



For months last year, “Kate” and her wildly popular SF K Files blog championed the high-stakes movement of idealistic middle-class professionals who are transforming many of San Francisco’s public elementary schools. Then she announced that she was sending her own daughter to an elite private school, and all hell broke loose.

A post from the post-private school city

Submit



BY DIANA KAPP

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEN SISKI



In the middle of
night in the fall of 2011,
Amy Graff, aka "Katie",
started a blog about her
anxious search for a
kindergarten for her
daughter, Paris, aka
"Alice." Now, she makes
a living blogging about
parenting, travel, and
the public-school move-
ment for three differ-
ent sites, including the
San Francisco Chronicle
Mommy Fi

On the night the SF K Files
was born, it was no
surprise that Amy Graff
lay anxiously awake,
staring wide-eyed at the
bedroom ceiling of her
Noe Valley condo. This
was in early October 2007,
just as San Francisco's
frenetic—and famously
disappointing—
kindergarten search was
officially getting under
way. And Graff had a
four-year-old in her last
year of preschool, which
pretty much says it all.

The first time I met Graff, about six months later, it was clear that the strikingly earnest, pretty, 34-year-old Berkeley graduate was a worrier, prone to high drama in both her dreaming and her waking life. Over time, I would hear about her global-warming obsession, when she swore her family off new clothes and nearly sold their only car; and her propensity to read pamphlets with titles like “Arsenic in Play Structure Sampling Results” and to order organic mattresses for her two kids. I can think of a dozen instances in our regular get-togethers over the past year when she has mentioned breaking down in tears, but almost always the happy, high-emotion kind. She just feels things *strongly*.

What she felt that October night was sheer, heart-pounding fear about the next six months, during which she had to find the right school for her daughter, Paris. Graff had been gearing up for this campaign for a full year, touring schools, attending forums put on by Parents for Public Schools, and interrogating a wide circle of friends. Already, everything about the process made her nervous, from practical questions, like how she would ever get Paris ready in time for a school that started at 7:50 a.m., to tales of how few people were happy with the school assigned to their child by San Francisco Unified's bizarre lottery system—or with their private-school acceptances, for that matter. The whole thing seemed like one big crapshoot.

But it was also incredibly loaded with meaning, and Graff found herself at a philosophical fork in the road that's increasingly tormenting politically liberal and professionally ambitious San Francisco parents: whether to take a chance on the city's erratic, often poverty-tinged public schools or adopt the default position of joining the private-school rat race. (The portion of San Francisco kids in private school, about 30 percent, is nearly four times the state average.)

In the abstract, Graff would have favored the public route. She had serious misgivings about private-school culture, especially the admissions process, which reminded her of her own sorority rush—more of a popularity contest than a measure of merit. She had gone to public schools in Los Gatos, albeit the more affluent, suburban type, and she was utterly committed to raising savvy city kids and exposing Paris and her younger brother, Dante, to true diversity. Graff also had an inkling, based on her research, that a public-school movement, driven in part by parents like her, was changing the landscape. Against all odds, elementary schools had been revived by language-immersion programs and turbo PTAs. San Francisco Unified students now scored higher on state proficiency tests than kids in the state's seven largest urban school districts. And while the district was still losing an average of 560 kids each year, kindergarten applications were up. By the next year, in fact, every seat

Would "Alice" be better off at the exclusive Marin Country Day School, with its nothing-but-the-best approach, or at a scrappy public school in the city with kids from many different backgrounds? That's the question that tortured her mother for a full year and a half.



would be full on the first day of school, for the first time in a decade.

Then again, Graff knew that even the most inspiring public schools were overcrowded and underresourced. And despite its improved test scores, the district was still saddled with the state's widest achievement gap between the lowest-performing student groups, which are predominantly low-income African Americans and Latinos, and the district average.

Even so, there was a new vibe among parents in Graff's circle that public school was on the table. And damn if Graff, in the midst of all this to-ing and fro-ing, hadn't gone and done the exact wrong thing: She'd fallen in love with one particularly exclusive private school—Marin Country Day School (MCDS), in Corte Madera. This idyllic institution by the bay boasted the best of everything a parent could ever want: top-notch instruction, state-of-the-art facilities, and motivated families. For heaven's sake, the classrooms had rows of tiny rain boots lined up outside for mucking around in the water. Was it fair to preemptively exclude Paris from this paradise, just to satisfy Graff's own social conscience?

It didn't help that Graff, an editor at *Via* magazine, and her husband, Anthony Falzone, a river scientist, didn't see eye to eye on that question. The broad-shouldered California native, whom Graff describes as a "typical guy" in his close-to-the-vest emotional makeup, had gone to a private high school. It gave him a great education, he says, and encouraged his environmental ethic—but his mother had made a big financial sacrifice to send him there, which he didn't think he and Graff could repeat. Between 1998 and

2008, the cost of private-school tuition skyrocketed 70 percent; at MCDS, the going rate for kindergarten was nearly \$22,000 a year—and it rises every few years. Even if Graff and Falzone's joint \$130,000 salary qualified them for some financial aid, the cost would still require them to give up vacations and dreams of a house, not to mention their college-savings plans. Falzone also didn't want his children to experience the kind of self-imposed pressure he had felt to make his mother's sacrifice worthwhile.

So, at odds with her spouse and her own inner populist, what's a mother to do? What any self-respecting San Franciscan does when spinning and angsty instead of sleeping: start a blog, of course. On that same October night, Graff got out of bed, padded into the dining room, and sat down in front of her laptop. Without really thinking, she set up an account on Blogger (Google's free blogging site) and started tapping away, recounting a disturbing dream she'd had the night before: She was walking Paris up the steps of her new elementary school when the building sprouted legs and ran away, leaving the two of them helpless and panting. She posed the question: "Have you had a similar scary dream about the kindergarten search in S.F.?"

