

L.A.'s private schools get a public viewing in one parent's guides

Self-published Whitney Guides give the facts, figures and some opinionated comments.

By CARLA RIVERA
Times Staff Writer

Ask Fiona Whitney what private school directors think of her books that help angst-ridden parents choose the right campus, and she doesn't hesitate: "I think they love me," she says. "I haven't heard one negative thing — and I'm really surprised."

Whitney is the author behind the self-published Whitney

Guides, which review Los Angeles' top private schools, blending facts and figures with amusingly opinionated descriptions.

On trying to find the out-of-the-way John Thomas Dye school in Bel-Air, she writes: "At first I thought I had taken a wrong turn and stumbled upon an Arabian Horsefarm enclosed by impeccably kept split-rail fences."

Of the "bright and airy" classrooms at all-girl Marymount school, she says: "I could imagine running through the corridors of this school feeling like quite the special daughter, especially when I looked at the wonderful walls of photographs depicting beautifully clad girls in their graduation robes."

The books have spawned a consulting business with business partner Mars Berman, as well as workshops and lectures. The guides retail for \$39.95 online and in bookstores, and Whitney charges \$150 for a half-hour phone consultation and \$295 per hour for an in-home visit. Seminars range from free to \$75 per person, depending on the venue.

The enterprise — part of a growing trend of education consultants — is driven by what is a painfully obvious fact for any parent: Finding a good school is a confusing, time-consuming, headache-producing morass.

That is especially true in Los Angeles, which has one of the most competitive private school markets in the country — in 2006, 37% of applicants to private schools were accepted, compared with 52% of applicants nationwide, according to a sample of member schools con-

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Guide helps parents weigh private schools

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ducted by the National Assn. of Independent Schools.

Stressed-out parents spend thousands of dollars for private tutoring and even prepare resumes of toddlers' achievements for admissions directors.

Whitney, a mother of two, stepped into the fray six years ago and has parlayed her parental concerns into becoming a well-known navigator of the local private school world.

She counsels parents to choose a school that is right for the child, not the most expensive or popular. She provides practical guidance, considering bank accounts, commute times and educational philosophy. Perhaps most important, she delivers a lot of hand-holding and reassurance for those who hope to enter L.A.'s rarefied private school community.

"It's almost like a support group," said Whitney, sitting in the kitchen of her Hancock Park home. "As our kids get older, parents are not as clear about what is the right path. What the books do in a small way is throw out a lifeline."

Whitney is the daughter of John Whitney, one of Britain's pioneering broadcast figures, who produced the acclaimed series "Upstairs/Downstairs" and was an executive for Andrew Lloyd Webber's theatrical company.

She both conforms to and defies the stereotypes of her English pedigree.

Whitney attended boarding schools and grew up summering with the family of Sir Richard Branson. She worked in the movie industry, raised avocados on a farm near Escondido, ran a respected art gallery and still mounts shows as a private dealer.

But she's pragmatic. She includes information about public charter schools and the Los Angeles Unified School District's magnet program in her books; her own children went to public and private schools. While she sympathizes with parents' anxiety, she offers a withering critique of societal pressures that would drive a mother with a 9-month-old babe in arms to fixate over which preschool waiting list to join.

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Fiona Whitney, author of Whitney Guides that review L.A.s' top private schools

Whitney is not an educator, and she considers that a plus.

"I wanted to give the parents' perspective and not come off as some expert," she said. "I also felt mad at the frustration of parents who are manipulated by the schools themselves into thinking they have to get in because they are the only choice."

Consultants such as Whitney walk a fine line in developing relationships with school administrators while not seeming to show any preference. While her books will point out shortcomings, she is rarely overtly critical in her appraisals.

"Yes, it's tricky," she said. "It's a difficult thing for me when I'm being informative for a parent while being destructive to a whole school. My father once said to me, 'You know you don't really address the issue of drugs in schools.' How I address this with parents is to say, 'Let's just safely agree that every school is facing this.'"

