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*From the Los Angeles Times*

**THE VELVET JUMP-ROPE**

## Kindergarten? It's competitive in L.A.

It's been a hysteria-prone season for parents of preschoolers jockeying for the coveted slots at top-tier private schools.

By Audrey Davidow

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IT was a nail-biter of a month. But at last the news is in: The idle chitchat, the intense speculation and competitive jockeying are over, and families throughout the Los Angeles area are either exulting in victory or wallowing in defeat.

It's kindergarten acceptance time, the make-it or break-it moment when L.A.'s top private schools mail their acceptance and rejection letters, then conveniently take off on spring break to dodge the hysteria. And by all accounts, this year has been especially brutal.

"Most people received their letters on Good Friday," says Hancock Park mom Chesney Hill. "But all the moms call it Black Friday."

Although the numbers are still being tallied, consultant Jamie Nissenbaum, whose company L.A. School Mates helps parents plan an admissions strategy, has seen nearly a 20% increase in applications for schools that typically cost \$20,000 a year. Parents who would've applied to four or five schools last year are now applying to seven or eight and are even considering -- gasp -- public school.

"I've seen parents with kids as young as 11 months schmoozing top admissions directors at fundraising events," says Nissenbaum. "Even siblings . . . are no longer guaranteed spots at certain schools."

Desperate for a new edge, parents are turning to private consultants such as Nissenbaum, padding admissions essays, plying admissions directors with lattes and sending family snapshots with recorded messages. When all else fails, there's always the time-honored tradition of name-dropping.

"It's been a really, really difficult year," says Ruth Segal, director of Wagon Wheel nursery school, a preschool often considered by parents to be a feeder for the city's most coveted kindergartens. "I've had so many mothers calling crying because they didn't get into schools." Segal spent much of last week working the phones, trying to find spots for students who got shut out.

Private schools in the Los Angeles area are now receiving up to 10 applications per opening, says Jim McManus executive director of the California Assn. of Independent Schools, and the quality of applicants is getting better. "The competition just keeps getting stiffer," he says. "And it's causing a lot of stress and agony for everyone involved."

"It was the worst experience that I could ever imagine going through as a mother," said one West Hollywood mom, who for obvious reasons requested anonymity: Her child was wait-listed at the two schools to which she applied. "Of course I broke down and started crying. I threw up. I had diarrhea. I locked myself in the closet and drank myself into oblivion. I felt like I failed my kid."

**Harsh competition**

MOST parents living this rat race will tell you that scoring a spot at one of the city's top-tier kindergartens -- places such as the John Thomas Dye School in Bel-Air, Oakwood in North Hollywood, Crossroads in Santa Monica, Campbell Hall in North Hollywood and the Brentwood School -- makes getting into the Ivy League look like a breeze. And they may have a point. According to the National Assn. of Independent Schools, the acceptance rate for private school in the Los Angeles area is 34%. The national average is 52%.

One of the most coveted schools in the area, considered by many power parents to be the most desirable K-6 around, is the Center for Early Education in West Hollywood. Deedie Hudnut, the school's director of admissions, says applications for the center were up almost 20% from last year. Of the 178 applicants, the school had room for only 16 new students.

Earlier this year, when the center's director, Reveta Bowers, went into the hospital for minor surgery, there was talk that even the anesthesiologist couldn't help but put in a good word for his kid just before putting her under.

Consultant Nissenbaum charges parents \$350 an hour to help crack the mysterious kindergarten admissions code and find the best fit for their family.

And the admissions frenzy is fostering a boom in kindergarten consulting businesses. Parents also now have Get Into Private School and L.A. School Scout to help them, and Fiona Whitney, author of popular guides to the local school scene, just added one-on-one consulting to her repertoire.

But there's more than one way to fix the odds. Never underestimate the power of courting the admissions directors, persuading important community members to write letters and, says one West Hollywood mom, showing up at morning drop-off with a latte for the preschool teachers who play a pivotal role in recommending kids to kindergarten.

It also means leaving nothing to chance. That essay prompt -- "Describe your child's strengths and weaknesses"? -- a gimme. Although the schools are looking for only two or three lines, says a Hollywood mother whose daughter was accepted at all four schools to which she applied, "they all say, 'Feel free to add an additional page' . . . and everybody does. I wrote a draft, then my husband edited it, then we each did multiple rewrites."

One admissions director often tells parents the story of a couple who sent in a framed photo of their son with a recorded message from the boy, coached by the parents, begging for a spot. He was turned down.

### **All in the family**

WHAT some parents don't realize, adds consultant Sandy Eiges, founder of L.A. School Scout, is that schools aren't just looking at the child; they're looking at the whole family. Which only amps up the anxiety quotient. Remember that "Entourage" episode in which sleazy power agent Ari Gold alienates the headmaster? "If the parents are obnoxious, sending too many e-mails, calling too many times," says Eiges, "they aren't getting in."

Nor does being a benefactor necessarily help. "I have clients," says Whitney, "who have said, 'I'm absolutely willing to write a check for \$100,000; is that enough to get in?'" Turns out, it's not. "Obviously, schools are looking for givers, and to some extent money does talk," she says. "But the big-giving families can give a lot more than that." Schools are interested in how you can spend your time and your skills, or in some instances, affect the diversity of the school population.

Still, there are no guarantees and no sure-fire formulas. "It's so arbitrary," says a Hancock Park mom. "It's not always the wealthiest family or the most connected people. We have celeb moms in our preschool who've been trying to get into the center for years and didn't make the cut."

"It's come to a point where some of the schools -- not all, there are some wonderful schools out there -- only want perfect children," Wagon Wheel's Segal says. "If they ask a child to draw a picture of themselves and they draw a dog, that kid is not going to get in. Sometimes it even comes down to looks. . . . But what are we creating? A class of Stepford kids? We really need to be looking at the whole child."

It's no wonder that some parents have resorted to fighting back by talking up or down a school's reputation. "People in this town love to gossip," Whitney says, "and before you know it, depending on who's doing the gossiping, a school can be red-hot or on the outs."

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