

**Sandra Tsing Loh's**  
**SCANDALOUSLY INFORMAL GUIDE**  
**TO THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**  
**2006-2007**

(freely downloadable at [sandratsingloh.com](http://sandratsingloh.com))

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>1.</b>	<b>March of the Middle-Class Penguins</b>	<b>1</b>
	Why L.A.'s middle class English speakers tend to move to Portland	
	Discovery of underground railroad: LA Unified to Harvard. . . but how?	
<b>2.</b>	<b>Welcome, Costco Shoppers!</b>	<b>2</b>
	How the LAUSD is like Costco	
	Independent schools and the high cost of foliage	
	Democracy: good idea, ugly lighting	
<b>3.</b>	<b>Conventional Wisdom: A Deconstruction</b>	<b>3</b>
	L.A.: Land of the 1.2 million-dollar home "good school districts"	
<b>4.</b>	<b>How Do I Find Out</b>	
	<b>What My Local LAUSD School Is?</b>	<b>5</b>
	A first hesitant toe into the choppy waters of lausd.net	
<b>5.</b>	<b>What are My School's Test Scores~</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>And Who Is To Blame?</b>	
	A second hesitant toe into the murky waters of greatschools.net	
	API scores: "Welcome to The Below-800 Club!"	
	11 <sup>th</sup> Hour Hail Mary pass: Thousand Oaks	
<b>6.</b>	<b>LAUSD, Impossible Price: 0!</b>	<b>8</b>
	With teeny IKEA wrench in hand, let's open these boxes:	
	<b>Open Enrollment</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>Magnet Schools</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Charter Schools</b>	<b>13</b>
	<b>Neighborhood Schools</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>INDEX</b>	<b>19</b>

**Sandra Tsing Loh's**  
**SCANDALOUSLY INFORMAL GUIDE**  
**TO THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

1.  
**MARCH OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS PENGUINS**

Greetings, Hysterical Los Angeles Parent! Welcome to this, my Scandalously Informal Guide to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

I wanted to write this Guide as a free tool for the next Hysterical LA Parent coming along-my own sort of underground LAUSD Wikipedia-ish thing.

Several years ago, when I began my own midlife journey through the educational Byzantium that is Los Angeles, I felt utterly lost. Simply put, L.A. seemed a city of great divides, a city of Rich and Poor. Those east of the 405 (The Poor) sent their kids to public school, those west of the 405 (The Rich) sent their kids to private school. (Actually, now that there are so many Democrats in private school, the preferred term is “independent” school.)

An educated person, I cared deeply about my kids' schooling. But \$20,000 (plus fees) for kindergarten? What the--?

Accordingly, somewhere round 2003, my husband and myself came to believe we were the last remaining members of L.A.'s Middle Class. We dutifully began packing our dented Toyota mini-van (the one parked in front of our 1300 square-foot home) in preparation for the ritual move to Portland.

But around this time, completely by accident, I stumbled upon them. . . Creatures I'd thought were only a fable. . .

Completely below the media radar, it appeared that a small number of hardy middle-class families were bravely waddling, March of the Penguins-like, across the unmapped vastness of LA Unified. Using nothing but love, optimism, and the stubborn gifts of their belly fat, they were noodging their children from K through 12 and on into college. Not just college, but colleges people have heard of-Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UC Berkeley (and all the other UC's, which are now super-hard to get into)!

These middle-class, English-speaking children had gotten a stellar education in LA

Unified, and they had paid no money.

How had they done it? This Guide will show you.

## 2.

### WELCOME, COSTCO SHOPPERS!

LA Unified has been called many things, none particularly useful to an actual LA Parent (with what we call “a dog in the fight”).

I believe the most helpful image for you is to think of the LAUSD as like Costco.

Costco has frightening parking, ugly lighting, and daunting 30-foot-high towers of Bounty paper towels. But look closely and you’ll find a jaw-dropping price on Glenlivet, hothouse cherry tomatoes and, oh my God. . . Yo Yo Ma. What is YO YO MA doing here?

Alternately, the LAUSD is like IKEA. Some boxes of treasure, some boxes of crap—their titles a nightmare of umlauts. . . all of which you will have to self-assemble. I’ve seen people sit on the floor and break into tears on the showroom floor of IKEA because it’s ALL TOO OVERWHELMING. . . ! Same with the LAUSD.

