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Real Estate

The Sudden Charm of Public School

FOR some young families who bought during the housing boom, having it all meant an affordable brood-sized apartment in possession of a good public school zone. But other parents in pursuit of real estate never even thought about schools. They assumed they would send their children to private school, often because they too had followed that route.

That was before the economic crisis. Now, as many would-be private school parents scramble for a good public school, there is a despairing recognition that in this respect, geography is destiny: With odds of being accepted into a popular school in another zone slimmer than ever, they either live in a neighborhood with a decent elementary or they don't.

Renters and first-time buyers are in the best position to light out for better school zones with their young offspring. Meanwhile, landlocked owners — unable or unwilling to sell in a down market or to spend around \$33,000 a year to send their child to private school — are panicking.

Trapped by their real estate, these parents are swallowing a bitter pill: had they sold their apartments a year ago, their profits might have financed an entire private school education.

Some parents are considering renting an apartment in a desirable zone — at least for the time it takes to prove residency. And some otherwise law-abiding parents plan to flout the system by establishing a fake residency in their school zone of choice.

“I can tell you I hear it all the time on the playground — whether you're moving or ‘moving,’ ” said Claudia Knafo, 47, a concert pianist

and music professor who lives with her husband, Alexander Yagupsky, 44, and 4-year-old son, Joshua, on West 110th Street and Riverside Drive.

She says her family's situation is common in her neighborhood.

"We bought our apartment in 2004," she said, "and like most new parents we never even thought about the public school zoning issues. We just assumed our son would go to private school."

But when it came time to apply last fall, she and her husband, a music teacher, felt they could no longer commit to the expense because of the change in the economic climate. They applied to three private schools asking for financial aid, even though they were advised by other parents that this would undermine their son's chances. He was turned down by one and put on the waiting list at the others.

"At that point," Ms. Knafo said, "we decided with the economy being what it is, we had to adjust our heads and think about public school."

There is no way of knowing just how many would-be or current private school parents are turning to the public schools. But there is no question that the city's public kindergartens are experiencing a groundswell of interest.

Late last month, the Department of Education said that several popular schools — Public Schools 6, 59 and 290 on the Upper East Side, and P.S. 87 on the Upper West Side — were putting children from their own zones on waiting lists because of a surfeit of applications. Many of the wait-listed children may be admitted eventually, as a change in the application process this year requires declarations of interest by parents before they hear from private schools or gifted and talent programs at public schools.

"I would say I've given out about a third more applications," said Michele Farinet, the parent coordinator at P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village, another sought-after school. While P.S. 41 and its sister

school, P.S. 3, have traditionally been able to take all zoned kids, Ms. Farinet is less sure about this year: “I never want to be negative about it. We’re doing the best we can to accommodate all the families.”

Ms. Farinet said that private school parents had been calling about transferring their children to P.S. 41 this fall; the number of such calls is usually zero.

Margaret Raphaelson, the parent coordinator at the highly regarded P.S. 321 in Park Slope, [Brooklyn](#), said she, too, had received several of these calls.

Meanwhile, parents are beating the pavement online.

“We’ve noticed significant spikes in traffic to our reviews of good schools since Jan. 1,” said Pamela Wheaton, the director of [Insideschools.org](#), a nonprofit Web site that provides information about the city’s public schools. For example, page views of information about P.S. 6 on the Upper East Side were up by 55 percent in the first quarter of this year from the last quarter of 2008. Views of P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village jumped by 59 percent, and P.S. 234 in TriBeCa by 44 percent. Site traffic also shows that “schools that have tended to be less desirable but on the fringes of wealthier neighborhoods are now being looked at more closely, like P.S. 198 on the Upper East Side,” Ms. Wheaton said.

After research that included speaking with parents from her neighborhood school, Ms. Knafo set her sights on two highly regarded schools in her district — P.S. 199 and P.S. 87 — and listed them at the top of the lottery form that parents of entering kindergartners were asked to submit by early March.

Results are due by early April, but Ms. Knafo doesn’t expect Joshua to get in because priority goes to children in each school’s own zone, and P.S. 87 already has at least 25 more applications from zoned children than it does seats, according to the Department of Education. As of

early March, P.S. 199 had 189 applications from zoned students for 177 seats.

Their anxiety mounting, Ms. Knafo and her husband are considering selling their two-bedroom co-op and moving into a zone with a more desirable school.

“We actually had a Realtor come to our home, because I was completely hysterical about what to do with this smart kid I can’t seem to find the right school for,” Ms. Knafo said. “We bought it for \$570,000 in 2004 and she said we’re back at 2004 prices, so we might not necessarily lose money on it.”

Plan B, she said, is to sublet the apartment and rent elsewhere. A schools consultant, Robin Aronow of School Search NYC, advised her that by historical standards her son’s chances of being admitted to P.S. 87 were good if the family established residency in the zone by June 1. Given the waiting lists disclosed by a growing number of schools, Ms. Aronow now strongly recommends calling the school before moving.

But Ms. Knafo worries that the rent from their apartment won’t cover the cost of a new one. The median asking price for a two-bedroom rental in the P.S. 87 zone is \$4,200 a month; in P.S. 199’s zone, it’s \$5,450, according to Streeteasy.com.

“Basically,” Ms. Knafo said, “it’s like playing Russian roulette — are we going to have to pay for two apartments to get our child into the correct zone? There are lots of people who are borrowing addresses or moving in with family. I personally am not comfortable with that.”

A man who lives in the same school zone as Ms. Knafo says he is prepared to do whatever it takes to get his son into a preferred kindergarten.

