

Brooklyn Sees Growth in Schools Consultants

Handful of Experts Guide Parents Through Process of Finding Top Schools

By SOPHIA HOLLANDER

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Maurice Frumkin, right, is president of NYC Admissions Solutions. *Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal*

Jackie Straus never bought into the extreme Brooklyn- mommy ethos, enduring glares from other parents as she bottle-fed and vaccinated her children. But when she hired a schools consultant for her daughter, she said, the parental peanut gallery barely blinked.

Her friends "might have thought it was weird, but they were certainly happy to hear whatever I had to tell them," said Ms. Straus, who moved to Prospect Heights from Manhattan in 2001.

Schools consultants have long been fixtures in Manhattan, guiding parents through the complex,

often high-stakes process of finding spots for their children in the city's top schools, from pre-K through high school. Now, a handful of new consultants is sprouting in Brooklyn, joining the borough's long-established doyenne of the business, Joyce Szuflita.

The newcomers, who span neighborhoods from Williamsburg to Bedford-Stuyvesant, offer everything from in-depth information on public and private schools to hands-on advice on applications.

Brooklyn's School-Advice Brigade For borough parents confused by their children's education options, there is a growing cadre of consultants. A sampling:					
	Leah Wiseman Fink School Select NYC	Maurice Frumkin NYC Admissions Solutions	Emily Glickman Abacus Guide Educational Consulting	Allison Shillingford Navigate the Maze	Joyce Szuflita NYC School Help
STARTED	2013	2013	1999	2011	2008
FEES	\$200/hour	\$185/hour	\$850-\$3,650	\$750/package	\$200/hour
SERVICES	Educates families about the application process; provides insights into schools	Helps create a schools list; reviews admissions process; offers application and interview help	Helps create a schools list; admissions help includes essay edits; interview prep; advice on school communications	Provides insights into schools; reviews essays; preps families for interviews	Educates families about the application process; provides insights into schools
PUBLIC OR PRIVATE	Both (focus on public)	Both	Private	Private	Both
GRADES	Preschool through elementary	High school	All	Focuses on elementary, some middle school	All; only public for high school
COVERAGE AREA	Brooklyn (Greenpoint/Williamsburg focus), Downtown Manhattan and Long Island City	Citywide	Brooklyn, Manhattan, Riverdale, Westchester	Citywide	Nearly two dozen Brooklyn neighborhoods
Source: the companies			Note: Some consultants offer discount packages and group sessions		The Wall Street Journal

The competition has yet to siphon away business, said Ms. Szuflita, who founded her own firm about school choices in 2008 and noted that her consultant work has nearly doubled in the past two years. She offers group workshops (up to \$30 a person) and private consultations (\$200 an hour).

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Brooklyn families with children enrolled in school rose by more than 88,000, a 13.8% change, according to U.S. census data. During that time, the number of children in nursery school, pre-K and kindergarten more than doubled, to 86,054.

But the number of elite Brooklyn private schools has remained limited, consultants said. And only 122 Brooklyn public schools out of 490 graded by the city received A's on their report cards last year.

"The need in Brooklyn for top school seats has not kept pace with the number of Brooklynites," said Emily Glickman, a Manhattan-based consultant who also works with Brooklyn families.

It doesn't help the competitive atmosphere that more Manhattan parents are now sending their children across the East River, consultants and school officials said. Nearly 70% of students accepted into ninth grade at Packer Collegiate Institute for the 2014-15 school year came from Manhattan, said the head of school, Bruce Dennis.

Two decades ago, "the idea of coming to Brooklyn for independent school would have been a really tough sell" for Manhattanites, Mr. Dennis said, noting that overall applications to the pre- and lower schools have risen 23% in the past five years. "The nature of the people living in the two places has kind of conflated."

That prospect worries even some consultants.

"Brooklyn culture is different from Manhattan," said Ms. Szuflita, whose service doesn't include helping clients craft their applications. "Brooklyn is a little more DIY. Nothing ever stays the same, but I hope it will never be a requirement that you have to have somebody manage your application to get a seat."

When Ms. Glickman applied to Packer herself in the 1970s, "I don't even remember interviewing," she said.

Now, she charges \$850 for a 2½-hour introductory session that helps families create a tailored private-schools list and \$3,650 for a full admissions consultation, including essay edits, interview prep and unlimited phone and email access.

Ms. Glickman estimated that the number of Brooklyn families she works with has more than doubled since she started consulting in 1999. They now constitute a quarter of her business, she said.

"I have a job because we're living with a system that's really hard for people," she said. "Right now, Brooklyn families are very tense."

Last year, two former New York City Department of Education officials also started separate schools-consulting businesses in Brooklyn.

"This is really a big need," said Leah Wiseman Fink, who was director of the Office of New Schools at the education department until September. Ms. Fink, who lives and works mainly in Williamsburg, focuses on preschool and elementary schools, charging \$200 for an hourlong consultation.

Unlike many Manhattan families, "the parents aren't trying to hire me to get them into the school," she said. "They're more hiring me to find the best fit."

Maurice Frumkin, who worked with Ms. Straus and her daughter, began consulting last year after leaving his position as deputy executive director of high school enrollment at the education department. His services focus on helping place high school applicants across the city (\$185 an hour), including application advice and interview prep, he said.

When Bedford-Stuyvesant resident Emerson Moore and his wife began looking for a kindergarten placement for their son earlier this year, he said they were surprised that some private schools wouldn't let prospective parents observe a classroom.

"Unless I can put on Harry Potter's invisible cloak and sit in the classroom, unless there's two-way glass, I don't know what's going to go on," said Mr. Moore, an attorney.

To get the inside scoop, they hired Allison Shillingford, who began consulting with families in their neighborhood in 2011. They ultimately enrolled their son in a West Village school she suggested that met their top criteria: a diverse student body, low student-teacher ratio and lack of emphasis on test scores.

Ms. Shillingford, who lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant, said she began doing free workshops with neighborhood parents after researching the process for her children. She decided to try it as a business and recently expanded her advisory to families in Fort Greene, Crown Heights and Clinton Hill.

"It's not like I'm trying to take over Brooklyn," said Ms. Shillingford, who charges \$750 to help clients through the process, including reviewing their applications and helping them prepare for interviews. "I'm trying to give educational options to people in my community."

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