Let us talk frankly, too, about the physical exterior of public schools. Let’s talk aesthetics.

An LA screenwriter friend once told me he could not bear to even imagine his twins INSIDE their corner LAUSD elementary. For him, it was the sheer institutional look of the place: the chainlink fence, putty-colored buildings, cracked asphalt, prison-like windows covered with those metal storm meshy things. . .

“Just driving by it,” he murmured, “even the grass made me sad.” He lacked the emotional strength to get out of his Prius and mount the steps. Fortunately, he and his wife are independently wealthy, and can pay \$38,000 a year (\$19,000 per twin) so their six year-olds can go to a hilltop school sans concrete, to honor diversity amidst foliage.

And after those negative first impressions of the LAUSD, then come second impressions.

Once you attempt to pierce The Borg, its leathery hide may prove surprisingly

tough. People manning LAUSD phones lack a sharp charisma. When asked if a school gives parent tours, front office staffers may look up from their typewriters and stare dully at one, as though in disbelief. Ukrainian-style customer service, can be the LAUSD.

Meanwhile, LA Unified is busily and eagerly offering parents things no parent in his right mind would ever want. . . Parents are continually being invited to fill out 20-part surveys, to form inter-district committees, or to hump across town to attend focus group-style meetings with titles so boring they make you fall right into a coma.

Even as we mock, though, it is worth taking a moment to consider the big picture. . . to form at least a Zen understanding of the shambling ways of The Behemoth. Which is to say public education is founded on the same principles as, well. . . as democracy. And we know how tedious that can be. Have you ever been to an city council meeting where EVERYONE gets to speak, or hastily clicked past such a meeting on Cityview Channel 35 or Cableview Channel 94 or whatever that terrifyingly-lit channel is?

Accordingly, one of LA Unified's most basic mandates is "equity and access." This means proximity to municipal bus lines needs to be considered, homeless parents be not discriminated against, and handouts must always be available in Spanish, Tagalog, Armenian, and Farsi. It means magnet school applications cannot be available online as WELL as at schools and libraries, because that might put at a slight disadvantage parents without computer access, parents without an awareness of the Internet ("El Internet? Que?"), parents whose native language does not even have an alphabet ("Internet-aeiiee!!! [strange clicking sound]"), or parents without, well, frickin'. . . FINGERS TO TYPE.

On the upside, you would not wish these parents NOT to be helped. You can't say you're AGAINST democracy.

And it also means the LAUSD owes YOUR kids a free education.

Let's see what they've got!

### 3. CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: A DECONSTRUCTION

As we proceed through this Guide, you're going to be asked to open your mind to thinking about education in some unconventional ways. . . ways may fly in the face

of Conventional Wisdom. Or as I like to call it, “The CW” (much as Orange County is now referred to as “The OC”).

The CW has always been when one’s children reach school age, what responsible parents do is move AWAY from the hellhole they’re living in and INTO a good school district. This is, traditionally, the middle-income neighborhood where middle-income families live in middle-income homes. . . White picket fences, the really GOOD union jobs~? Righ~?

Fast forward to 21<sup>st</sup> century Los Angeles.

For middle-class families, this is where things become not just confusing, but actually trigger a series of traumatic Kubler-Ross stages.

The first Kubler-Ross stage is DENIAL, aka:

“But surely we MUST live in a good school district!” (I can almost hear you crying out.) “Why just down the street, they’re asking \$600,000 for a two-bedroom, pergo-splattered faux Cape Cod townhome that gazes up into the armpit of the howling 605!”

But no. According to The CW, there are only three good public schools districts in Los Angeles. . . and yours is not one of them. For the record, these are:

La Canada  
South Pasadena  
Calabasas (Las Virgenes school district)

Why are these considered the BEST school districts?

1) Because they are considered the BEST. By whom? For one, education’s most listened-to experts: realtors. Realtors can also divulge which are the WORST school districts, but you have to parse their secret realtor “code.” Once at an open house in La Crescenta (“Blue Ribbon schools!”), the realtor whispered: “We’re told never to use the words Glendale and Armenians in the same sentence but-!” Here she raised the penciled lines that once were her eyebrows. Later she referred to Glendale as “Baja La Canada.”

2) These school districts are considered the BEST because they have the highest test scores.

For still-innocent parents, this may suggest the question:

“How do these Los Angeles schools’ scores compare to mine?”