“I will certainly consider some alternative way to game the system by gaining a different address,” said the man, who asked to remain

anonymous for obvious reasons. “This is my child, who is a really smart kid, and he’s not going to my crummy zoned school. That’s just not going to happen.”

When he and his wife bought their \$1.6 million six-room apartment a year and a half ago, they had envisioned his alma mater, a prestigious private school, as the place to send their son. . He and his wife both still have jobs and could probably scrape together the tuition. But their financial optimism has dimmed.

“I think it’s all part of the end of the wishful-thinking era, where you just think you’re going to grow into your expenses,” he said. “We’ve had successively bigger mortgages and we say: ‘It’s always a stretch. That’s all right; in a couple of years we’ll have more money.’ But now we’ve had to get a little more real.”

Indeed, the boom-inflated price of the real estate they occupy has worsened the situation. “I think of my father, who had three kids in private school when I grew up,” the man said. “His home probably cost him two or three times his income. So there was some money left over for school. But that math doesn’t work anymore. Most people I know own apartments that cost five or six times their income. And most people are spending so much money on their apartments there is nothing left for private schools.”

The growing undertow from private to public emphasizes just how desperate some families have become.

“Moving your kid out of private school is usually one of the last things to go,” said Kathy M. Braddock, a partner at Charles Rutenberg Realty. “You give up vacations and cars and take away summer camp first. “But I hear people evaluating everything now. I know lawyers who have been laid off, Wall Street people, the Madoff victims. These are people who never thought they would be in a financial situation where they would have to start making certain choices.”

Moreover, whereas “saying you’re interested in sending your kids to public schools used to be a taboo among a certain group of people,” Ms. Braddock said. “Now it’s actually kind of cool and in vogue.”

A West Village woman who is thinking of pulling her first grader from private school said that public school tours are full of parents contemplating moving.

“It really is like this phenomenon that’s going on,” said the woman, who asked not to be identified because she hadn’t yet spoken to her son’s private school. “There’s a lot of parents who have one kid in private school and they have another they’re trying to place, and there seems to be a general willingness to move to another zone.”

A renter whose lease ends soon, she said she and her husband, who also have a kindergarten-bound daughter, would be among them for the right school. “We thankfully still have our jobs,” she said. “But after the market crashed, we started to think, ‘Are we crazy to pay all this money for schools when so many friends have kids in public schools?’ ”

Joanne Aron and her husband, Michael Oka, decided it was worth an extra \$2,000 a month in rent to live in the P.S. 6 zone, where they hope to enroll their son, Martin, 4, in kindergarten.

“We both work in finance,” Ms. Aron said, “so God forbid we should lose our jobs — pulling him out of school would be awful. We thought this would probably be a safer option.”

They moved into a \$6,200-a-month three-bedroom apartment about 10 days ago. But the 150-seat kindergarten they’ve set their sights on already has a waiting list at least 13 children long.

"I'm trying not to panic," said Ms. Aron, adding that she had been told that even in past recessions the school had been able to accommodate everyone in the zone. However, she said, “everything

seems extraordinary this year, so who really knows where it will end up?"

Her backup plan is to keep her son for another year at the Upper West Side Montessori preschool he currently attends. But, she said, "I would be pretty upset if we just moved to the East Side for school and he's commuting to the West Side."

Some brokers say they've noticed a surge of interest in public schools from couples who don't have kids yet and from childless people who are concerned about resale value.

"For the last 10 years people have made an extraordinary amount of money, so they have the cash to buy an apartment now, even with the setback from the stock market." said Daniela Kunen, a managing director at Prudential Douglas Elliman, whose two listings on Park Avenue in the P.S. 6 zone are drawing significantly more traffic than comparable ones just north and south of the school zone. "However, they would prefer to get into an apartment that will provide their children with a free education so they can limit their expenses because they're uncertain about the future."

Karen Advocate-Connolly, a senior vice president at Prudential Douglas Elliman, said she had noticed a spillover from the highly regarded but pricey P.S. 6 zone. "It used to be very much P.S. 6, and now people are willing to broaden their horizons, like P.S. 290 and P.S. 183. The buyers now are just very savvy, and they've done their research on the different schools out there. They at least want a public school backup — they're looking for the option."

Noah Bilenker and his wife, Valerie Abitbol, recently went into contract on a two-bedroom apartment costing around \$1 million on Third Avenue near East 81st Street in the P.S. 290 zone. The couple — both lawyers who do not yet have children — chose that apartment over another on East 95th Street and Third Avenue solely because of the school.

“I think the change in the economy made us look for things in more established neighborhoods,” Mr. Bilenker said, citing a significant number of new condominium buildings in the more northern neighborhood.

The apartment they are buying is in an area with deeper roots, he said. “I think there would be more established parent-teacher and community groups, and if the city has budget problems and there are cutbacks among teachers, the more established schools with strong networks among parent and alumni groups will be able to weather the storm better.”

Just how much a good school district is worth in terms of an apartment’s purchase price is hard to tell.

“We always say put another \$15,000 onto it,” Ms. Braddock said.

But most brokers don’t seem to have an actual number in mind — only the sense that like a washer/dryer, a good school zone will attract more interest.

Colin Palombo, 41, a software entrepreneur with a 14-month-old son, recently made offers on two apartments in a less-than-desirable Upper West Side zone. Mr. Palombo, who is working with Max Dobens, a vice president of Prudential Douglas Elliman, explained his calculation: “If we get inside a decent zone, that would save us \$2,000 to \$3,000 a month in private education.”

Mr. Palombo said that conversely, anything in a less desirable zone should be that much cheaper.

In general, Mr. Palombo said, that’s the case with three-bedroom apartments on the Upper East and Upper West Sides: “Typically, the good zones are in the most expensive areas.”