

Score High on the Kindergarten Essay

Yes, what you write really does count

Of all the essays you write in your life, the one that you pen for your child's application to kindergarten is up there in importance with the one you wrote for college.

After all, the next nine or thirteen years of your child's schooling can ride on whether the admissions director at the school of your dreams likes what you have to say and the way that you say it. Your essay conveys a lot about you. It makes a big statement to someone who doesn't know you and you want to be on good terms with.

Admissions directors — a mixed group of discerning and sometimes clubby women — from top schools shared with Junior Ivy League what they're looking for when they put on their reading glasses (if they need them) and scrutinize what you've written about your child, family and their schools. Here's what they said.

School #1:

"It's truly optional, and I don't need to read references to Hillary Clinton either. Sometimes it's better to reference your babysitter if they can say something. But a very creative parent essay stops me in my tracks. And I read them all thoroughly. Don't write from a four-year-old's point of view, or say, 'Looking back on my XYZ school career,' that's nauseating! Don't be sloppy, take some care, and it can be neatly handwritten. Just tell me about the kid and tell me what makes them special or cool and put it down in a wonderful way.

"I highlight things in an essay I want to remember to talk to parents about in the parent meeting. Every essay is highlighted by me, and some parents say, 'My goodness, you read it!' I also tell parents, 'It's not busy work, it's valuable,' and some parents will say, 'I spent lots of time working on it and so did my husband. We really worked on it.'"

Favorite essay: From a writer on David Letterman's show.

School #2:

"First of all, anything that is over the top, like a three-year-old fluent in five languages and a virtuoso pianist, is ridiculous. Or I had a favorite this year about the depth of philosophy and one three-year-old's musings to her grandparents about the meaning of life. Seriously, on my application we really are looking for a parent's insight and understanding of their child. We don't do parent interviews per se, so we really read what they write. It is helpful to know about special interests of the child to try to connect when we meet them or also any special needs or physical ailments, conditions, etc., that might help us better understand the child.

"The essay doesn't have to be lengthy; actually, sometimes bullet points can be clearer. Anything too long is bad and we won't read it all. I'll skim and probably hone in on the beginning and end. Honestly, honestly, honestly we want to make the right match — without knowing the truth that becomes a tricky game. Truthfully, some of us are better writers than others, and that's okay.

"I certainly enjoy well-written essays and do take offense to spelling mistakes and other glaring errors."

School #3:

"My favorite ones go through all the attributes of how wonderful their child is, but also get warmly honest and say, 'He's a four-year-old who doesn't go to bed on time, or throws a fit when he doesn't get the ice cream he wants!'

"Most admissions directors are parents too, and they know what's honest and what's not. The ones I like most end on an honest note, and that makes me want to know more."

