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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Kindergarten Admissions: From Our Side of the Desk

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As professionals whose job it is to make admissions decisions, we appreciate how challenging it can be to apply to kindergarten in the New York City independent schools. The actual timeline for the application begins in September the year before a child starts kindergarten. The process involves attending school tours, play-groups, family meetings, and having the child take the “ERB”—a test administered by the Educational Records Bureau, which most independent ongoing schools require. The process is time-consuming and can seem overwhelming. That being said, it is also enlightening and can be informative about the many school options available for children in New York City.

We also are well aware that there are misconceptions about the admissions process that make it seem more daunting than it is. The four of us—who come from two preschools and two ongoing schools—would like to address some of these myths. With so many independent schools in our city it is difficult to generalize, but we believe that the following responses are widely applicable,

and hope that they will clear up some of the misinformation that swirls around this process:

Myth: Certain preschools “feed” into ongoing schools.

Ongoing schools are not looking at a limited number of preschools to fill their kindergartens. In fact, our experiences over the last five years tell us otherwise. **Babby:** For example, each year at Dalton, more than 250 different preschool programs from Chelsea to Clinton Hill in Brooklyn are represented in the applicant pool. Its kindergarten class of approximately 95 children is comprised of children from approximately 50 different early childhood programs. **Ronnie:** Of the 98 preschoolers in our 2012 graduating class, 48 students will go to 24 different independent schools in New York City, and two to independent schools outside the city. The other 48 students will attend 10 different public and public gifted programs. **Jean:** Of the 38 students who graduated in 2012, 31 are off to 24 different independent schools. The other seven will attend public schools in the fall.

Myth: A well-connected preschool director can get your child into the school of your choice.

It is the preschool director’s job to get to know your child, and to get to know the schools to which you might apply. And that does make a difference, particularly in the guidance the director is able to give you in helping to find a school that is a good fit. That said, families relocating from out of town are also viable candidates even though their children have not attended preschools in New York City.

An admissions director might communicate with a preschool director to discuss any discrepancies in a report that do not coincide with the school’s observations of a child. The ongoing schools do not ask the preschools which children they should accept as they know the qualities they are looking for in children and what students will thrive at their schools. It is the child and the family that are key in the decision-making.

Myth: Participating in your preschool guarantees your child a spot in kindergarten.

You are joining a school community that welcomes participation in everything from meetings and parent conferences to potluck suppers and auctions. (The exception would be a co-op school that does have specific requirements of participation.) Every bit helps and is appreciated.

There are many ways to be involved that fit families' different schedules, whether involved in being in charge in the library on a weekly basis or bringing in collage materials for a classroom project. We understand the desire to want to “do it all,” but one should feel no pressure whatsoever. We assure you that the inability to participate does not prejudice your child's chances for admission to an ongoing school.

Myth: There is a cut-off ERB score for most schools.

There are cut-off scores on the admission tests for Hunter and the Gifted and Talented programs of the city's public schools, but independent schools do not have cut-offs for acceptance. Most independent schools require the test administered by the Educational Records Bureau, but it should be realized that its result is not made up of just one number. There are many subtests as well as anecdotal information that provide a fuller picture of a child's ability. Different schools are looking for different types of children and no school we know of relies solely on a specific score. Further, schools understand that these are very formative years for young children.

The ERB result is truly only one part of the puzzle. Visits to the schools (usually as part of a small group), interviews, and reports from the current preschool are other factors that are considered. The four of us agree that we have seen many children whose ERB scores do not fully capture their potential. It is our job—especially in those situations—to provide a full and balanced picture of the child.

Myth: My child is at a disadvantage if he is not “prepped” for the ERB.

Actually, it is the other way around. It is clear to admissions staff and teachers when the ERB does not reflect the child in front of them, and that can be a disadvantage in the process.

Myth: Who interviews you matters.

Generally, appointments are scheduled at times that work best for parents. At most independent schools, a number of admissions staff members meet with parents in order to see all of the applicant families during the season. Be assured that admissions offices are staffed with carefully trained members who work together as a team. It truly does not matter with whom parents meet; schools have Admissions Committees, and this group—not one person—makes the final decision.

