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# A Parent's Point of View

By **Sandra Pinnavaia**, *School for Children Parent*

When people ask us why we chose Bank Street School for Children... three separate times... for our three (very different) children, we always boil it down into... three simple reasons. From “hardest” to “softest,” here we go:

## 1. Educational excellence

We believe strongly in the core educational philosophy at Bank Street. You've read about it, and we really believe it: that learning happens best through experience, that meaning must be made through exploration and wrestling with complex issues, and that learning with, from, and in relation to others is a critical life skill. Perhaps these phrases are used in other places, but at Bank Street it is refreshingly and honestly at the very core of the approach.

My husband and I recognized that our most influential learning moments had come when this philosophy was in action. We deeply believe that future citizens of the world (not to mention future professionals) will need better and better preparation to navigate an ever-more rapidly changing world full of problems. We ourselves had received more traditional educations (he at a prep school; me at a public school), and let's just say we were looking for more.

Simultaneously, we will admit to being risk-averse education snobs and wanted our offspring to have all the best options as they grew up for high school and college. So we wanted “proof of concept” that the Bank Street philosophy in action from age three to Grade 8 really worked in the competitive modern educational environment. The high school and college placements of SFC alumni were compelling for us—range and depth, impressive all. It was clear to us that Bank Street is not a cookie-cutter feeder school that produced one flavor of high performers. Perhaps most telling for us was the alumni panel, where fascinating and composed young people spoke so articulately about their paths and how Bank Street shaped the people they grew to be and the values they hold dear—whether their professions were in academia, business, law, medicine, the arts, or public service and beyond.

This has all played out for our kids so far: they have had incredible options at the high school and college levels. But more importantly, they have felt confident about who they are, what they were looking for, and how to choose among these options.

## 2. Sanity

We admit it: we live crazy lives in the very cauldron of one of the most competitive cities in the world. We reluctantly acknowledged at their births that our children would be surrounded by competition: on playgrounds and in music class, in restaurant sophistication and vacation destination, on travel sports teams and at talent shows. Perhaps most importantly, we knew they were destined for an ever-escalating academic “arms race,” with a very real risk of early burnout.

We longed for a place where our children could be children for as long as possible. Perhaps because both my husband and I grew up outside of the city (he in suburban Baltimore, me in rural mid-Michigan), and because we are second-generation college grads in each of our families, we really wanted to preserve our kids’ space for wonder, curiosity, and discovery.

We wanted school to not make either our kids or us crazy. We wanted school to be fun, mind-expanding, and a place where the right things mattered. We wanted them to play and argue and invent and learn every day, and most of all to love going to school.

Bank Street provides this environment nearly perfectly. The homework assignments are intelligent and meaningful; they are paced appropriately for age groups. Bank Street stretches, supports, and coaches children in equal measure. Not surprisingly, with three kids we have had many instances in which one of our kids was either “ahead of” or “behind” the “average” of their classmates, in one subject or one way or another (note that these words are in quotation marks because they are words never used at Bank Street) and for the most part, Bank Street responded perfectly with either more runway, more challenge, or more support. Hence, the learning environment both in school and at home is a sane and smart one. Our kids entered high school well prepared academically and yet still fresh, not cynical, and ready for more.

And our family has had so much fun along the way. Rock Band concerts are as much a learning experience as curriculum night; the various enactments and drama nights are not only picture-perfect but really connected to academic and social curricula. We never had a moment of feeling like we were in competition with other families on any subject. Many of our best friendships have been formed at Bank Street. In heartfelt terms, it is a truly sane oasis in NYC.

And don’t worry, they still learn how to handle competition and pressure!

## 3. Passion

Bank Street is a community full of passion about children and about learning. This manifests itself in one of the most caring, engaged, and skilled communities imaginable. The kids are passionately engaged in their classrooms and without ex-

ception become passionate advocates on many issues. The teachers are passionate learners themselves and endlessly interested in how each child is unique. They find remarkable things in every child and truly help little personalities emerge. They support parents with wisdom and compassion at every developmental stage and often, for us, provided landmarks and a map to navigate difficult passages.

We had the occasion to deal with our share of bumps in the road, beginning with a three-year-old biting incident and carrying right on through various crises of adolescence. We, at every step, found support from the teachers and other staff who really, deeply knew our children and cared about their motivations and their well-being. We felt supported; our kids felt supported; they thrived and continue to do so.

A final note: We are enormously grateful to Bank Street School for Children and to Bank Street College. Many people fail to appreciate the many benefits that accrue to the school, its students, faculty, and families because the school is embedded in a leading college of education. From basement to roof deck, every square inch of Bank Street is devoted to what makes early childhood education great. Bank Street College has been an innovative, leading voice in education for nearly 100 years, and simple actions such as riding in the elevator with graduate faculty or seeing graduate students working together animatedly in the cafeteria, give a glimpse of the amount and elegance of the day to day work going on in the building. Everyone benefits from the rich intellectual and professional environment it makes around the very topics of children and education. It is a very special place for kids and families to begin their educational journeys.