Okay friends, it’s time to move into our next Kubler-Ross stage. . . what is that second stage, oh yes--ANGER.

#### 4.

### FIRST WEB BREAK-OUT EXERCISE: HOW DO I FIND OUT WHAT MY LOCAL LAUSD SCHOOL IS?

If you are the sort of parent who is easily frazzled, it may be time for a short break of herb tea or Ben & Jerry’s or icy vodka or similar. I have just pre-checked all the following websites for you and have since applied a cold compress (all I will admit to on a family website).

In a moment, as if in a first scuba lesson where you dip your face into the water, I’m going to send you to yon Byzantine governmental digi-snarl known as:

**lausd.net** (official website of the LAUSD)

But wait! Before you venture on your perilous journey, Frodo, please accept these magical totems I’m offering you:

Frequently Asked Questions

FAQ’s

Schools

School Finder

Find a School

What is my local LAUSD school?

What the f&\*!!! is my local LAUSD school?

Parents

Lost Parents

Lost Parents of the LAUSD

Lost Parents of the LAUSD, Southwest North Valley, District 1712-A

HELP!

These are useful phrases that with luck, may wash you onto a magical-if ephemeral-shore where you can simply type in your home address and your designated LAUSD school will pop up. Good luck with that.

If all else fails, locate your local LAUSD district office via:

(213) 241 KIDS or (213) 241 5437

In any case, return when you have an LAUSD school name. Yes? Finally? Good. We are now ready for our. . .

5.

**SECOND WEB BREAK-OUT EXERCISE:  
WHAT ARE MY SCHOOL'S TEST SCORES-  
AND WHO IS TO BLAME?**

For purposes of illustration, let us imagine your LAUSD school does NOT turn out to be a "hot" elementary like:

Carpenter (ooh!)

Ivanhoe (ah!)

Wonderland (insert appropriate Baby Gap-infused exclamation here!)

No, let's say YOUR home LAUSD school has a name like (flugelhorn of alarm):

"Guavatorina Elementary"

Which is to say, like so many LAUSD schools, its name seems to recall some obscure and slightly moldering Ecuadorian melon. And no one you know knows anything about it.

On Guavatorina, there is a definite lack of CW.

Here, I believe, is the one case where being a parent without a computer is actually an advantage. To gain more information about Guavatorina, you might actually have to put on your shoes (were you the sort of LAUSD parent lucky enough to HAVE shoes) and physically VISIT the school.

But no. Like a hopped-up crystal meth addict, the MIDDLE-CLASS PARENT'S first instinct is to lock the doors, pull the shades, and with increasingly anxious tapping fingers burrow him or herself ever deeper into the maelstrom of the 'net, home of such invaluable parental resources as:

**greatschools.net**

This indispensable website lists a wealth of information for all public schools in California, including their API's (Academic Performance Indexes). (In California, API's range from 0 to 1000, 800+ being the ideal.)

Unless your marriage is one that, quite frankly, is going just a bit TOO smoothly, let The Guide save you the time, stress, and tire tread of screeching out to a lot of Sunday open houses while loose pages of the LA Times Real Estate section flutter upsettingly around your head like Bats in the Hair! Bats in the Hair! (The Guide has already done that for you, and has the therapy bills to prove it.)

To cut to the chase, here is a wildly useful calculation I believe you'll find unique to The Guide.

In California:

**1 API point = \$1000 worth of real estate**

So in Los Angeles, a three-bedroom home whose local school has a ("baseline acceptable") 800 API will have a price tag of about \$800,000, which is why some wags call the API the "Affluent Parent Index." So if you live in anything less than an \$800,000 home, your local school's API is likely to be, well, Guavatorina-like (aka: like a sad bruised melon).

Which may suggest another question:

"If our monthly payments in L.A. are up the wazoo, how can our LAUSD school's API score be so low?"

Once again, point your browser. Like a chatty neighbor who can't be stopped, greatschools.net will barrel cheerfully on with colorful charts telling you exactly what percentage of your school's students are on the free and reduced lunch program (aka: po'), how many are English learners, how many of their parents didn't graduate high school and will even provide bar graphs to show exactly how low these students' API scores are. (You'll see~the po' get their own blue bar graph, their own wan little tenement of stank API).

Causing one to ejaculate aloud at one's computer:

"By George, THAT'S the problem. . . THE F#&@\$\*@\$IN' POOR!"

