

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADE PARENTS CONSIDERING PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

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For a variety of reasons some parents of seventh and eighth graders consider private high school options for their children. While public high schools in the Tamalpais District (Redwood, Tam, Drake) offer quality educations leading to admission to excellent colleges and universities, some students and families may prefer the smaller settings of local private schools. In my experience I have found that there are a number of considerations to think about when making the decision to pursue private school admissions. I will discuss the steps in the application process and some of the psychological/ social, and practical issues to keep in mind.

I. The Range of Private School Options

There are several groups of private and charter high school that may be of interest to you and your child. These include Marin County private schools, Marin County parochial schools, San Francisco private, parochial, and charter schools. A list of all of these schools and contact information is provided as an appendix to this letter. At first, think broadly about possibilities, rather than decide on only one or two schools as options.

II. The Process

During the fall of the year, there are High School Nights hosted by local schools, such as Marin Country Day School. This is a good opportunity to hear about the admissions process from representatives of the schools, themselves. If you and your child are interested, then these are some preparations that should be made for the application process.

Call independent schools to find out when their Open Houses take place. These usually occur on evenings and/or weekends. This is another good way to hear about what the schools have to offer, but are not designed to be private tours or question and answer sessions for individual students or families. Admission to charter high schools in San Francisco require attendance at an Open House.

Call the independent high schools for applications and set up dates to visit or "shadow" at the schools. You should do this in September. Charter schools also will provide for visits. When visiting, students should inform their teachers at Del Mar of their impending absences and take responsibility for making up work.

Once you have decided to which schools to apply, begin working on the application, get letters of recommendations to teachers, and prepare for your shadowing and interview (see below). If standardized testing is required, and most schools do require this (see below), make sure you know when the test results have to be sent to the schools and apply to take the test well in advance.

Pay close attention to deadlines for applications by students, parents, and teacher recommendation forms. There is often a different deadline for financial aid applications. The deadline for many schools for the general application is the first full week in January.

Acceptance notification letters are usually sent out the second week of March.

III. What Your Child Needs for Private School Acceptance

1. Your child will need good grades. While not all applicants are “straight A” students, they should at least be on the Blue, if not the Gold Honor Roll. Some of the private schools weigh grades more heavily than others.
2. Your child will need to take the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) or the admission test for parochial high schools. These tests are reasoning tests similar to the college entrance examination, but easier. Both verbal and mathematical skills are assessed. I recommend that if private high school is a serious consideration, then have your child take the SSAT sometime during seventh grade, without studying. If s/he does well, then s/he can take the test that counts in December of 8th grade. If there are weak areas, then you have three options:
 - i. Buy an SSAT study book at Borders or similar bookstore and use the practice tests and test strategies to improve test taking skills.
 - ii. Hire a private tutor to work on test taking skills
 - iii. There are some private educators that offer test preparation classes for groups in the fall

Remember that making a good match between the student and school is most important. If an otherwise qualified student is poor at test taking, then test preparation is appropriate, so that s/he is not excluded solely for that reason. On the other hand, inflating test scores with a lot of preparation, when the day to day academic requirements of the school would be too difficult for the student, does the student no service.

3. Your child will need letters of recommendation from an English and Math teacher and an administrator (usually the principal, but may be psychologist or counselor). This means that your child will need to build a good relationship with his/her teachers, showing not only good grades, but participation, interest, and both academic and personal traits that stand out.
4. Part of the application process is a personal essay. While this may seem more like applying for college than high school, nevertheless, your child will have to present him or herself in a way that helps differentiate him/her from other equally qualified applicants. Most schools look for well rounded students with at least some outside interests. I always

suggest to students that if they have had any life experiences that have changed or affected them in some strong way, then they should write about that (a divorce, an illness, travel, some kind of community service, overcoming some challenge, an important religious rite of passage, etc.), if those experiences are appropriate to the essay requirements. Ultimately, your child has to be him/herself, but thinking about “the resume” is helpful.

5. Shadowing is another important part of the process. Students (or their parents) should set up days or part days to shadow at the prospective schools. The public high schools also have shadow days, which your child should attend, as there is no guarantee of private high school admission, and they may, in fact, like public school better. It is recommended that students not shadow with someone they know at the private schools. The high school students will be asked to comment on the eighth graders’ suitability for acceptance to the school, including their participation in the classes they visit. It is also recommended that students visit ninth grade classes, so that they can understand the content and participate, if they feel comfortable doing so.
6. Students will often have a personal interview at the private high schools or charter schools. Most eighth graders are not terribly poised, so a little role playing can be conducted at home. The following are useful topics to address: how to greet the interviewer, maintain eye contact, show expression, interest, and enthusiasm, some “practice” questions/responses – interests and talents, strengths, weaknesses, why the student wants to go to the school, what they have to offer, and any important goals or life experiences. Students should prepare by reading material about the school and formulate their own comments and questions. They should try to remain relaxed and ask good questions. Students should avoid short answers, but not over respond. They should be demonstrative about what excites them and not chew gum! Use common sense for attire – not overly dressy, but no jeans, shorts, baggy pants, T shirts, spaghetti straps, etc. Be prepared to answer the question, “If you could change one thing about your school (Del Mar), what would it be?” Angry criticism of the school is not what they’re looking for, but a thoughtful change implying that the applicant cares about the school and is invested in improving his/her education.