Graff then tacked on one last paragraph to assure anyone who might read her words that she was not looking to "feed the frenzy" or "brag endlessly about my precious little spawn who only deserves to go to San Francisco's very best school (that would get really annoying)." She was just looking for a way to channel her anxiety and vent and, in the process, help others who were also feeling overwhelmed. She emailed the blog link to a friend who had suffered through the process years before, and to another friend who had a kid heading to kindergarten, who passed it on to her mothers' group.

With that, the SF K Files appeared—like a stream of gasoline aimed at a dancing brushfire on a zero-humidity Santa Ana day.

In the past, thirty- and fortysomething San Francisco parents of a certain income and professional status—writers, architects, professors, scientists—did one of three things. They worked the system to get their children into one of the five public elementary schools that have consistently been at the top of the heap (see sidebar on page 86); they fought their way into a private

Yes, they did!

Sherman Elementary School, in Cow Hollow, is one of the most dramatic parent-fueled turnaround stories in the city—and the garden project, which began in 2006, is its crown jewel. With nearly \$130,000 in voter-approved funds, several tons of donated soil, and some help from local landscape architects, idealistic volunteers turned the barren blacktop into a lush garden, complete with vegetables, herbs, and butterflies. Students now attend a gardening class every two weeks, and plans are afoot for a once-a-month salad bar stocked with the harvest.

FORE
Y 2006

BLACKTOP DEMOLITION
AUGUST 2006

FRAMING THE PATH
SEPTEMBER 2006

LEAF IMPRINTING
SEPTEMBER 2006

PATH COMPLETED
SEPTEMBER 2006

POND INSTALLATION
JUNE 2007



school, lamenting the sorry lack of public-school choices but relieved to know their child would get a good education; or they moved to the suburbs. Lately, though, more options have come into play.

The school district itself is responsible for some of the turnaround. It now has 19 immersion programs, and it recently engineered successful ballot propositions that secured funds for teacher training, salaries, and enrichment programs. But bands of pioneering, professional parents have also been rolling up their sleeves, transforming, then marketing, the hell out of lesser-known schools. They live in places like Bernal Heights and Potrero Hill, and unlike their counterparts of just 5 or 10 years ago, they're committed to city life. They're the types who jam with their bands on Friday night, join the California Academy of Sciences, and spend a few hours with friends at Tartine in the Mission on Saturday afternoon.

Some have simply been priced out of the private-school market, and with the economy tanking, that group is likely to expand. But even if they can still afford private school, many of these parents are driven largely by their ideals. They *believe* in public schools and hate the idea of turning their backs on the system, however flawed it may be. For these parents, choosing public school has become a statement of political principles, and even a rationale for having one parent at home and willing to volunteer a lot of time at school. Partly as a result of these efforts, the group of schools that middle-class professionals perceive as worth clamoring for has tripled, maybe even quadrupled, in size.

But worry and tension still fill the air. The district's lottery, in which parents have to list their seven top schools and often don't get into any of those, is in itself enough to make even cash-strapped, public-school devotees fantasize about private school. Also looming is the fear that most public schools, no matter how improved, still aren't good enough to give their kids a great educa-

tion. When all is said and done, some families still end up opting for private school, which leaves them open to charges of abandoning the cause—an accusation they counter by claiming that the public-school crowd is sacrificing its kids.

Graff found her audience in this charged milieu. Using "Kate" as her pen name, and "Alice" as Paris's, she blogged almost daily on the SF K Files, posting school reviews and lobbing out meaty issues like "Can you judge a school by its principal?" or "Are schools in the suburbs really better?" Her tone was matter-of-fact, in contrast with her excitable personality. She also

reported on her own visits to two more private schools and a dozen public ones, which she would eventually narrow down to her seven lottery choices. She wanted to showcase the positives—the negatives were obvious, she thought, and she felt obligated to be upbeat for her readers. Fairmount, which Paris could walk to, had "shiny blue linoleum tiles" and a very sincere principal with a cute gap in his teeth. At Buena Vista, the arts curriculum stood out, especially with its onsite kiln and full-time arts coordinator. High-scoring Alice Fong Yu particularly resonated with Graff—perhaps, she surmised, because her messy inner yin yearned for the manicured yang of this Chinese-immersion school.

But in the comments section of Graff's blog, her impassioned audience let it fly—proving, among other things, that class warfare is alive and well in San Francisco. Private schools were depicted as highfalutin and elitist, driven by and for connections, and there was much lamenting of the resource gap between public and private schools. Almost all the comments were posted anonymously, which encouraged the free-for-all environment. Graff would put up an innocuous teaser and watch her readers fight it out. Mocked a Mill Valley mom who clearly didn't regret fleeing the city: "Mmm. The wonderful broad-mindedness of San Franciscans...

Many of these parents have been priced out of the private-school market. But even if they can still afford the tuition, they're driven largely by their ideals. They believe in public schools and hate turning their backs on the system, however flawed it may be.

TY PLANTING DAY
OCTOBER 2007

COMMUNITY PLANTING DAY
OCTOBER 2007

THIRD-GRADERS IN GARDEN
MAY 2008

AERIAL VIEW OF GROUNDS
OCTOBER 2008

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY LESSON
OCTOBER 2008

GARDEN IN
OCTOBER



I miss it! It was so much fun to feel superior to schlubs who chose the suburbs.” And this, from an unnamed poster, defending the notion that an elite of progressive parents can save the public schools: “Values and ideals, be they around education or food or whatever, do eventually permeate the culture. It’s one reason why San Francisco public school curricula are improving, and why Safeway now carries organic produce for the masses. Now, before everyone goes off about my implying that private school is a good role model for public school and Rainbow Grocery rocks, can we all stop and take a moment to FEEL THE LOVE?”