Typically, middle-class parents now move into the third Kubler-Ross stage,

BARGAINING, otherwise known as. . .

“Thousand Oaks is not REALLY quite as far as they say.”

Which is to say parents comparing greatschools.net API scores against L.A. real estate ads soon figure out that if you buy a home in Thousand Oaks, you may well pay \$40,000 less than you’d pay for the same API in South Pasadena-

But you’ll also add 40 minutes to your drive, which, okay- For every 10 minutes of white-knuckled freeway driving (even on that far-flung 118 everyone swears by) (five minutes on the 118 equaling 15 on the 405), you’ll bag 10 API points-one API point per minute. But that’s with no traffic. One big rig turns over and there you sit, hyperventilating, heart pounding. . . LITERALLY HEMORRHAGING API!

## 6.

### LAUSD, IMPOSSIBLE PRICE: 0!

Keening hysteria, all the wrong loans, divorce and bankruptcy. . . that is where the CW gets you, in L.A.

Alternately, some middle-class families throw up their hands and become Baptists. . . which itself is very interesting.

But for today, let’s dispense with the CW and start opening boxes. At IKEA, the mystery boxes would have names like “Lol,” “Varknedink,” and “Klumspoo!” In the LAUSD, we call the boxes:

**Open enrollment**

**Magnet schools**

**Charter schools**

**Neighborhood schools**

On the upside, the Los Angeles Unified School District is a marvel of school choice. On the downside, as we’ve said, IKEA-like self-assembly is required, what is this teeny toy wrench, and why do instructions come in Swedish, French and Japanese?

At the same time, you gotta admit. . . IMPOSSIBLE PRICE!

A.  
OPEN ENROLLMENT

If only Albert Camus were an L.A. parent! How existential are our dilemmas!  
What haunting work he would be writing!

60 Feet From Ivanhoe

A chain-smoking Frenchman named Mersault wakes up one day to find himself in a living hell of his own creation. All his FRIENDS' LAUSD school is Ivanhoe (angel voices, all problems solved forever-or at least until middle school). Cruelly, Mersault's home LAUSD school is that steaming pile of merde known as (flugelhorn of alarm) Guavatorina Elementary.

And the cosmic irony of it is they live but 60 feet apart!

For Mersault (who now pours himself a Cinzano, to intensify his suffering), it seems further proof that EVERY DECISION HE HAS MADE IN HIS ADULT LIFE has been a mistake. (He remembers that fateful day with Marie, her laughing comment: "Oh no-let's buy a house on the WEST side of the street. Such pretty, pretty cactus!" Quel idiot!).

Alternately, let's say while trolling greatschools.net, the chain-smoking Mersault finds, around his low-performing school, a ring of schools with better API's (The Ring).

Or finally, let's say Mersault identifies a specific LAUSD school or LAUSD schools that simply strike him as much more formidable, for reasons between him and his Dieu (or compellingly scientific proof of lack thereof).

French philosophers might conclude, from Mersault's plight, that man is alone. But for my people, the Chinese, who love a bargain (not to mention a wee bit o' gambling), crisis is simply. . . danger meets opportunity!

Which is to say if those more desired LAUSD schools have open enrollment (aka: room for extra students), any child is eligible to apply. Schools determine if they'll have open enrollment each year by March/April (you call them). Students are picked from the waiting list by lottery.

**"OPEN ENROLLMENT" ADVANTAGES:**

Simple.

### “OPEN ENROLLMENT” DISADVANTAGES:

As you may imagine, getting into “hot” LAUSD schools often creates parental frenzy akin to eels devouring horse’s head in Volker Schlöndorff’s The Tin Drum.

### B. MAGNET SCHOOLS

So much is said about the LAUSD magnet system, so few understand it.

To get you Base Camp One of the Everest of Understanding, let me proffer another tale. This one is called:

#### The Country Mice and The City Mice

Once upon a time, two Country Mice woke up to find themselves living in Van Nuys (very poor, very Hispanic). They were told they had to move out of the Nuys to get to the good L.A. public schools. This CW was offered by their friends The City Mice, who were living down south in Sherman Oaks (more affluent, more white, with a Jamba Juice).

My husband Mike sighed to himself, nibbled on a little piece of stale cheese (not sure how long I’m going to be able to drag out this mouse metaphor), and filled out the one-page LAUSD magnet application (“Choices”) in December, which basically asks you what your home address is.

