

Emotions run high in the school admissions process

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Lucky few

Working in the office at one of Delaware's most popular schools this month is like sitting inside a pressure cooker with desks. Admissions letters are mailed between January and April, and some elementary and middle schools get several hundred calls from parents in a single day.

One mother called for a tour of Immaculate Heart of Mary Elementary School before her child was born.

A father offered a \$5,000 donation to have his child admitted to Newark Charter School. It didn't work because students are chosen strictly by lottery.

When one twin is accepted at Tower Hill School and the other is not, some parents have opted to send the accepted one anyway.

Sussex Academy of Arts and Sciences has had parents of kindergartners call to see if they could get on the waiting list for sixth grade. The families on the waiting list for H.B. du Pont Middle School are so faithful that the school has no trouble filling slots even when they occur three weeks after school starts.

The school gatekeepers — the secretaries, admissions directors and principals — are besieged by parents who have established their own educational pecking order and want their children at the top.

Families have bought new homes to move within the sending district for Newark Charter School — the school ranked first out of 57 public middle schools on the fifth-grade DSTP tests last year. Out-of-staters have accepted or declined job offers at Delaware companies based on whether their children were accepted to the school.

There were 490 applicants for 162 openings in Newark's next fifth-grade class. Outstanding credentials don't help, because applicants are selected in a public lottery drawing held Jan. 25.

"You will hear shouts of joy

and you'll hear parents break out in tears," says administrative assistant Cheryl Simpers, who helps answer hundreds of calls the day after the lottery.

"They'll come to us and say, 'My child's a straight-A student. He's always on the honor roll. He takes advanced classes. I don't understand why he didn't get in.' It's really the luck of the draw. That's really the only f& way you can do it."

Gregory R. Meece, the school's director, says several parents have offered to make "donations" if he would take their children. One offered \$5,000.

"I said, 'Sir, if you would like to make a donation. I'd appreciate it, but it will not affect your child in any way,'" Meece says. "I told him when the slips are pulled out, it's totally random. We have a cross-section of the community, students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, all IQ ranges. I tell parents, 'You could be the first to apply, you could be the last, you could be my next-door neighbor or my cousin, and you have no better chance than anyone else.'"

"I've had people offer to do computer work for us. I say, 'That's really great. I'd love to have you, but it won't help you get your kid in.' I've had parents in my office crying, their concern is so great that their child receive a good education that is safe and that fits within their economic circumstances."

"It's their most precious commodity — their children. If I had an additional school, I'd

take every single one of them. There's nothing better than a kid who wants to go to school."

Patsy Gnagey, who answers the phones at Sussex Academy of Arts and Sciences in Georgetown, says they ring nonstop with parents who want their children to be part of the middle school's incoming sixth-grade class. This year, there were 166 applications for 105 slots, and many parents were disappointed at the Jan. 14 lottery drawing.

"It was very emotional for all of us," Gnagey says. "We'd like to help, but there's nothing you can do. A lot of influential people last year were disappointed because they just couldn't get their children in."

Bob Gielow, director of admissions at Tower Hill School in Wilmington where admissions is based on testing, says the least enjoyable part of his job is explaining to parents whose children are not accepted for the current year.

"The conversations I have with families who are not accepted in the school are kind of gut-wrenching at times," he says. "Obviously, parents are frustrated and disappointed and sometimes angry at the decisions we reach. We hope families will trust that we're going to make the decisions that we, in our heart or hearts, feel are the right decisions."

Nadine Ostroff and Mary Casino answer the phones at Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Brandywine Hundred, where admissions are based on parish participation and testing. Over the years,

they've had a parent who called 10 or 12 times a day to check where their child was on the waiting list.

They've had dozens of parents who tell them their children are brilliant, bored at preschool, and the kindergarten teacher just can't challenge them anymore. And the woman who made a big deal out of being the pastor's cousin when she toured the school, but the pastor didn't recognize her name.

"Sometimes we have 120 applications for 60 kindergarten spots, and that's tough. Plus, siblings get first shot, then parishioners," Casino says.

"Some years, people would do anything to get in. One year we had about 45 kids who were siblings, and that only left about 15 spots for everybody else. People couldn't believe it. They were ready to go see the bishop. We tell them that we'll try to get them in for the first or second grade, but they don't want that, and I can understand how they feel."

Ostroff says whenever she answers the phone she remembers how nervous she was when she was trying to get her three sons into the school. "Being a mother and having gone through it, you sit here and you listen to people's stories and you give them the best answer you can. It's not necessarily always what they want to hear."

"It's your job to make parents feel wanted, make them feel comfortable and make their children feel important," says Casino, who has been answering the phones at IHM for 32 years.

"You have to extend yourself to the parents. You have to be honest and say, 'We'd love to have you, and hopefully your child will be here.' If you know there's no hope, you can say, 'Well, your chances are very slim, but please fill out the application.'"

"I believe that people who work in the school offices, all the schools, and are the first contact the parents have ... should take time and really listen to their concerns," Casino says. "It should be almost like a vocation."

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