Clearly, Graff had hit a raw nerve, and her ravenous, vulnerable readers, some of whom commented up to 10 times a day, were feeding off her and themselves. The K Files acquired such a buzz around town that GreatSchools.net, a national website aimed at helping parents with their school search, began trying to lure Graff. The *San Francisco Chronicle* also offered her a full-time gig to launch a sister concept—the Mommy Files—which she quit her magazine job to accept.

And the more public schools Graff saw, the more good stuff she noticed. By mid-November, she wasn’t just spouting a line; she was starting to internalize the notion that public school might be the right idea after all. The success stories kept piling up, as did the Cinderella tales behind them. Seven years ago, Miraloma, in Noe Valley, didn’t even qualify as under the radar. It ranked 48th out of 67 district elementary schools, 74 percent of the kids came from low-income families, and only 8 percent of fifth-graders were scoring in the top quartile on reading tests. But a handful of more affluent neighborhood families said to each other, “I’ll do it if you’ll do it.” (“You’d kind of pray they didn’t get in anywhere else,” admitted one of the moms.) These parents proceeded to plant and paint and organize, and as they attracted more like-minded families, they raised more funds, which eventually enabled them to hire a learning specialist for a year. They also helped the school get grant money for an extra teacher to keep fourth- and fifth-grade class sizes down, and so on. As more professional families enrolled, scores improved, and Miraloma is now considered a trophy school.

Sherman was one of the next to turn, its fantastic bloom visible in the lush garden now overtaking its Cow Hollow yard. (“Grab some lettuce, grab some spinach, make a salad,” the project leader yelled to visitors during a recent tour.) Sherman’s latest API score of 891 now surpasses stalwart Rooftop’s and is on par with famous Clarendon’s; and this year, the school hired a new, Ivy League-educated whippersnapper principal who’s getting great initial reviews.

Of course, the ride hasn’t always been smooth. Tension can arise—in the administration and among the existing parent population—when supercharged parents descend upon a struggling school with their strong opinions about how to get things done. “Some principals have small chips on their shoulders,” says Graff. “They don’t necessarily greet middle-class, type A parents with open arms.” But such growing pains generally work themselves out, and they haven’t slowed the school momentum.

After Miraloma and Sherman, Grattan’s star began to rise, too; then, driven by San Francisco parents’ seemingly insatiable hunger to raise bilingual kids, so did Leonard Flynn’s and Starr King’s. These were schools that, as recently as four years ago, had been scoffed at; now lottery requests were up. Graff was impressed, and her blog seemed to accelerate the bandwagon effect. “What do you know about Paul Revere?” one K Filer asked, while another offered, “Sunnyside has huge

potential to become the next Miraloma.” A group of parents of toddlers in Potrero Hill saved downtrodden Daniel Webster from closing, raised \$500,000 to open a preschool on the premises, and committed to sending their kids there.

Flynn parents have had a particularly powerful presence on the K Files; they tout their beloved school’s bright play structure, built in a single day by 500 volunteers, its programs with the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Ballet, and its full-time librarian. “It’s inspiring

on so many levels,” one mom boasted. “Clarendon, Alamo, Claire Lilienthal, Miraloma—these are all great schools that have made it. Flynn is on that path.”

Now Paris might be headed down that path, too—if only Graff could figure out what to do about her romance with MCDS.

Graff may have become a megaphone for the public-school movement, but she wasn’t ready to let go of her other fantasy quite yet. By now, Falzone was onboard, too: The week before Halloween, he and Graff had visited MCDS together, and for a guy who protects salmon habitats for a living, learning about a class that had actually spotted a salmon swimming upstream in the campus creek was all he needed to hear. Still, too many things would have to line up just right for this to work out: Graff and Falzone would have to reconcile themselves to being one more family that goes into the metaphorical gated community; Paris would have to be accepted; and they would have to find the money.

“You have abandoned the ship, so don’t be a hypocrite and pretend that public schools are important to you. Do what you have to do for your kid, but don’t pretend that you care about the rest of us,” read one comment after Graff revealed her choice.

Ah, the money. One Sunday evening, “Kate” let loose on the blog about a nasty fight with Falzone that had ruined her day, pulling her readers deeper into her private life than she ever had before. The blowout about money had quickly devolved into questions about whether Falzone was ambitious enough; if he were, Graff said, all of this would be much less stressful. He, on the other hand, accused Graff of not giving enough thought to what it would mean to take on this financial burden. Then he stormed out.

Actually, Graff was as torn about the money as she was about everything else. A substantial source of fire-power behind the turnaround public schools, she’d noticed, was stay-at-home moms. Many had made the choice early on to work less during their children’s elementary school years; she, too, had hoped to cut back

left her office, a quiet sky opened up into a downpour, and a gust of wind whipped Paris’s birth certificate out of her hand—double negative. But then Graff spotted a penny and recovered the paper—double positive. Another promising sign was that the man who took Graff’s forms complimented her on her Burberry purse. But the bag was actually a knockoff, a fact that she felt compelled to confess. Still, on her way back to her office, she looked up at the sky and saw a crack of blue peeking through the gray clouds. Surely that meant her luck would hold.

Only it didn’t. In fact, things went as badly as they could have. After being on pins and needles for two months, Graff was denied all seven of her requests. She had barely even heard of Junipero Serra, where Paris was



on her work while her kids were young, which meant sending them to public school. So now, when she wasn’t daydreaming about her daughter wading in rain boots at MCDS, she was imagining Paris in that lovely morning circle at Miraloma, in which parents and kids sway together and sing, or negotiating her day in another language at Alvarado, Flynn, or Alice Fong Yu.