Come spring, to our shock we Country Mice found that, living in the Nuys, we were automatically assigned approximately one zillion trillion magnet points. (Actually 8: our LAUSD school Van Nuys Elementary gives us 4 for overcrowding, 4 for PHBAO~Predominately Hispanic, Black, Asian, or Other).

Our friends in Sherman Oaks? 0.

So our five year-old went right into a kick-ass Van Nuys magnet school where starting from kindergarten she had modern dance, Mad Science Lab and-and frickin’ maskwork. They went to see plays so often, I was tempted to demand ixnay on the rama-day and get crackin’ on the Open Court (see section 6C).

In the meantime, our friends the City Mice ended up sending their kid to private-I mean independent-school in some canyon somewhere because upon visiting Sherman Oaks Elementary the dad noticed a teacher who seemed a bit tired.

What's ironic is I would have killed to get into Sherman Oaks Elementary (800-plus API) but that year, unusually, they didn't have open enrollment (remember? Part 6A).

So, in brief, what have we learned?

On the one hand, thanks to the clanking machine of the LAUSD magnet system ("access and equity"), due to our extraordinarily desirable Van Nuys barrio address, our two kids are set 'til 18. (The magnet school is K-12, 550 students, and the second child will add, to her 8, an extra 3 points for being a sibling, bringing her total to 11.)

Which is to say, in contradiction to the CW, the LAUSD magnet system draws an entirely new map of desirable zip codes.

If you live in particular sections of. . .

Van Nuys  
North Hollywood  
Highland Park. . .

Or any other hood where tattered immigrants in foil hats push shopping carts past pupuserias and 99 cent stores. . .

Friend, I wager you're sittin' on a magnet point GOLDMINE!

#### **"MAGNET SCHOOL" ADVANTAGES:**

It's literally like Revenge of the Nerds.

LAUSD MAGNET OFFICE NUMBER: (877) 462-4798

"Choices" applications are available in early December at public schools, libraries or at the LAUSD offices downtown at 333 S. Beaudry, and are due around Jan. 20th. PS: The next layer of LAUSD complexity includes Permits With Transportation (PWT's), Gifted and Talented programs (which require evaluations), and SAS (School of Advanced Studies) programs (which do not). You can also accrue

Waiting List Points (4 per year, 12 max) regardless of WHERE you live, which some parents collect as back-up for middle school.

Still confused? Look for “**Martinis and Magnets**,” a December event fellow LAUSD mother Christie Mellor and myself throw annually. We’ll post the date and time later on this site.

### “MAGNET SCHOOL” DISADVANTAGES:

Of course, once your family is safely ensconced in the magnet system, you’ll have to deal with that unique L.A. phenomenon known as Magnet School Envy.

Unbelievably, your wealthier parent friends will now cast themselves as the victim, because they dwell in too affluent and white an enclave (there are no magnet points in Brentwood) to draw ANY magnetage whatsoever. (In Van Nuys, our street cred is so phat we practically POOP magnet points.)

I think of my Prius-driving screenwriter friend (PDSF), he of (remember? section 2): “The grass made me sad.” When we brunch—which I prefer to do on his side of town because it is, frankly, 1000 degrees cooler—recently I’ve noticed him going into these half-wondering/half-bitter Magnet School Idyllizations.

“Of course, unlike some, we couldn’t get our twins INTO some MAGNET school,” he’ll observe, while tearing off a huge hank of one of those Whole Foods brioche things.

In the meantime, the truth about our magnet school?

“The grass would make him sad” if there WERE any. Our magnet school’s sprinklers haven’t worked for years. No one has bothered fixing them, because everyone is too busy rushing around doing their DRAMA. And their maskwork. Including me.

Then there is my PDSF’s concept of diversity which, as I’ve mentioned, at his twins’ hilltop independent school among the foliage they honor. To judge by the student population there, L.A. “diversity” looks like 14 white kids and Savion Glover. 10 white kids and 5 brown kids is “urban,” 5 white kids and 10 brown kids looks, well, not safe.

It’s an interesting conundrum, as in LA County, white children now number just one in five. So to get enough white children in class to maintain a certain comfort level, a parent literally has to pay more.

We pay nothing for what we consider is an excellent school, but it's true that in my daughter's kindergarten class of 22, she was the only blonde. Although neither she nor her classmates seemed aware of it. Which makes sense to me: When I went to public school in Southern California in the '60s and '70s, I was often the lone brown kid in a sea of white.

