admissions letters this spring*

"Of course, the big get in D.C. right now is Sidwell [where Obama's daughters attend]. A family friend had a baby in early January, and she keeps reassuring me that her husband is already giving whatever they can afford. And not just to Sidwell—also to the inauguration fund, the Democratic National Committee, even Obama's re-election campaign. I know she wants me to write a recommendation, but I think she also hopes to have the president on board by then, too." — *A Sidwell Friends alumnus*

"For parents, the preschool directors hold the keys to the kingdom. All sorts of subtle sucking up goes on. One mother worried the preschool director didn't approve of her SUV. She was terrified to drive it up to preschool because he might see." — *West Coast private-school mom*

"There's a real bias against Wall Street people this year. They won't even look at you. Being an investment banker is almost a smear. In New York, there are plenty of other wealthy people. For a while finance people were the flavor of the month, but demand is so high, you can replace them instantly. You can't buy your way in. If one person has \$25 million, there's another with \$50 million." — *Amanda Uhry*

On the Interview Process

"Should you send an 'I love you' letter to your first choice? In the past, it was key, but now it's seen as an act of desperation. Instead, you basically have to bribe your preschool director to tell the school you'll definitely come. It's just the same thing, but through back channels." — *West Village mother awaiting a kindergarten-admissions decision*

"Schools hate when you reschedule play dates. So when my 3-year-old woke up with a fever of 102, I had to decide: Send in a sick kid or keep her home? It felt like I was going to be denying her a Harvard education because of one small cold. But am I a horrible parent for forcing a sick child to interview?" — *Tribeca mother awaiting admissions decisions for kindergarten*

"When we took our daughter for her play date, my husband freaked out. First, he froze when we met the admissions director. Then he started making uncomfortable jokes about pot to other parents. Then he accused another little girl of stealing our daughter's sweater. I practically had to give him a Valium halfway through." — *D.C.*

mother awaiting admissions decisions for kindergarten

"At Dalton, the big question is, did you get an interview with Babby? [Elisabeth "Babby" Krents is Dalton's admissions director.] The perception is, if not, then you're wasting your time—there's no chance your child will get in. So my wife casually mentioned we did speak with Babby to another couple we're friends with over dinner, and the other woman literally leapt across the table at her. Well, it turns out they didn't get a meeting with Babby." — *Upper East Side father of twin eighth-grade girls*

"I literally made myself sick getting our son into kindergarten. I developed a rash. I threw up before interviews. When he got rejected from our first choice, I had such a bad migraine that my husband had to take me to the emergency room." — *Boston private-school mom, now applying to kindergarten for her second child*

"For my husband and I, we began obsessing. What should we wear? Should I get my hair done? How much jewelry is over the top? But then, it turned around and we began to scrutinize the admissions offices: This one is a little shabby, this one a little corporate. At our first choice, we thought it was the worst sign when we interviewed with an assistant gym teacher in his office, which was the size of a closet. Turns out we got in." — *Tribeca mother of a sixth-grader on last year's admission process*

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"If you're rich or know the right people, you want to trumpet it, but at the same time, you need to act down-to-earth and modest. It's a delicate balancing act. I had one client, the unknown husband of a well-known celebrity, who was calling admissions offices only to hear that the schools were no longer sending out applications. Obviously, the wrong spouse was calling. The actress needed to call, and act really nice, and even doing that, their kid needed to get decent ERB scores." — *Emily Glickman, founder and president of Abacus Guide, a Manhattan-based admissions consultancy*

"We heard the post office was dropping a day of service, and of course it would start February 11, the day admissions letters go out. Why are they doing this to us?" — *Brooklyn father awaiting admissions decisions for his 4-year-old son.*

Kathleen Kingsbury is a writer based in New York. She's a contributor to Time Magazine, where she has covered business, health and education since 2005.

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