As the January 11 deadline for the lottery approached, Graff pored over her choices, comparing acceptance percentages, weighing the pros and cons, reordering her priorities—and airing this hand wringing on the blog, of course. Ultimately, she put Alice Fong Yu at the top, with Miraloma as her first non-immersion choice, but she truly believed that she and Paris would be happy with any of her seven picks.

Graff decided to hand-deliver her lottery form to the district office. Because she’s superstitious, she was on full alert for any signs of how things might go. As she

At Miraloma, in Noe Valley, principal Ron Machado made a promise to his students: Each year that they raised their API score, he would get a mohawk. It’s happened the past two years; this year, he’s considering a tattoo instead.

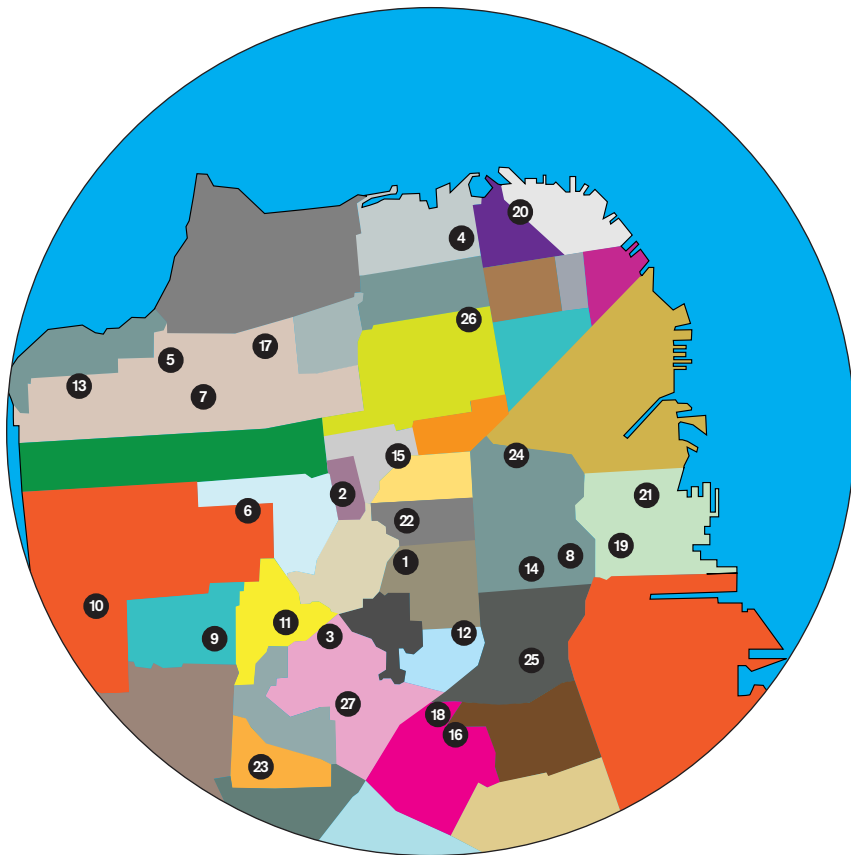
assigned. “I’m in shock” was about the extent of her blog post after getting the news.

Not only that, but the blow was actually the first half of a one-two punch—the second had been delivered with a velvet glove, but it was a knockdown nonetheless. Like Charlie Bucket, Paris had gotten one of Mr. Wonka’s golden tickets—she was accepted at MCDS. On top of that, the offer came with a generous financial-aid package: All Graff and Falzone would have to come up with themselves was \$8,000. You’d think Graff would have been nothing but thrilled, but at this point, she was panicked, horrified, and ecstatic all at once. “You hear all these stories of people opening their letters and popping the champagne and running around the block,” said Graff. “But I felt like I had just opened this giant problem.” Graff had started looking forward to seeing her daughter walk proudly into the public-school world. What would her blog readers

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Where parents are applying (themselves)

For years, even San Francisco parents with private-school predilections were happy to send their kids to these “fab five” public elementary schools: Lakeshore, Rooftop, Claire Lilienthal, Clarendon, and Lawton. Today, the list of schools considered humming (or at least confidently emerging) has grown significantly. We asked six public-school experts and activists* which of the city’s 71 public elementary schools are now on their radar, and why.



Glossary

First-choice requests:

The number of families who put this school at the top of their list in the district's public-school lottery system.

API score: The measure of a school's performance on state proficiency tests. The target score is 800 out of 1,000. All scores are from 2008.

Change in requests:

The rise or decline in the number of total lottery requests a school received.

Spectacular turnarounds

1 Alvarado

Neighborhood: Noe Valley
Kindergarten slots: 80
First-choice requests: 164
API score: 826
Change in requests since 2004: +56%
Plus signs: Grand, high-ceilinged building. Artist-in-residence program. Emphasis on social justice. Parents just built classroom workstations. Spanish-immersion track: *muy* popular. “A real multicultural, multi-class, tight-knit community.” Overall feel: *iSí se puede!* (Yes, we can!)

2 Grattan

Neighborhood: Cole Valley
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 73
API score: 787
Change in requests since 2004: +306%
Plus signs: Award-winning gardening program produces the healthiest herbs around. Moviemaking in an awesome tech lab. Kids beg to stay after school for chess, drama, Spanish, and world music. “Reflects Cole Valley's friendly, funky vibe.”

3 Miraloma

Neighborhood: Noe Valley
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 96
API score: 825
Change in requests since 2004: +170%
Plus signs: Raised scores in seven of the last nine years. (Beloved skateboard-ing principal said he would get a mohawk whenever it happened.) Getting in is “winning the lottery.” Volunteers are so ubiquitous that they're mistaken for paid staff.