(But of course, I'm endlessly calculating: if I sent her to private school at \$15,000 a year, would the ratio of blondes be better? In a class of 20, would there be. . . 15 blonds? What is that~\$1,000 per blonde? What if I DRIVE fast?)

I'm not saying it's not a Brave New World being one of the fewer English-speaking moms in a school with a higher immigrant population. Indeed, comparing notes with other Public School Mothers (PSM'S), the single frustration I hear most often cited is that of birthday parties.

In short, claim what you will about immigrants, while wonderfully hard-working I believe I CAN say a great many of our L.A. immigrants lack SOME BASIC BIRTHDAY PARTY KNOW-HOW. They got no chops. While it may be a relief not to have to trek to Chuck E. Cheese 4 times a month, few want to throw their first grader a birthday party and have no one come, other parents being flummoxed by the meaning of a strange card with Scooby Doo on it ("Aiiiee!!! [clicking sound]").

To alleviate this problem, it makes me wonder if we should start, in Los Angeles, a Middle-Class Birthday Party League. All our middle-class kids could attend each others' birthday parties-we'll put up 'em on line like some kind of Moveon.org thing. No parent need ever spend more than \$200 on a party, Ralphs cake OK, and you can continually move on those My Little Ponies in that Great Circle of Re-Gifting. Think of the possibilities, people! Let's get creative!

Danger meets opportunity!

### C. CHARTER SCHOOLS

I admit I am a traditionalist. Even in kindergarten, if my kids are not actually bleeding from the ears, I think some drilling, some memorization, and some homework is okay. Even at home, in reward for tiny little accomplishments, I'm all for busy little charts, stars, and stickers, particularly if I can remember where I put

them.

I am also a fan of Open Court~in as much as one can say one HAS formed an emotional attachment to a literacy program. Open Court was originally developed to teach reading and writing to gifted children. In a fortuitous development for the LAUSD, it also happens to work like gangbusters on English learners. So the LAUSD uses it.

Via Open Court, my daughter and her peers were reading and writing (a few sentences at a time) by the end of kindergarten. Being parents of relatively little educational imagination, we were pleased. (Overall, I have less concerns with LAUSD instruction than I do keeping straight the difference between a minimum day, a reduced day, and what I call “Tuesday lite”~kind of a low-fat, low-carb Tuesday where school starts at 8:47 and ends at 11:23.)

That said, I respect the realness of the feelings of the parents who say they have a PASSIONATE AVERSION to Open Court. Literacy by a certain age is not of high value for them. Fostering a child’s unique individuality and creativity is. These parents don’t want a “one size fits all”. . . They long for an education that is more PROGRESSIVE.

What I understand is that progressive education is HOLISTIC~a word that I confess always makes me feel a little sleepy, and like I want to lie down with a small yoga pillow. What I think what it means is that instead of Math, English and Art, you might do whales. You draw the whales, you count the whales, you write about whales.

In a progressive education, you graduate from first grade to second not according to an artificial external clock but when you are ready. So as a result, there might children of many different ages together in the same classroom.

A HUMANISTIC education may, in addition, teach PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION. One can see the appeal of this given that, in the lower grades, TRADITIONAL conflict resolution involves bullying, name-calling, and Melvins.

So for these parents, the question is:

Is there room for crunchy-granola in public school? Even in the “access and equity”-burdened LAUSD? Why yes!

Check out:

**charterassociation.org**

for the progressive charter school near you. It's still LAUSD, meaning. . .  
Impossible price!

ADVANTAGES:

Passionate, enthusiastic parents putting out 110% to build a dream.

DISADVANTAGES:

Passionate, enthusiastic parents putting out 110% to build a dream.  
Which is to say I think of the ideal charter school parent as Keatsian, in the sense of being an intense romantic, burning with a hard gemlike flame. (Never mind that I seem to have conflated a few differing notions, including a quote actually attributed to Walter Pater.)

By most accounts, L.A. charter school voyages tend to be emotionally dynamic. On the upside, there is exciting curricular freedom. On the downside, there is much, much, much volunteering, the children still have to perform well on standardized tests, and often in flux are matters of accreditation, funding, and even the school's very building.

That said, happy charter school families swear by them.