Myth: If one parent misses an appointment it is held against your child.

Schools value the opportunity to show their programs to applicant families. At the same time, we understand that life in New York City does not always run as planned and that it may not be possible for parents to keep each appointment. If you find you must miss an appointment or will be delayed, however, it is important to call and inform the office.

Myth: It helps to know someone on the Board, a big donor, or a parent.

It is who you are rather than whom you know. Admissions personnel are educational professionals and are looking for children and families to make a match with their schools. Boards of Directors understand that it is the admissions officers' jobs to do the work they were hired to do.

Myth: Donate to the school during the admissions season.

Not a good idea. Donations to schools during admissions seasons are carefully monitored for this, and most schools will return gifts coming from applicant families.

Myth: If you need tuition assistance, your child will be at a disadvantage in the admissions process.

New York City independent schools really do strive to attain socio-economic diversity in their communities and work hard to be as generous as they can to attract all segments of the city population. All independent schools have financial aid, generally starting in the kindergarten year but frequently the aid budgets are not sufficient to meet all of the needs of families. Some schools separate the admission decision from the financial aid decision so it is possible one might receive an offer of admission, but not an offer of aid. Other schools will make an offer to a family only if they can also offer tuition assistance.

Myth: Children with summer birthdays are at a disadvantage.

There are twelve months in a year. Admissions directors need to balance students' different ages in their classrooms and at the same time ensure that a particular child is developmentally ready to enter their school. Preschool directors will provide guidance as to the best timing for your child to apply. Some children with summer birthdays may be among the youngest in their kindergarten classes, and others among the oldest because it is deemed a better placement for that child in that particular school. **Jean:** For example, in Chelsea Day School's 2012 exiting class, a boy with a July birthday will enter kindergarten at an independent school in the fall. His classmate with an August birthday will enter a pre-k class at another independent school. It depends on the child. **Ronnie:** At Washington Market, we have sent some children with summer birthdays to an

independent school when they have just turned five and others to the same school when they have turned six. **Linda:** The birthdays of our kindergarten students generally fall within a one-year range that can vary from year to year. Some children may be turning six at the beginning of the school year, while others may have turned five over the summer. But all children must be five prior to September 1st. **Babby:** Looking at Dalton's past five years, there is a range of birthdays represented in the kindergarten classes—with children who remained at their preschool for another year and turned six over the summer, to a significant number of boys and girls with late summer birthdays. There is no advantage or disadvantage regarding one's birthday and acceptance to our school—it is all about the individual child.

Myth: Admissions consultants give you an edge.

Monies might be better spent on tuition. It is the role of your preschool director or appointed staff members to work effectively with families who are moving on to ongoing schools. Your preschool has experienced your child in a school environment, and can best present a profile of your child and your family to an ongoing school. You might find organizations like Early Steps and the Parents League, which provide admissions counseling, to be helpful.

Myth: Write a thank-you note at every turn.

Use your judgment. Understand that admissions offices at ongoing schools tend to be inundated with too much mail. Do not go overboard with expressing your level of interest in a school.

As a final point, the official policy about expressions of interest is stated as follows in the *2011-2013 New York Independent Schools Directory*, and this is the practice at our schools and the other schools we know:

Formal expressions of "First Choice" shall not be solicited by either sending or receiving Member Schools, and Member Schools acknowledge that

any expression of "First Choice" by a family is not binding in any way and does not prevent a family from changing its mind. Families are welcome to identify to their sending school Director or Head the top three schools of interest to their family. Receiving Member Schools shall not ask sending schools whether they are an applicant family's "First Choice" nor request a "First Choice letter", but may inquire whether they are one of a family's top three choices.

So, take a step back. Open your eyes and minds to the many educational options available in this wonderful city. You might learn about schools that you never knew existed. At its best, the process will be a learning experience for you and your family and you will come to better understand your own values and educational criteria as you visit schools. There is much to appreciate and enjoy in the process.

We look forward to meeting you.

References

www.earlysteps.org

Independent Schools Admissions Association of Greater New York,
www.isaagny.org

New York Independent Schools Directory, published by ISAAGNY,
available for purchase through The Parents League

www.parentsleague.org

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