4 Sherman

Neighborhood: Cow Hollow
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 84
API score: 891
Change in requests since 2004: +223%
Plus signs: Exploding parent volunteerism. Gorgeous, well-kept, Spanish-tiled building. Chinese bilingual kindergarten class of 20. Hip-hop dance for third- and fifth-graders. “The best teachers fight to get in here.”

Always been strong, and getting stronger

5 Alamo

Neighborhood: Richmond
Kindergarten slots: 80
First-choice requests: 116
API score: 902
Change in requests since 2004: +33%
Plus signs: Outperforms Claire Lilienthal on the API. Full-blown ceramics program with two kilns. Popular in the neighborhood for decades. “Foundation raises more money every year than we can even spend.”

6 Alice Fong Yu

Chinese Immersion
Neighborhood: Inner Sunset
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 262
API score: 948
Change in requests since 2004: +45%
Plus signs: Highest-scoring elementary in S.F. last year. Parents can sleep in (9:30 a.m. start time). Academics trump arts (lots of homework—big surprise). “Teachers are focused; even the kids seem to walk in straight lines.”

7 Argonne

Neighborhood: Richmond
Kindergarten slots: 70
First-choice requests: 82
API score: 873
Change in requests since 2004: +55%
Plus signs: District's only year-round school. Real go-getters co-head the school's parent organization, including Newsom's former chief of staff. New computer labs and a new building. Half hour twice a week of Russian culture and language. “One of the best-kept secrets in San Francisco.”

8 Buena Vista

Spanish Immersion
Neighborhood: Mission
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 114
API score: 642
Change in requests since 2004: +9%
Plus signs: 25 years of Spanish-immersion experience. Unusually accessible principal. Fifth-graders perform with the San Francisco Opera. Playground has grass.

9 Dianne Feinstein

Neighborhood: [Parkside](#)
Kindergarten slots: 80
First-choice requests: 91
API score: 840
Change in requests since 2007: +273%
Plus signs: Newest school in SFUSD—spiffy, modern, airy. Huge playground. The senator herself is beefing up the book supply. “This definitely feels like a big, warm family.” Even the cleaning supplies are green. PTA raised \$70K last year—only the second year of the school’s existence.

10 Sunset

Neighborhood: [Sunset](#)
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 53
API score: 873
Change in requests since 2004: +189%
Plus signs: Principal (MCDS headmaster’s sister) knows every one of the 351 kids by name. PTA has already raised \$100K. API puts it in top 10. After-school Mandarin and Cantonese. “This is definitely a school on the move.”

11 West Portal

Neighborhood: [West Portal](#)
Kindergarten slots: 90
First-choice requests: 185
API score: 907
Change in requests since 2004: +84%
Plus signs: “You can only use so many superlatives to describe it.” Energetic principal is hugely invested—his own son is starting kindergarten in the fall. Emphasis on critical thinking. Five kindergarten classes increase your odds.

Rising toward the top

12 Fairmount

[Spanish Immersion](#)
Neighborhood: [Noe Valley](#)
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 55
API score: 720
Change in requests in the last year: +62%
Plus signs: Newsom’s school czarina, Hydra Mendoza, sends her kids there. “Very integrated community.” Hands-on science. Rock-star principal just took a job in SFUSD administration—will his legacy live on?

13 Lafayette

Neighborhood: [Richmond](#)
Kindergarten slots: 80
First-choice requests: 49
API score: 853
Change in requests in the last year: -1.5%
Plus signs: [Curbside](#) drop-off. Recently named a California Distinguished School. Principal is a 25-year Lafayette veteran. Diverse mash-up of white, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, and Indian. As close to a neighborhood school as exists here. Annual school musical. “Definitely a Miraloma or a Sherman.”

14 Leonard Flynn

[Spanish Immersion](#)
Neighborhood: [Mission/Bernal Heights](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 64
API score: 697
Change in requests in the last year: +70%
Plus signs: Lead tour guide had chosen it over the lauded, private Friends School. Where parents of co-op preschoolers want their kids to go. Fundraising has increased from \$3K to nearly \$40K in three years. “So much art, music, and dance that the third-grade teacher said, ‘No more!’”

15 McKinley

Neighborhood: [Castro](#)
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 40
API score: 785
Change in requests in the last year: +40%
Plus signs: Writing, writing, writing. “Whole child” approach. Strong environmental ed program. PTA lucky to raise \$10K in ’02 now raises nearly \$70K. Drumming performance group, soccer team.

16 Monroe

Neighborhood: [Excelsior](#)
Kindergarten slots: 80
First-choice requests: 100
API score: 783
Change in requests in the last year: +20%
Plus signs: [Spanish](#) immersion and Chinese bilingual. Visual arts, theater, and music. “Slice-of-San Francisco kind of place, where all different types of students are doing well.”

17 George Peabody

Neighborhood: [Richmond](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 24
API score: 859
Change in requests in the last year: +38%
Plus signs: Only 235 kids. Whiz-bang new play structure courtesy of parents (and grants they fought for). Teach for America-trained principal. UCSF M.D. and renowned public-school evangelist parent Adams Dudley is quickly spreading the word. Recess “coaches” lead basketball, kickball, pickle ball, and more. “I see an awful lot of focus on the individual child.”

18 SF Community

Neighborhood: [Excelsior](#)
Kindergarten slots: 30
First-choice requests: 33
API score: 802
Change in requests in the last year: +32%
Plus signs: Innovative, project-based teaching. Intimate—mixed-age classes at every grade level. Free after-school program. Teacher-run (no principal). “The healthiest, most authentically democratic, collaborative environment in which to be a teacher.”