IV. Psychological/Social Issues

Private school is not for everyone. Prospective students should be disciplined, academically oriented, and prepared to work hard. Eighth graders often want to go to high school where their friends go, or may be attracted by a very pretty campus, or the thought of going to school in San Francisco. Finding the correct match both socially and academically is the primary goal, and parents must not leave the decision up to their thirteen or fourteen year old. Eighteen year olds have a difficult enough time choosing a college.

Even attempting the application process has its psychological risks. Obviously, not all students are accepted, even ones whom we at Del Mar would expect to be accepted. Students applying to private high schools should have enough “ego strength” and resiliency (and forewarning) that if they are not accepted they won’t be devastated.

Some students are different enough from others that they have a better chance of finding a peer group within a larger, rather than smaller setting. The available options for extracurricular activities, with which a student might get involved, may also be greater at a public high school. It can be very lonely with no friends in a small school.

Parents should talk to other parents of students attending prospective private high schools to see what the school climate is, how students are treated by both faculty and other students, how much stress and pressure there is, the variety of extracurricular activities, the prevalence of alcohol and drugs, the involvement of parents in the life of the school.

V. Practical Issues

There are two practical issues to consider: money and logistics.

Money: private schools are very expensive, with most more than \$20,000 per year. If there are several children in the family then private high school and college may be prohibitively expensive. There should be very strong evidence that the student will either get a better education or be better suited socially for a private high school, instead of deciding to save the money for college and going to an excellent public high school. Parents with more than one child may need to consider the “fairness” issue: if one child is sent to private high school, what about the others? They may or may not be suitable for private high school, when the time comes, but can you justify spending \$80,000 on one child, but not the others? It’s worth thinking about.

Logistics: all of the private high schools are farther away than Redwood (and Tam). At least for the first year one to two years, you will be driving or carpooling. If you have children still in the district, then driving to high school may bring added stress. If your child goes to school in San Francisco, then there are buses, but then the commute time must be considered, as well. Many students love coming into the city, but they make friends who do not live in Marin, and that means more driving. Their days may be late, as well, particularly if they participate in after school sports or other activities.

In conclusion, the decision to apply for private high schools and then to go, if accepted, is a complex one. I believe that it is better to think about these various considerations beforehand, so as to make a more informed decision. I would be happy to meet with any parent and student to help you with a decision for your particular family.

Appendix
Contact Information for Schools

Independent Schools: Marin

The Branson School
P.O. Box 887
Ross, Ca. 94957
454-4669 Fax: 454-2327
www.branson.org

Marin Academy
1600 Mission Ave.
San Rafael, Ca. 94901
453-2808 Fax: 453-8538
www.ma.org

The Marin School
100 Edgtide
Sausalito, Ca. 94965
339-9336 Fax: 339-9337
www.themarinschool.org

Parochial Schools: Marin

Marin Catholic High School
675 Sir Francis Drake Blvd.
Kentfield, Ca. 94904
464-3800 Fax: 461-7161
www.marincatholic.org

San Domenico School
1500 Butterfield Rd.
San Anselmo, Ca. 94960
258-1905 Fax: 258-1901
www.sandomenico.org

Independent Schools: San Francisco

The Bay School of San Francisco
35 Keyes Avenue
San Francisco, Ca. 94129-1736
561-5800 Fax: 561-5808
www.bayschoolsf.org

Convent of the Sacred Heart
2222 Broadway
San Francisco, Ca. 94115
292-3125 Fax: 292-3183
www.sacred.sf.ca.us

Drew College Preparatory School
2901 California St.
San Francisco, Ca. 94115
409-3739
www.drewschool.org

International High School of the French American International School
220 Buchanan St.
San Francisco, Ca. 94102
558-2000 Fax: 558-2024
www.internationalsf.org

Jewish Community High School of the Bay
1835 Ellis St.
San Francisco, Ca. 94115
345-9777 Fax: 345-1888
www.jchsofthebay.org

Lick Wilmerding High School
755 Ocean Ave.
San Francisco, Ca. 94112
333-4021 Fax: 586-0737
www.lwhs.org

San Francisco University High School
3065 Jackson St.
San Francisco, Ca. 94115
346-8400 Fax: 346-7522
www.sfuhs.org

Stuart Hall High School
1715 Octavia St.
San Francisco, Ca. 94109
345-5812
www.sacredsf.org/SSH/SHHS

The Urban School of San Francisco
1563 Page St.
San Francisco, Ca. 94117
626-2919 Fax: 626-1125
www.urbanschool.org

Catholic Schools: San Francisco

Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory

1055 Ellis St.

San Francisco, Ca. 94109

775-6626 Fax: 931-6941

www.shcp.edu

St. Ignatius College Preparatory School

2001 37th Ave.

San Francisco, Ca. 94116

731-7500

www.siprep.org

Charter Schools*: San Francisco

Gateway High School (25% Learning Difference students)

1430 Scott St.

San Francisco, Ca. 94115

749-3600

www.gwhs.org

***Note: Charter Schools are publicly funded and do not charge tuition**