Andrew Rakos, admissions director for the Fountain Day School in West Hollywood came across the Whitney Guide at a local book fair a few years ago and asked her to review his school.

"It made the owners of the school nervous because you never know how an outsider is going to see a school," said Rakos, whose son attends Fountain Day.

Whitney and her team visited the school twice, speaking with parents and teachers, inspecting bathrooms and watching kids do

homework, Rakos said.

Her subsequent review noted that the campus itself was unassuming but went on to laud the school's family atmosphere and demanding curriculum.

Rakos said the review helped the school to improve its presentation and he has recommended her to parents of students going on to middle and high school.

"You have people spending \$20,000 a year plus for elementary and high school education and another sector who are willing to move every two to four years just to get their kids into the right schools, so there is a need for people like Fiona to guide you in the right direction," said Rakos.

Not every school administrator is enamored with the idea of private consultants, but the profession is currently undergoing phenomenal growth, said Mark Sklarow, executive director of the Independent Educational Consultants Assn. Membership in his group, which requires three years of experience, has doubled in the last two years, from 300 to 600, and is expected to double again by 2009.

Most consultants charge an hourly rate similar to that of family therapists, said Sklarow, which in Los Angeles would likely be \$200 or more. A package of intensive services with interviews, observation of family dynamics and scouting of suitable schools might cost from \$4,000 to \$6,000.

Sandy Eiges, who operates LA School Scout and has a background in education administration and social work, said she can spend as little as two hours or as much as a year guiding parents through the process.

Eiges praised Whitney's initiative in developing her books, but said they were not comprehensive enough to cover all territory. With demand so intense, she feels little competitive pressure.

"I see nothing but very frenzied, worried and bewildered parents and there are more than enough to go around," she said.

Whitney said the books were meant to be a starting point. One guide covers private preschools and the other kindergarten through 12th grade.

Sales have grown steadily to



GINA FERAZZI Los Angeles Times

PARENTS' RESOURCE: *Fiona Whitney, left, and Mars Berman have teamed up on a consulting business that grew out of Whitney's guidebooks on private elementary and high schools in the L.A. area. A recent seminar in Los Feliz was crowded with young parents seeking information and advice.*

more than 14,000, and while the sales numbers are not Harry Potter-like, the client base is often influential: Whitney gets calls from "regular" moms and dads but also the town's movers and shakers and people in the entertainment industry relocating from New York and London.

Nina and Mike Leahy were moving to Los Angeles from New York last summer and panicking about finding a nursery school for their daughter Anastasia. They ran across Whitney's guide on the Web and found that she also offered consulting services.

The couple, who both work in the music business, had called 15 schools to ask about procedures and schedule tours and found that many were less than encouraging about their daughter finding a spot. Whitney helped them to narrow their choices.

In unfamiliar territory "you do have that nagging feeling that

you're missing the obvious and best choice," said Nina Leahy.

Mars Berman met Whitney five years ago at a children's co-tillion where they ended up in the bar area drinking wine and chatting. Berman was a long-time Montessori preschool teacher whose daughters went to private schools, but her educational philosophy matched Whitney's.

"Fiona's point of view, which is to alleviate fear and shed light on the process, is the same place I'm coming from," said Berman.

A recent talk the two held at a Los Feliz children's boutique, Dragonfly Dulou, was crowded with young parents with questions about what a charter school is, what kind of child benefits most from Montessori and the costs of private education.

Whitney has noted a deepening interest in private schools

among middle- and working-class parents, driven in part by dissatisfaction with the public school system in general and deep suspicion — sometimes misplaced — that the local neighborhood school is inferior.

She gives families a reality check on the cost of private schools, listing application, registration and other fees besides tuition.

Her daughter, Charlotte, attended Immaculate Heart, while son Bevan, now a freshman at Humboldt State University, attended the North Hollywood High magnet program.

"When all is said and done, every child should be in an environment where their talents and strengths can be nurtured," said Whitney. "Both of my kids are happy, and I only paid one school tuition."

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