

Put your child's best foot forward


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So you've found a private school where little Caitlin or Evan will thrive. Now, how do you make sure they get in?

Every year, parents are disappointed when their children are turned away because classes are already full or the student did not meet entrance requirements. That's why educators recommend applying to several schools, ranking them in order of preference.

"It's tough, because there are a lot of applications and the spots are few," said director of PrepSkills Inc., a company that prepares students for entrance exams required for admission to many private schools.

Schools vary in their admission criteria. In early grades, schools will usually ask the parent and child to visit the school for a half day or full day. The purpose is to observe how the child interacts with others and determine whether he or she will be a good fit with the school.

A child who follows the teacher's instructions and gets along with others will have a better chance of getting accepted than one who pulls hair and has frequent meltdowns.

Even in primary grades, some schools administer their own tests to assess academic abilities. They may also require report cards from the previous school and request a confidential report directly from the child's previous teacher.

In later grades, schools often require the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT). It consists of two sections: a short essay, and a multiple-choice test that covers mathematics, verbal skills and reading comprehension.

The SSAT has two levels, one for students in Grades 5 to 7, and the other for students in Grades 8 to 11. For students determined to ace the SSAT, help is available. Prepskills offers a 26-hour course to prepare students, including a three-hour simulated test.

"Our phone is ringing off the hook," said Director of PREPSKILLS INC., a former teacher whose two boys attend private school.

As well as SSAT results, schools base their decisions on an admission interview with the child. Many children find the experience daunting, which is why Prepskills devotes part of its course to developing interview strategies to help kids put their best foot forward.

Most schools are looking for well-rounded individuals whose interests extend beyond academics to art, music and athletics.

"We're looking for really unique, talented and motivated kids," said Aron Solomon, director of admissions at Appleby College in Oakville, Ont., a private day and boarding school. His search for the best and brightest kids takes him around the world.

"A student with no interest in arts, community service, athletics -- they wouldn't get in."

Parents sweating about the admissions process should keep in mind that schools have an interest in playing up their exclusivity.

"You must always remember that you are a buyer, not a seller," the Canadian Educational Standards Institute advises. "Schools, public or private, are selling you a service. You are not there to sell them on your child."

"There is a discouraging trend among some independent schools, and parents who buy into it, to give the impression that it is a privilege to be accepted."

That's a good thing to remember as you fill out those application forms.