19 Starr King

[Chinese Mandarin](#)
Neighborhood: [Potrero Hill](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 25
API score: 697
Change in requests in the last year: +78%
Plus signs: Dynamic academician principal. Free after-school program run by YMCA. Mornings, Jimi Hendrix and salsa music in the yard. *Chronicle* sang its praises. “Had I known then what I know now, it would have been my first choice.”

20 Yick Wo

Neighborhood: [North Beach](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 45
API score: 865
Change in requests in the last year: -2.5%
Plus signs: State and federal accolades are piling up. Rigorous academics. Poetry is a priority. Students are now crossing the city to attend. “I am stunned that public schools can deliver at this level.”

Next up?

21 Daniel Webster

Neighborhood: [Potrero Hill](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 4
API score: 612
Change in requests in the last year: +23%
Plus signs: Eight go-getter neighborhood families have made turning it around their life’s mission (and have committed to sending their own kids in 2009). New Spanish-bilingual program you can actually get into. Fresh paint, mural, and plants. Pet project of former mayor Art Agnos.

22 Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy

Neighborhood: [Castro](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 14
API score: 772
Change in requests in the last year: +38%
Plus signs: Emphasis on social justice (last year, kids organized themselves into a peace sign on the blacktop). Longtime principal and active parent body. Steady interest from LGBT families.

23 Jose Ortega

[Chinese Mandarin](#)
Neighborhood: [Ingleside](#)
Kindergarten slots: 20
First-choice requests: 8
API score: 808
Change in requests in the last year: +4.5%
Plus signs: API score broke 800 this year. Individualized learning plans for each student. Principal has held many positions in the school. “This place has tons of heart.”

24 Marshall

[Spanish Immersion](#)
Neighborhood: [Mission](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 35
API score: 706
Change in requests in the last year: -9.5%
Plus signs: Lovely facility that transports students to another world. Woodworking once a week. Always needs English-speaking families. “Very organized, respectful environment.”

25 Paul Revere

[Spanish Immersion](#)
Neighborhood: [Bernal Heights](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 18
API score: 633
Change in requests in the last year: +61%
Plus signs: K Files blogger Amy Graff had her “Eureka!” moment here: An unknown public school can rock. Fabulous old building. A dream school, which means more hours of instruction. “Bernal families have taken this place under their wing.”

26 Rosa Parks

[Japanese Bilingual](#)
[Bicultural Program](#)
Neighborhood: [Western Addition](#)
Kindergarten slots: 40
First-choice requests: 15
API score: 743
Change in requests in the last year: -10%
Plus signs: Young, action-oriented principal with EdD. Sun-filled classrooms. “Here’s an example of how a good leader can make a huge difference.”

27 Sunnyside

Neighborhood: [Sunnyside](#)
Kindergarten slots: 60
First-choice requests: 16
API score: 750
Change in requests in the last year: -22%
Plus signs: A close-knit, cozy place. All-school jumping jacks and toe touching start the day three times a week. Focus on science. “Maybe the next Miraloma.”

★ OUR PANEL

GENTLE BLYTHE, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

CRYSTAL BROWN, PARENT AT SHERMAN ELEMENTARY AND EXTREMELY ACTIVE IN PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

AMY GRAFF, FOUNDER OF SF K FILES

ELLIE ROSSITER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

LISA SCHIFF, AN AUTHOR OF BEYOND CHRON’S WEEKLY EDUCATION COLUMN AND A NATIONAL BOARD MEMBER OF PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

LORRAINE WOODRUFF-LONG, FORMER HEAD OF PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND A MIRALOMA ELEMENTARY PIONEER



PARTY The Modern Art Council, SFMOMA's senior fundraising auxiliary, hosted the **2008 Bay Area Treasure Award** luncheon at the St. Regis Hotel. This annual lifetime achievement award recognizes Bay Area artists who continually define and redefine contemporary art. This year honored famed artist **Manuel Neri**. **THE SCENE** Event chairs included **Jill Barnett, Candace Cavanaugh, Toni Ferrer, Martha Angus, Betsy Linder**, and MAC president **Dolly Chammas**. Bay Area Treasure is made possible by major support from **Wells Fargo**. Generous support also provided by **Ryan Associates**, and wine courtesy of **Robert Mondavi Winery**.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 85

think if, after all those months of carrying the torch, she decided to throw it aside and take the easy way out? "I was on display, and I just felt really guilty," she says.

Yet she knew that everything about MCDS—its creative atmosphere, its academic rigor—suited her precocious, artistic daughter. Dizzy from the emotional whiplash, Graff decided to tell the blog about her lottery shutout but not breathe a word about the MCDS acceptance until she and her husband had a chance to figure out what they wanted to do.

Within a day, she received nearly 200 responses. The outpouring read like one of those online memorial sites that pop up after somebody dies. People also seemed to feel that if the movement's poster parent had been let down, the whole bobbing balloon was bound to pop. Read one response, "kate—I'm disappointed for you. i think a lot of folks kind of made you their locus of hope, as in, 'if kate gets one of her seven in round one, then i can still believe in this stupid system.'" In fact, not accounting for children who get into the same school as a sibling, about 45 percent of families experienced the same fate as Graff. (Choosing to disregard sibling placement allows the district to claim that 81 percent of students attend one of their seven picks.)

The lottery system, it turns out, has engendered real despair ever since its roots were sown in 1983. It started when the NAACP and several African American parents filed a lawsuit alleging that the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) "engaged in discriminatory practices by maintaining a segregated school system." The solution, the court decided, was to create racial balance in the schools. Because neighborhoods were largely segregated, the district introduced what it called a consent decree, in which families would be assigned to schools based on race and ethnicity, and parents would be invited into the process by submitting their preferences.

