

BUSINESS DAY | BASIC INSTINCTS

Relax, It's Just Preschool

By HILLARY CHURA OCT. 21, 2006

DON'T tell anyone, but my husband and I plan to send our toddler to a public prekindergarten program.

It's not just the outrageous cost — about \$17,000 a year for a 4-year-old to learn his letters, or more on a per-pound basis than Harvard. Our neighborhood public schools on Manhattan's Upper East Side are some of the finest in the city (a factor when we relocated) and we just don't think exclusive for the sake of exclusive is necessary. Still, the fear is that you really do get what you pay for, and no parent wants to gamble with their child's future.

With the emphasis on early childhood development, many parents who hear of our decision, nod, say “ohhh,” and position themselves between their children and our son. It's as if we are dooming our first-born and his 7-month-old brother to a lifetime of wanton mediocrity instead of paving their way into the joint M.D.-Ph.D.-law programs of their choice.

It's not that my husband and I are opposed to expensive education. He obtained a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and his undergraduate degree from Yale. My parents lived on lentils for four years so I could attend Smith College. Short of buying the right scratch-and-win ticket or having a generous uncle take care of us, we will do the same for our sons should they go that route.

So I sought confirmation that our sons' college diplomas would not depend on their prekindergarten pedigree.

“People can look too far down the road,” said Cynthia Bing, head of school advisory services at the Parents League of New York, which counsels parents primarily interested in nonpublic schools. Harvard’s dean of admissions, “is never going to ask where your child went to preschool or elementary school,” she said. Phew. So maybe it is O.K. to use the savings during the 13 years in question to expose our sons to Mandarin or Spanish language classes, music and sports as well as interesting educational trips, fun experiences and supporting our school’s parents’ association.

We felt the same conflict last year when our son was accepted to one of the city’s sought-after nursery school programs. (We ultimately elected not to send him.)

Thanks to my husband’s economic foresight to go into finance, we perhaps could stretch and afford private school if we were to forgo extravagances like protein and retirement planning. But the two of us, both products of public primary schooling, believe that environment would expose our sons to a greater diversity of people and ideas than they could experience in a private setting. Our sons will benefit from a great education while we support a civic institution that is essential to growth and equality of opportunity in our city.

“There are a lot of unattractive aspects to New York private schools with the level of elitism and noblesse oblige — beginning with the parents and ultimately sifting down to the children,” said Nancy Lieberman, author of “Admissions” (Warner Books, 2004), a novel about a Manhattan family’s quest to get their daughter into one of the “right” high schools. But, she cautioned, with parents’ associations so active in fund-raising at public schools, “there is such a level of required participation.”

But, putting subjective issues aside we wanted metrics to compare area public and private schools. Sources like the Department of Education nces.ed.gov, schooldigger.com, psk12.com and schoolsk-12.com allow you to examine school size, some demographics and occasionally test scores in public or private — but rarely both — schools. The material, however, can be dated. Apple-to-apple meters are hard to pinpoint since students at independent schools rarely take the mandatory

tests as do their counterparts at public schools, said Myra McGovern, spokeswoman for the National Association of Independent Schools.

“It’s often a choice of choosing between right and right versus right and wrong,” Ms. McGovern said.

Education can be as much about whom your children sit beside as what they learn, said Christopher Lubienski, a University of Illinois professor. A study he released this year reported that, once demographic characteristics are controlled for, fourth- and eighth-graders in public school performed as well as or better than students at private schools on math tests.

“In a sense, you’re not purchasing a type of school,” Mr. Lubienski said. “You’re purchasing a peer group who your kid goes to school with.”

Sure, this decision may make us less-than-cool on the playground. But right now, only our children think we’re cool. And that won’t last.

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