



## School Options

**Jennifer Friedman, March 2011**

Parents in New York City have the unfortunate task of starting to think about elementary school options when their babies are still...well, just that...babies. At La Escuelita, parents are asked to attend an “exmissions” workshop in the spring when their children are often still three years old, entering into the 4s or the afternoon 3/4s or even earlier if they plan on applying to private schools with pre-K programs. And even when the options seem easy and clear (though they almost never do) there is a great amount of stress involved in selecting, and harder yet, getting into the “right” school.

I like to tell parents that picking a school is a bit like finding an apartment in Manhattan; no matter what, you are going to have to give up something. What each family is willing to give up depends on what the family wants and values most. For apartments one sacrifices light or ideal location, pays significantly more than expected, or settles for less space. When it comes to schools, parents have to determine what they are willing to give up. Perhaps it is not as “rigorous” as desired, or the facilities are not as nice as another options’. Maybe the teaching staff is wonderful but the administration has high turnover. Other factors are the curriculum, location, the parent body, diversity, and of course cost and the financial impact on a family. Only one private school in the city offers Spanish-English dual language and outside of the Upper West Side there are limited public dual language options. And there is always the question of public versus private. For some that goes hand in hand with the other factors, while for others it is purely an economic decision, and for still others it is an ethical decision.

While parents have to focus on finding a school they feel is right for them, they also have to go through the process of application, whether they are considering public or private options, and often they are subject to factors that are seemingly unfair, such as connections. The most upsetting part of the process for me is the element of judgment and the negative effect I see this having on parents. I worry about the way this process, the testing, the searching and hoping, impact the way parents see themselves as parents and see their children as individuals. I cannot help but think that as much as a parent tries not to let his child’s OLSAT or ERB score impact his view of her, that indeed it does seep into how he forms his idea of who she is. This goes both ways, so a parent of a child who scores well may start to worry about how to better “challenge” her because “she’s so smart”, while a parent of a child who does not score as well may NOT worry about this when she should. So much is riding on one test, on one day of a child’s life. My perspective on this was solidified two years ago when I met a mother of identical twins. These are the kind of identical twins who could play tricks on friends and teachers because they look so much alike one needs to use the clothing they wear on any given day to remember who is who. Yet one scored high enough to qualify for G&T and one did not. I always knew these tests do not accurately measure intelligence and are more a result of other factors than actual skills, but the reality of two 4 year olds with the exact genetic material scoring so differently only catapulted my skepticism into downright disapproval. And interestingly, their mother said that if she had to guess she would have guessed the other way around; that the one who did not score high enough would have been the one to get in, not the other way around. I could not help but wonder if the results of this one test shifted her entire thinking of her daughters or maybe just shifted it ever so slightly, but nonetheless impacted how she viewed each of them.

I know this is the process we have been handed and have to participate if we want to consider all of the options for our children’s elementary school experience. I simply urge parents to understand the information in context and to separate themselves as parents, and their children as individuals, from the process, the judgment, and the pressures they will inevitably feel as they search for “the right fit”. I encourage parents to not fall in love with any particular school but rather look at each school as a list of pros and cons and aim for the schools that have the pros that matter most to their individual family, because there is no perfect option.