But that solution turned out to be problematic, too. Eleven years later, a group of Chinese American families, fed up with the fact that their kids were not getting into the schools of their choice because the quotas for Chinese American students were already filled, brought a suit claiming that the practice was discriminatory—and five years later, the court agreed. Eventually, the district opted to use socioeconomic standing as the deciding factor instead,

which it calculated by means of what it called a diversity index: an amalgam of a family's home language, economic status, and whether their child went to preschool. (Research has consistently shown that poverty is a more powerful determinant of how kids fare in school than ethnicity is.) Each family would get seven lottery picks that would be dumped into a computer that crossstabbed these requests with demographic data, and ideally came up with ethnically and economically balanced school rosters that honored parent requests.

The diversity index has been a constant source of controversy—in fact, the district is currently revamping the system for the 2010–2011 school year. Too many parents don't get any of their picks; a 2005 report found that the SFUSD was "severely resegregated"; and the city's goal of educational equality is as far away as ever. And the K Files, for some, has done little to lessen the frustration. As "Kate" and others talked up specific public schools, more people requested them, making the competition even stiffer—and some parents were unhappy about the effect. "Kate, your blog has had such an impact on this process, but all the chatter is making the desirable schools even more desirable...and the stakes are even higher now."

As the blog debate fizzled into finger pointing, Graff and Falzone finally decided to go with MCDS. He was so tired of his wife's 24/7 preoccupation that he just wanted the matter settled; Graff felt that with no satisfactory public-school option, they had to go with the bird in the hand. But she still waited two weeks to reveal that news on the blog. She didn't relish facing the onslaught of cynical, disillusioned commentary, and the blog did not disappoint. Some loyalists stood by her, acknowledging that it was perfectly legitimate to act out of self-interest on such an important issue. But the I-told-you-so's were out in full force: "Yes, it has ended as I thought it would all along, with Alice in private school. Irony, ain't it?" Another reader wrote, "While this blog has been extremely valuable and I thank you, I would bet the farm that you would never have gone public. Am I wrong?" And for some readers, Graff had done the unthinkable: "You have abandoned the ship, so don't be a hypocrite and pretend that public schools are important to you. Do what you have to for your kid, but don't pretend that you care about the rest of us."

None of this helped Graff make peace with her decision. She hated feeling like a turncoat, and as much as she felt sure that Paris would thrive at MCDS, she was still wondering “what if?” about public school. All that MCDS wealth did intimidate her, and she wondered where she and her family would fit in. “At MCDS, we’d be the economic diversity,” she said. “We’d be the poor people.” She also hated the fact that Paris would have to ride an hour each way on the bus.

So, yet again, Graff took a right turn away from her chosen path and decided to go for a second round of the lottery—an option the district offers to dissatisfied families. If she could just see the public-school process through to its natural conclusion, she felt she could truly move on, regardless of what happened. And it would mean so much to her readers, she thought, if she gave it one more go. She just hoped MCDS wouldn’t hold it against her when it found out—she knew from traffic data that folks there had been reading the K Files regularly for months—or, God forbid, rescind its offer.

Graff realized that her approach would have to be different this time. The process required her to consider schools that didn’t yet have victory gardens and high-powered PTAs, the ones where the promise was perhaps stronger than the reality. She decided that her best hope was to focus on lesser-known immersion schools. The parents in these programs, Graff knew, tended to be highly motivated professionals, and thus the kinds of committed volunteers and potential PTA donors who could really make things happen for a school. Plus, an intensive second-language experience was something Paris wouldn’t get at MCDS. In typical fashion, Graff threw herself into the process, full steam ahead.

In a matter of days, she posted, “Eureka! I found the hidden gem: Paul Revere.” That evening, she posted about three more diamonds in the rough. She’d unearthed good things about Marshall Elementary, Jose Ortega, and even her assigned school, Junipero Serra. Marshall

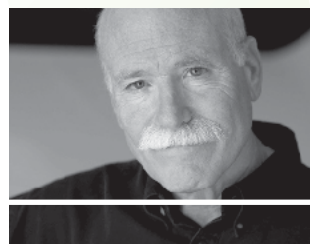
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WED 7 JAN ROB KAPILOW'S WHAT MAKES IT GREAT?

The ever-popular conductor, composer, and NPR commentator Rob Kapilow explores Beethoven's masterpiece “Archduke” Trio in his trademark format of live performance examples plus intriguing analysis.



SAT 10 JAN MORE STORIES BY TOBIAS WOLFF: WORD FOR WORD PERFORMING ARTS COMPANY

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SAT 24 JAN STREB: STREB VS. GRAVITY

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MacArthur “Genius Award” honoree Elizabeth Streb combines dance and athletics in a thrilling challenge to the force of gravity.



SUN 25 JAN ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET,

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WED 4 FEB ROKIA TRAORÉ

Uniting the traditional instruments and rhythms of her native Mali with jazz, pop, and classical music influences, renowned singer Rokia Traoré appears on the heels of her new CD, *Tchamantche*.



FRI 20 FEB KRONOS QUARTET OASIS: MUSIC OF CENTRAL ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

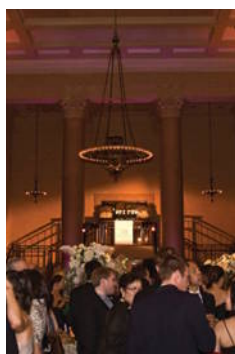
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ARTY Fashion icon **Wilkes Bashford**, **Christopher** and **Amber Marie Bently**, and award-winning film producer **Geoff Callan** were at an evening of awareness at the **Bently** **erve** benefiting **No on Prop 8-Equality** **California**. **THE SCENE** Guests were treated to a spectacular display of wedding finery designed by **Nunn Martin** of “I Do!”, **Blueprint Studios**, **Sam Leftwich Events**. Models in **Wilkes Bashford** couture were featured on cake toppers throughout the hall as guests enjoyed bites by **Nature SF** and drinks by **Chandon**, **LeBlon**, **edere**, and **Voss** water.



