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NPN preps anxious parents for Chicago school applications

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Chicago parents pile into the school fairs that Neighborhood Parents Network hosts each fall to help decode the admissions processes.

Wendy Donahue, Chicago Tribune

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Every fall, staff at Chicago's Neighborhood Parents Network watch the clouds of anxiety roll in as its members apply for coveted spots at selective enrollment public and private schools for the next school year.

NPN message boards fill with parents comparing results throughout the daunting process, from the first batch of paperwork in autumn, to testing in winter, to the arrival of their children's scores

and waitlist numbers in spring, and through the limbo that sometimes casts a shadow over their summer.

The result of these candid exchanges: an uncensored, up-to-the-minute database, monitored day to day by Christa Reed, associate executive director at NPN. In those parents' posts, Reed watches for patterns and blips — and detects some shifting winds over the past year. The chatter among NPN members suggests that waitlists are shrinking, even vanishing, at some elementary schools, public and private.

Reed, who lives with her husband and 3-year-old son in Lakeview, shared her insider's view of this and other related trends as NPN prepares to host its popular preschool and elementary school fairs in September and October. This is an edited transcript of a phone chat.

Q: What did you see on the NPN parent discussion forums regarding applying to schools for 2015-16?

A: Over the summer, we were seeing some selective enrollment schools tracking waitlists on their web site. Essentially they're getting tired of answering phone calls from parents wanting updates. LaSalle II and Ravenswood were posting weekly updates; those are two off the top of my head.

We also see trends from certain threads (on our message boards) that parents constantly update. When they get calls from schools they're wait-listed at, they say, 'here's our number (on whatever school's waitlist), here's when we got the call, here's my tier,' and they say whether they're accepting the slot. This is much more timely than schools' tracking lists.

We can go back to last year's threads, and the waitlists for this year were moving a lot faster.

Q: Why do you think the waitlists moved faster?

A: A lot of parents have different theories. There was the idea of a potential CPS strike that was making parents nervous, so we saw more of them look into private schools because they'd rather not deal with the chaos of CPS.

Also, as more parents get more and more involved, the CPS schools are getting better. But suddenly the schools are over capacity, and parents are finding out about this ahead of time, and thinking, OK, my child is going to be one out of 40 kids in his kindergarten class; is this what I want?

Q: What are some of the factors contributing to the school improvements, followed by overcrowding, at some CPS schools?

A: The housing bubble in 2008 meant more people weren't able to sell their homes, and everyone enrolled in schools like South Loop, Ogden, Bell, Nettelhorst. Some of these CPS schools have in-

sane fundraising, where parents are raising millions of dollars, and the schools got so good so fast. They have all of these resources.

But there's not enough physical space in the building. These schools are so overcrowded, principals have to go out and check to see that kids are living where the parents say they are (in order to get into the school). A lot of times they're not. A lot of parents are moving into the neighborhood, then a few weeks after school saying, "We just moved." If the principals know you're invested in the school and fundraising, they want you to stay. But that also takes away that spot for the neighborhood kid, or puts him in an overcrowded school.

Q: Is there good news at private and parochial schools?

A: **Some of the elite schools are getting bigger.** The British School's second campus in the South Loop just opened, with a big rooftop and soccer field. And for the first time ever they're not going to have a (long) waitlist. When you build a new school, you've got to get new bodies in the door.

GEMS Academy is building its upper school adjacent to the existing building (near Millennium Park). This year they're adding seventh grade and by next winter they'll start taking high schoolers. They're going to go all the way up to 12th grade. They're technology focused — kindergartners have iPad minis.

Bennett Day School is growing very quickly, adding a grade a year through eighth grade. They're currently in Fulton Market, but they're converting a giant, beautiful old building on Grand Avenue into an awesome high-tech school. The philosophy is based on Reggio-Emilia, which emphasizes social awareness and learning through play.

There are more choices. Where you used to have a heavy European curriculum — very strict — or Montessori, and there wasn't anything in between, now there are more curated curricula. It's a great time to be a parent in Chicago.

Q: What does that mean for other private schools?

A: GEMS is pulling from that elite pool that historically was untouched — Parker, Latin, the University of Chicago Lab School. The Lab School has always come to our South Side school fair, because it always fell within their application deadline, but this year they're representing at both of our school fairs. That means they're focusing more on recruiting ahead of time.

Q: Are parents who attend NPN school fairs investigating options for the next school year?

A: At our school fairs, you'll see plenty of pregnant people who are so far ahead of the game because they're interested in buying real estate and want to know what school they'd be in before

they move.

We also hear a lot from parents who go to the neighborhood (public) school, and they find it's not a great fit for their kid, and God forbid your child has some kind of developmental difference that that school can't address. There are some in CPS that are fantastic, and some are terrible. (NPN has a [Developmental Differences Fair](#) in March to assist parents in finding schools and other resources.)

We try to put the information all out there so you can make the best choice for you. And if you make the wrong choice for your child, that's OK. We have members who are at their third school, but, you know, they found it. Sometimes that's what it takes.

Q: How about city high schools? It seems that the options are more limited.

A: The public high schools are big, so they can be intimidating. Lincoln Park High School separates its International Baccalaureate kids — they're segregated physically from the rest of the kids there. That can be intimidating to some people too.

There are private schools that have secondary entry points. Francis Parker's is sixth grade, because they adjust their classroom structure at sixth grade, so they can accommodate more children. So some people will go to a CPS school (for the early grades), save all their money, then go to a Parker or another private school for six or seven years. (The theory is) you get into a great college if you went to a great high school.

Q: For private school, has the tuition picture changed?

A: I think some schools are getting a little craftier in how you pay. There are some private schools that will say our tuition is this much money, and then they'll say, "We expect you to donate 100 percent of your tuition but, don't worry, it's tax deductible because it's a donation." Donation expectations are going up.

There's a lot of financial aid happening that wasn't before — full-blown scholarships — but they don't necessarily (broadcast) that information.

Q: What else is different in city school admissions?

A: There is a trend in parents starting their kids much younger than we started. Personally I don't know anyone who doesn't have a child in preschool at age 3. Maybe that's city life. Or maybe it's the idea of having this pressure. If your kid has to take a selective enrollment exam for CPS at age 4 to get into one of these schools, are we putting kids in preschool because we think it's preparing them academically for this exam? I hope not, but maybe.

Everyone has some anxiety about socialization, so maybe that's why that's happening. As city parents, we're a little older, a little more educated, we've probably done a little bit more Googling. Generally, I think older parents are just a little more anxious. I think that's just part of our culture. It's fascinating, I totally realize it's happening, and I totally realize I'm part of it.

NPN annual school fairs

[The Neighborhood Parents Network](#) offers school fairs each fall to help parents in the city navigate public and private school admissions. Parents learn about application processes, including selective enrollment testing and lotteries, from both school representatives and CPS parents who've survived the ordeal. They're popular — the October one had only 50 spots left out of 725 at press time — so parents who are interested in attending should RSVP ASAP.

[South Side Preschool & Elementary School Fair](#)

When: 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Sept. 19

Where: Hyde Park Neighborhood Club, 5480 S. Kenwood Ave.

Cost: Free and open to the public

[Annual Preschool & Elementary School Fair](#)

When: 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Oct. 18

Where: Grossinger Autoplex, 1530 N. Dayton St.

Cost: Free for NPN members, \$25 for non-members
