

MICHAEL BAUER: Restaurant 'daily specials' not to be missed

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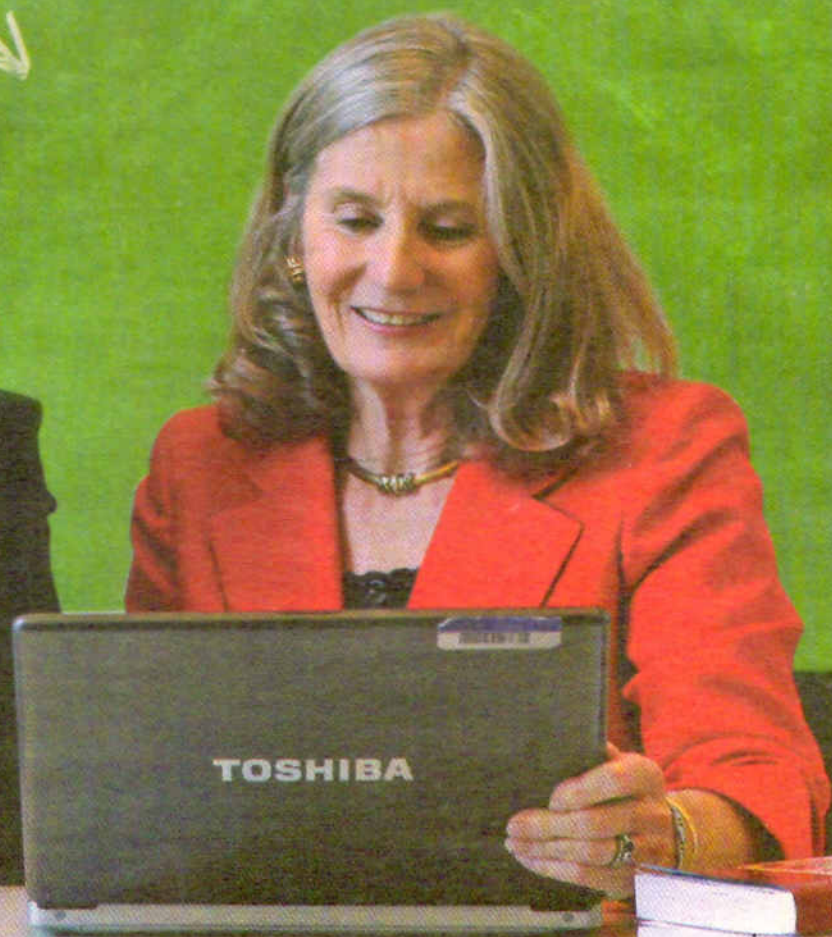
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BACK TO SCHOOL

Three new teachers, fresh from college, aspire to make a difference



Coaches guide parents through kindergarten admissions process



 BACK TO SCHOOL

Help for your school hunt

Counselors who know the ins and outs of admissions can be saviors for parents navigating the stressful process