PHOTOS BY MATT POWERS AND STEVEN UNDERHILL

had a Spanish-immersion program, and Jose Ortega, which hadn't particularly grabbed Graff during her tour, was attracting many families that hadn't gotten into Alice Fong Yu, because of its brand-new Chinese Mandarin (CM) program and its solid principal. Graff's round-two lottery list led with the more established Leonard Flynn Spanish Immersion (SI), Buena Vista SI, and Alvarado SI, but then she went with places where she felt she had the best odds of being accepted—so Jose Ortega CM was next, followed by Monroe SI, Starr King CM, Marshall SI, and Paul Revere SI.

This time, Paris was assigned to Jose Ortega, a small, unsung school in Ingle-side, near San Francisco State. (Ah, the favorable odds of an unproven school.) Despite Graff's initial, underwhelming visit, her reaction was actually upbeat. All the time she had spent on the blog, going back and forth with her most vocal (and cynical) groupies, had made Graff believe that she might not get in anywhere, so she was ecstatic to imagine Paris in *any* public school that had potential.

Her enthusiasm was rewarded when she went back for a visit and made a real connection with the nurturing, confident principal, JoLynn Washington, who grew up in Bayview and had held almost every post at the small school. “JoLynn treats everyone as if they were family,” Graff said. The school itself was impeccably clean, with an incredible view of the Pacific from the blacktop, and the auditorium had a fantastic mural made of intricate origami birds. Graff was impressed with the individual learning plans Washington had instituted for each student, and when a school administrator put her in touch with several of the nine families in the first Chinese Mandarin class, and some of the program's 19 incoming families, she found that they were a congenial bunch, ready and eager to help revitalize the school.

With about two weeks left before she had to decide on a school, Graff was spinning like a top. One day, she declared she was sending Paris to Ortega; the next, she said MCDS. She talked to anyone who would listen, including me. (Her husband was the one exception; he had OD'd on the process by then and had pretty much left the decision in Graff's hands.) At that point, the rubber really hit the road. It's one thing to ship your kid off to Miraloma or Sherman, and quite another to do what Graff was now contemplating: send Paris to a school that,

as recently as 2004, had been on probation for failing to meet federal performance standards, and whose PTA had raised only \$7,000 in 2007.

Then Graff and Falzone went to a lemonade social for newly admitted families at MCDS. The first parent they met asked them, “So, do you work for a hedge fund, or are you a software engineer?” Even though the man was being facetious, the comment just reminded Graff and Falzone, once again, how different they were from the typical MCDS family.

But it was the words of San Francisco school superintendent Carlos Garcia that finally tipped the balance for Graff. Garcia had come to San Francisco in 2007 from Las Vegas, where he had made major improvements in an urban school district even larger than San Francisco's, and one of his top agenda items here was to close the achievement gap. She remembered a conversation they had had back in January 2008, when she interviewed him for the blog and asked what he thought of San Francisco parents. They're the smartest he's ever met, he said, but also the most selfish. It isn't OK to think only about your own child, he explained; San Francisco's lowest-performing kids are falling farther and farther behind, and fundamental progress can never happen until we all think of every child as our own. “I was haunted by his comments,” Graff admitted. She had absolutely bought into the idea that public schools are the backbone of our democracy, and that being part of a community means helping to make it better for everyone. What better way to teach Paris that our actions matter than by sending her to a place like Jose Ortega?

Once Graff made the decision, she was amazed by how good she felt about it. Sure, she had a few pained visions of Paris tromping around gleefully in those damn rain boots. But she never felt like she was sacrificing her to a cause. “I went into this thinking I was going to do the best for my daughter,” Graff said. “Now I think, ‘I'm giving her an amazing opportunity.’”

Some K Filers actually didn't agree. “I think you're nuts to give up a spot at MCDS. Absolutely nuts,” wrote one. “I honestly think you just passed on what is probably the best educational opportunity in the Bay Area.” But the majority felt totally vindicated. As one supporter commented, “Liberals rejoice! The prodigal daughter has returned to the fold!”

The family's Jose Ortega experience

got off to a great start. Throughout the summer, there were playdates with incoming families. Graff and Falzone (who ended up being just as excited about the choice as his wife was) pitched in at one of the school's first Maintenance Days, along with about two dozen other couples, mostly from the Chinese Mandarin program. And Graff joined a group that was working on ways to expand immersion programs in middle and high schools. This, she knew, would be the next front in the struggle: keeping parents from abandoning the district after sixth grade. A group of the original pioneers at Miraloma had just sent their kids to once beleaguered Aptos Middle School. Graff, too, was thinking ahead.

The first day of school meant lots of tears for Graff—happy ones, of course—even though the only thing that troubled Paris was not being able to make it across the monkey bars. At their first PTA meeting, Jose Ortega parents agreed to devote the year to fixing up the schoolyard. Graff volunteered to head up the effort to build a second play structure; another Chinese Mandarin-program parent is planning a garden for one section of the school's blacktop. There was more good news when the latest API scores were released in August: Washington had succeeded in breaking the magic 800 barrier.

In late September 2008, Graff, who still posts regularly on the K Files, was invited to Marin Day School, a private preschool in San Francisco, to talk about Jose Ortega on a panel. After a year of being an evangelist for a movement she wasn't even sure she would join, she could speak freely. Unfortunately, Graff couldn't get through everything she wanted to tell the audience about all that can be gained from picking a place like Jose Ortega—she was crying too hard. ■

CONTRIBUTING WRITER **DIANA KAPP** WROTE "SCHOOLS GONE WILD" FOR THE OCTOBER 2007 ISSUE OF *SAN FRANCISCO*.



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