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Nonprofit Founder Weighs High School Options

IF YOU HAVEN'T heard of Calfee School Guide, it's one of the hottest things going among San Francisco's middle-school set and their parents seeking to learn more about the city's 18 specialized high schools.

The educational nonprofit wasn't founded by a frustrated local parent or teacher of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Instead, Patricia Calfee '04, a trained economist with a background in public relations and a passion for cooking, created the guide to help students and parents find a school that caters to their career interests.

With no children of her own, it was serendipity and her love of cooking that came together to inspire Calfee School Guide. While earning her economics degree at the University of San Francisco, Calfee began teaching after-school cooking. "I had fun with the kids and was then asked to be a mentor," Calfee said.

As the mentor of four middle school girls, including one who was enrolled in her cooking class, Calfee was approached by the parent of one of the girls for advice on which high school his daughter should attend. "Her father was a single parent who had recently emigrated from Vietnam and worked seven days a week," Calfee said.

Knowing next to nothing about San Francisco high schools, she spent the next few months and thousands of hours researching and visiting schools. "I toured the 14 public schools and four charter high schools and each school was vastly different," Calfee said.

The variety is a result of San Francisco's "choice enrollment," which allows students and parents to pick a school that best suits them, rather than be assigned one according to their neighborhood.

And while specialties that range from athletics, languages, arts, and computer programming can be good for students, finding time to visit and acquaint themselves with San Francisco's public, magnet, and charter high schools can be next to impossible for time-strapped parents. Calfee, who regularly meets with principals, teachers, students, and parents, has taken on that responsibility. As the Guide's only full-time staffer, she manages two part-time volunteers.

Each year, she holds free seminars with eighth-graders and their parents to educate them on their choices and answer questions. In just two years, the nonprofit has grown from serving four schools in 2006 to 12 in 2007.

Calfee's research is endorsed by the SFUSD. And the nonprofit's Web site, www.CalfeeSchoolGuide.org, which highlights school activities and programs, took first prize in the education category of the AIGA-SF Cause/Effect Awards for 2007. Calfee is currently at work on a guidebook that touches on issues ranging from transitioning schools to Internet safety for parents and students navigating the K-12 public education system.



Patricia Calfee '04 founded a nonprofit that helps San Francisco students and parents find a high school that caters to their needs and interests.

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