There are even charter junior highs, and high schools. . .

Yes? Is this a moment of self-recognition for you? "Hard gemlike flame" ring a bell? Do you hear its siren call? (Organic vegetable garden, Alice Waters, Chez Panisse. . . Chez Panisse. . .)

I don't want to ruin your life or your marriage but yes, if you were sufficiently mad, you could even. . . start one.

PS: The other main "flavor" of charter schools are those started in poor, urban, minority areas to use innovative teaching to lift student achievement. In L.A., among many fine examples, the current 800-pound gorilla is The Green Dot Schools at. . .

**greendot.org**

## D. NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL

Finally, there are the middle-class (and even affluent) parents who JUST SAY NO. . . to the madness.

Our last fable is a little story called:

### Stone Soup

It came to pass that two mothers found themselves living next to a sad-ass little LAUSD school called Guavatorina Elementary. They'd never been to the school, but the CW from all their neighbors was that it was sad-ass. Particularly vociferous was this chain-smoking French dad in clogs whom everyone referred to as "The Stranger."

Year after year, every morning at 7 a.m., the two mothers watched 15 different Range Rovers roar out the block to ferry children to 15 different independent schools in 15 different parts of town.

As time passed, the two mothers became increasingly curious about this sad-ass little school everyone was frantically flying from like spokes on wheel.

So one day, the two mothers put on their shoes, walked hesitantly up the concrete steps, and were quite startled by a principal and entire staff screaming, in unison: "Oh my god! You came!"

The two moms had been toying with starting a charter school. However, after talking to the human beings actually inside Guavatorina, they became attracted to the fact that it already had putty-colored buildings, cracked asphalt, and a not very attractive (if fully enclosing) chainlink fence.

Around this time, the moms also heard of L.A.'s Neighborhood School movement, where parents help communities to re-engage together with their local public schools. So Los Angeles will perhaps not ALWAYS be a City of Two Nations.

Helpful websites the mothers visited included:

**wpef.org**  
**partfoundation.org**

**carhaycenterschool.org**  
**penfamilies.org**

The mothers began planting water-resistant foliage and an organic teaching garden by referring carefully to the . . .

Official LAUSD plant list

They also received assistance from:

**treepeople.org** (who help green L.A. public schools)

They figured out how to bring in an orchestra's worth of free instruments and more via. . .

**vh1.com/insidevh1/savethemus**

And:

**mhopus.org**

They were able to bring in, for free, 10,000 new and almost new books (and repaint the library) via:

**accessbooks.net**

They were able to help get free money for teachers via:

**donorschoose.org**

To the moms' surprise, it turned out Guavatorina students already had weekly instruction in dance, music, art and drama. (All LAUSD students in all grades are on track to have this by 2009, via the ongoing 10 year arts prototype program.) And they were already having free trips to LACMA, Disney Hall, and the like. Which none of the neighbors knew about as no one had ever SET FOOT in the school.

Enthused, the moms began throwing fabulous birthday parties which incorporated ALL cultures. The birthday parties took place at My Gym and featured a magician, piñata, belly dancers, AND a slaughtered goat. OK, maybe not the goat.

And when the neighbors saw the organic arugula and heard the violins. . . Much as in the tale "Stone Soup," everyone pulled their kids out of private school, sent their

kids to Guavatorina, flung into the soup the veggies they themselves had been hoarding (Spielberg, Schwarzeneger, Laker tickets) with a frenzy akin to eels devouring that horse's head in Volker Schlöndorff's The Tin Drum and within three years, no one could get in. (Based on a true LAUSD story.)

And then came the realtors. . . Story for another day.

But in the meantime, getting two hours a day back from commuting, the neighborhood children had plenty of time to have an extra violin lesson, to open a lemonade stand. . .

Or to simply to sit in a tree, stare at the sky, and pick one's nose, which. . . have you noticed? So few children get to do nowadays.