By Julian Guthrie | Chronicle Staff Writer

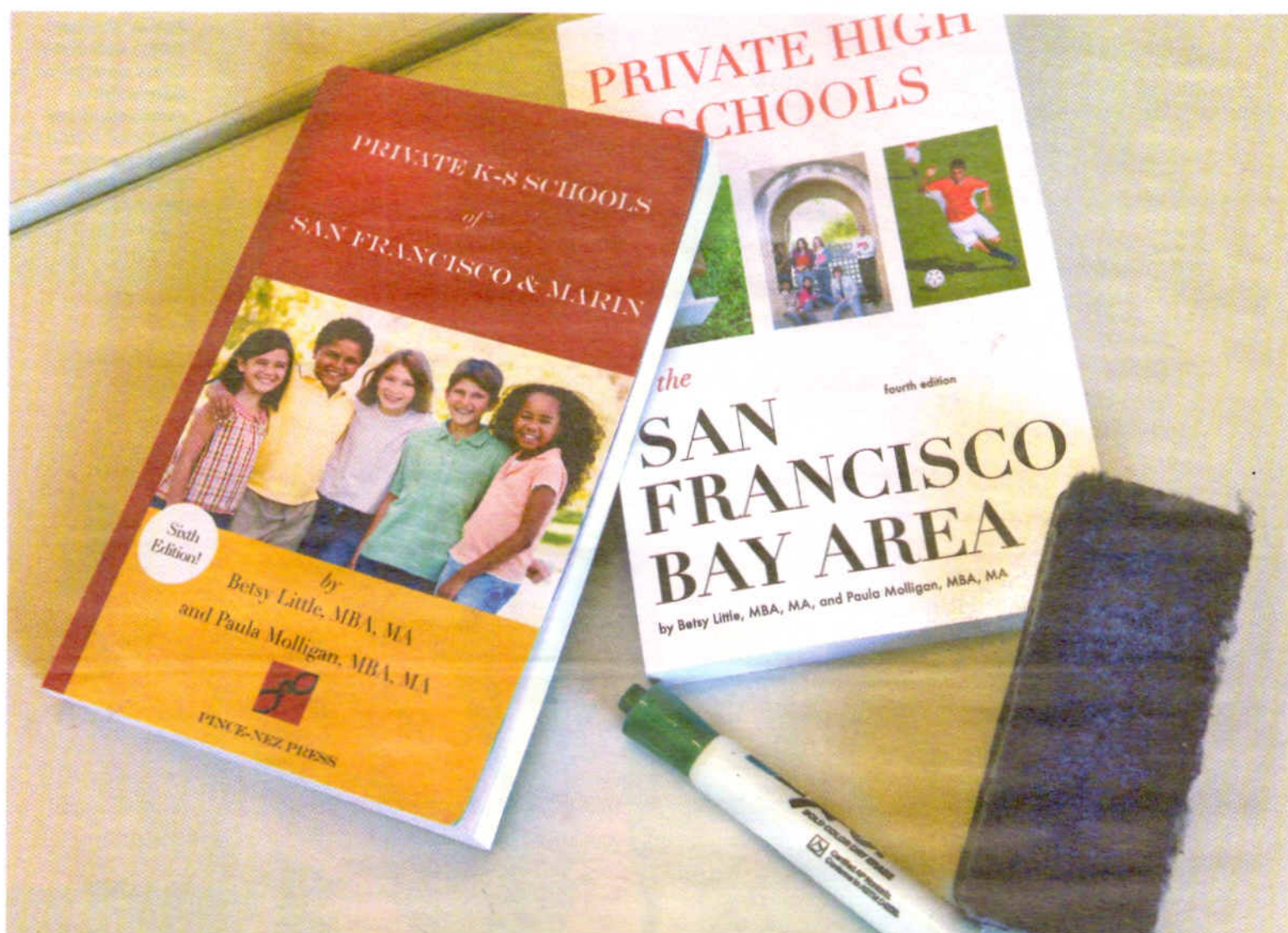
San Francisco residents Rich Peterson and wife Tanya Peterson visited a dozen elementary schools — a mix of public and private — in search of just the right place for their daughter, Avery. None of the schools seemed right.

The Petersons wanted a mainstream school, but also one that would be attentive to Avery, who had a history of seizures. That's when they turned to Betsy Little and Paula Molligan to help them navigate the Bay Area's daunting kindergarten admissions process.

"We met with them, they listened to us talk about our daughter, and as we were talking, they looked at each other and said at the exact same time, 'Marin Primary,'" recalled Rich Peterson. "It was a school we hadn't even considered.

Paula Molligan (left) and Betsy Little specialize in admissions counseling for families trying to find the right preschool, primary or secondary school for their children.





It is a mainstream school, but one that turned out to be just perfect for her."

These days, coaches like Little and Molligan are gaining in popularity, part of a cottage industry that has sprung up around getting kids ready for kindergarten placement. It's an industry that includes tutoring, boot camps, assessment programs, checklists and guides.

Based in San Rafael, Little and Molligan specialize in providing admission counseling for families trying to find the right preschool, primary or secondary school. Both women have master's degrees in education, and both have worked in private schools — Little as an admissions director and Molligan as teacher and head of a school. And they are the authors of "Private K-8 Schools of San Francisco & Marin," a book that is often heavily earmarked and riddled with sticky notes by parents. (A new edition of the book is due out early this month.)

Their services range from hourly consulta-

tions (at \$400 an hour) to a year's contract, offering unlimited time to families during "admissions season," which runs from March through March. (Letters of acceptance are sent out the second or third Thursday in March.)

With too many applicants vying for too few spots, the process of getting into a private kindergarten is generally considered torturous. There are school tours and parent interviews, coffees and cocktails. There is the dreaded drop-off of children to be assessed by admission directors for things such as writing of one's first and last name (correct capitalization required), shaking hands and making eye contact, and drawing a three-dimensional self-portrait.

"We actually try to dispel the anxiety around assessment," said Little. "We also try to get people to think outside the box, and to apply to

Little and Molligan have written guides to private K-8 schools and high schools.

between five and seven schools."

They also urge parents to think carefully about the costs of going private, noting that

there are high-quality public and parochial schools. Tuition at private primary schools runs as much as \$24,750 a year, and it can cost more than \$33,000 at private secondary schools, bringing the total of a kindergarten through 12th-grade private school education to around \$400,000.

