

Education costs

The most expensive preschools

By Liz Moyer, *Forbes.com*, September 19, 2007

If you're like many new parents, nothing's too good for your little genius, including \$30,440 for preschool so your 4-year-old can occupy a few hours each day playing with blocks and finger painting in an organized setting.

Think that's a typo? Think again. That is the price of admission to the preschool program at New York's Ethical Culture Fieldston School. Other private schools in big American cities aren't much better. Bank Street, also in New York, will set you back \$27,450; pre-K at Washington's Sidwell Friends runs \$26,790. Compared to that, The Center for Early Education in Los Angeles, with its \$15,400 tuition, seems like a bargain.

Forbes.com hunted down the most expensive preschools in the biggest urban areas across the country using local school guidebooks, Web sites and experts to compare tuitions and programs. There is no central database that tracks tuition trends, not even locally, says Deborah Ashe, director of admissions in the lower school at New York's Trevor Day School, where preschool tuition is \$24,200. And there are a lot of variables. Some schools that are preschool-only programs have comparably lower tuitions than preschools affiliated with elementary schools, and some schools get funding from the government.

Tuitions have been rising at an 8% clip across the board, according to some experts. That's more than the annual tuition increase at Ivy League colleges. But there is something to be said for the hefty premiums, according to Victoria Goldman, author of preschool guidebooks for New York and Los Angeles and mom of two New York private school kids. "You get what you pay for," she says.

Mostly what she means is facilities. The elite Episcopal School on Manhattan's Upper East Side, for example, which costs \$14,500 a year, is housed in an elegant seven-story townhouse. Seven years ago, Boston's nearly 100-year-old Tenacre School (pre-K tuition is \$16,000-plus) built a new gymnasium, library and multimedia center.

Washington, D.C.'s Sidwell Friends School gutted a few buildings and built a new "green" middle school. "Many of the older schools are antiquated and in constant need of upkeep," says Georgia Irvin, author of a schools guidebook for the D.C. metropolitan area.

But paying the tuition is easy compared with getting in. Entrance to an exclusive private preschool is a painful rite of passage for thousands of upscale New York moms every year, kicking off with a mad rush of speed dialing early in the morning the day after Labor Day to secure applications before schools run out of them.

The way the game works, at least for many top private nursery schools: You call to get the application, rush it back to the school and wait anxiously for word you will be granted a tour and your child will be invited to an on-site pseudo-interview the schools call a "play-date."

Some schools dispense with the play-date and just meet with families individually. Some ask for essays. Some just want to know where you live and work. (Presumably much information about your potential as a big donor can be gleaned from your address and employer).

Then there is the bone-chilling, mind-bending wait during which you agonize over your kid's performance during the play date and handicap her chances vs. the others (including that kid who went fishing in the classroom fish tank). While the process starts in September, it doesn't end until early March, when the notifications are mailed.

After conquering the application process and winning a coveted spot, no small feat in itself, the reality hits hard. Preschool, for most just a few hours a day in the mornings, can cost more than studying for an engineering degree at Michigan, and much more at some very selective schools.

Of course, the lure for many is the program itself. At the 92nd Street Y, a school that gained a fair amount of notoriety for its role in the Wall Street research scandal a few years back, kids are engaged in an archeology "dig" and sculpture projects, among other things.

At New York's Horace Mann, where educating a 4-year-old sets you back \$26,880, kids are taught reading and computer readiness. At Chicago City Day School, where tuition is \$17,000-plus, instruction in foreign languages, drama, music and science begins in the junior kindergarten.

Many parents view private preschool as a necessary step in the even more stressful process of securing a place in a private grade school, the process for which has been chronicled recently in the documentary "Getting In" on the TLC cable channel.

In truth, the other thing pushing parents to send kids to preschool is the cold reality that kindergarten has become the new first grade, with parents pushing academic learning earlier with the fear that their kids will fall behind if they don't meet major milestones like reading well before what is considered normal.

That makes preschool the new kindergarten. And that's a whole other story.

###