**THE END**

*INDEX follows on next page*

**Sandra Tsing Loh's**  
**SCANDALOUSLY INFORMAL GUIDE**  
**TO THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**INDEX**

**A**

**Alice Waters**, organic vegetable garden, Chez Panisse-good reasons to drop your life and found your own charter school, 14

**Armenian**, which if a realtor is selling there, Glendale is totally NOT, 4

**API points**, ratio of, per dollar of real estate in California, 6, also see  
Affluent Parent Index (API), 6

**API point droppage**, who is to blame, 7

**B**

**Baja La Canada**, realtor slang for Glendale, 4

**Baptists**, for middle-class families, a kind of spiritual Portland (see Portland), 8

**best school districts in Los Angeles**, aka: not yours, 4

**blond children**, as in whither in Los Angeles basin?, 12

**C**

**Camus**, living 60 feet from Ivanhoe Elementary and still not qualifying, existential conundrum of **the Chinese**, gambling enthusiasts unfazed by LAUSD open enrollment lotteries and magnet schools, canny users of complex zodiac charts and lucky sprays, (PS: Years of Rabbit, Snake and Chicken VERY auspicious for Balboa Gifted, API = 972!), 9

**Cinzano**, what LA Unified district lines drive semi-suicidal fictional French characters to drink, 8  
**CW**, Conventional Wisdom (as in The OC), 3

**D**

**democracy**, the tediousness of, 3

the terrifyingly-lit L.A. municipal Cable Channel 35's of, 3

**diversity**, honoring, private schools, aka: 14 white children and Savion Glover, 11

**"dog in the fight,"** heroic battle-cry of Democrats with children actually IN LA Unified, 2

**F**

**faux Cape Cod**, pergola-splattered \$600,000 townhome, trigger of first Kubler-Ross stage, 4

**G**

**grass**, aka: "The grass made me sad"-reason why diversity-honoring parents cannot imagine their children in public school, 2, also see unbearable metaphorical poignance of

chainlink fence, 2

cracked asphalt, 2

putty-colored buildings whose windows have those metal storm-meshy things, 2

**greatschools.net**, aka: not yours, which is not-so-great, 6

hideous API of the poor, their sad hunched little blue bar graph, 7

**Guavatorina Elementary**, totemic tattered LAUSD school whose name is like an obscure mouldering Ecuadorian melon, which does not inspire academic confidence, 6

## H

**hard gem-like flame**, progressive charter school parents, burning with, 14  
**howling 605**, \$600,000 townhome that gazes up into the armpit of (first Kubler-Ross stage), 4

## J

**Jamba Juice** (plus Noah's Bagels), universal symbol indicating high API score LAUSD elementary schools nearby, 9

## K

**Keats**, hard gem-like flame, misattribution from Pater, progressive charter school parents, 14  
**Kubler-Ross Stages of Los Angeles Unified middle-class parents**  
    anger, 4  
    bargaining, 7  
    denial, 4

## L

### LAUSD

leathery hide of, 2  
"Ukrainian-style customer service, can be the. . .", 2

## M

**Magnet School Envy**, where DEAD grass seems actually greener, 11  
**Marie**, existential cactus-loving IDIOT who picked house on wrong side of street from Ivanhoe, 8  
**Martinis and Magnets**, homage to LAUSD mother Christie Mellor's hilarious **Three Martini Playdate**, 11  
**Middle-Class Birthday Party League**, proposed new project for moveon.org, 12

## N

**non-peaceful conflict resolution**, bully, name-calling, Melvins, 13

## O

**Official LAUSD Plant List**, straight from 333. S. Beaudry, includes planting, soils, irrigation, 15  
**118 Freeway** as kind of secret API "helper" (gateway to Thousand Oaks), 7  
**Open Court**, LAUSD, the Joe Lieberman of contemporary literacy programs, 12, 13

## P

**Portland**, where middle-class L.A. families traditionally exile themselves to when first child reaches school age of five      a la Logan's Run, 1  
**Prius**, cheap shot for car, am sorry, but "Grass made me sad" dad does drive one, 2, 11  
**pupuserias** (plus 99 cent stores), universal symbol indicating LAUSD elementary schools with a zillion magnet points, 10  
**PWT's**, Permits with Transportation, along with SAS, one of a string of many terrifying LAUSD terms that will      tempt you into Cinzano, 11

## T

**Thousand Oaks**, which IS as far as they say, 7

## U

UC's, which are all now, like, super-hard to get into!, 1  
union jobs, the really good ones, whe-?, 3

## V

Volker Schlöndorff's The Tin Drum, eels devouring horse's head, universal symbol of "last child to get into last good school" frenzy of 21<sup>st</sup> century middle-class families, 9, 16

## Y

Yo Yo Ma, as in what the f-? doing at Costco, 2

yoga pillow, small, accessory for discussing progressive education, 13