"This is after-tax, nondeductible money," said Molligan. "If it's going to be a huge sacrifice to send the child to private school, we say, 'Don't feel compelled. There are lots of options.'"

Little added, "Would you rather take the money and do something like make your kids

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global citizens by spending several weeks out of the year taking family trips to foreign countries? We can't make the decision for families, but we can calm the angst."

Little and Molligan are the first to say that not everyone needs their services.

"We don't guarantee — or we'd be charging a lot more money," laughed Little. "But our yield is very high in terms of families getting in."

She added, "Kindergarten isn't kindergarten anymore. When I went to kindergarten, I got stars on my report card for things like being respectful. Now it's about things like phonemic awareness. It's just a different world."

Anxiety only escalates on the days when parents have to drop off children for assessment.

But in contrast to many urban areas across the country, San Francisco independent schools do not use IQ tests for entry. While each school in the city — and across the Bay Area — has a different way to assess readiness, all look at a combination of behavior and developmental readiness: Can the child write his name, identify letters in the alphabet, use scissors correctly and show a comprehension of rhymes? Does the child look an adult in the eye and listen through storytelling?

Po Bronson, author of the best-selling "NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children," says San Francisco's private school assessment process is "relatively nonthreatening and might be more sane" because it doesn't rely on one intelligence test. In cities including New York, where admission to coveted private schools has been characterized as a "blood sport," a single test is used, with questions focusing on things including discerning patterns (understanding that a circle is to an oval what a square is to a rectan-

"We can't make the decision for families, but we can calm the angst."

Betsy Little, author-educator and school selection counselor

gle) and doing things such as arranging colored blocks based on a picture shown in a certain amount of time.

Having studied IQ tests given for kindergarten admission at major school systems across the country, Bronson has concluded: "Regardless of what is being tested or which test is used, they all have one thing in common. They're all astonishingly ineffective predictors of a young child's academic success."

He says a study of the research shows: "If you picked 100 kindergartners as 'gifted,' i.e. the smartest, by third grade only 27 of them would still deserve that categorization. You would have wrongly locked out 73 other deserving students."

Bay Area private schools base a great deal on a child's behavior during the one- or two-hour assessment. This emphasis on behavior also has its weaknesses, Bronson cautioned.

"One of the leading assumptions is that kids who are better behaved are going to be able to learn more in kindergarten, and because they're well behaved they'll do better in first grade, and so on and so on," said Bronson, who lives in San Francisco and has been

through the admissions process with his two children. "But that's not true. Sitting on one's hands and minding the teacher is very different from being self-motivated and focused.

"You have plenty of kids who don't bother the teacher and will follow orders, but won't really focus. They will sing in the choir, but they won't sing with all of their heart. They will play soccer, but they won't play to win. They will not cause any problems, but they don't throw themselves into anything."

What Bronson sees as an incredibly powerful thing to look for, something that's often overlooked in the assessment of young children, is for kids who are self-directed in a way that speaks to an abiding interest and strength of will.

"Obedience is way overrated in terms of how we look at 5- and 6-year-olds," Bronson said. "When a kid is focused and can tune things out and has goal-directed activities, when they find things they care about and throw themselves into, those are the kids who can pass other kids by the thousands. That is what's very powerful."

As for coaches like Little and

Molligan, Bronson says, "I have talked to lots of coaches across the country. I think families are stressed out by this process, and if they can afford it, can use the help."

Betsy Little describes their services this way: "Do you write your own will, or do you see a specialist?"

And, in the end, Little and Molligan see their job ultimately as "being the voice of the child," in helping find the school that fits the youth.

One of their clients, who wanted only his first name used so his daughter wouldn't be identified, said that he and his wife felt totally unprepared for the kindergarten admissions process in San Francisco.

"My wife and I were both very busy with work, and we didn't know the differences between various schools and the specific pluses and minuses of public versus private versus parochial," George said.

He said that working with Little and Molligan helped in myriad ways.

"We were very interested in getting into one school, the Chinese American School, because we are Mandarin speakers," he said. "Betsy and Paula suggested we keep our minds open and look at other schools, including one we hadn't thought about. We ended up applying to something like eight private schools and a number of public schools. Betsy and Paula gave us a mock interview and gave us feedback on our parent essays. They watched our daughter at preschool to give them insight into what type of school she would like."

In the end, they fell in love with a school they hadn't considered: San Francisco Day.

"I don't think Paula and Betsy are absolutely necessary," George concluded. "But they lowered our stress level, and they were helpful. Our daughter loves her school." ♦

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