

Helping parents find discount places in private schools



(Transcript from SBS World News Radio)

Many parents spend years on a waiting list, in the hope of securing their child a spot in a private school.

The operators of a website, which first launched in Victoria and now available in New South Wales - say they're helping parents nab last minute places at discounted rates.

Darren Mara reports.

(Click on the audio tab above to hear the full report)

Sydney mother Rosio Chiha has set her sights on private education for her son.

After learning that the enrolment journey is often a long one, she was urged to put his name on a waiting list soon after birth.

"I did think it was crazy at first when I first heard about it, that it's so common now that it almost seems like the thing to do, you should definitely try and get an early start."

But now there's an option for parents who get in late.

A website called School Places allows families to find last minute vacancies and get discounts at some New South Wales private schools.

School Places chief executive Natalie Mactier says the service can help both schools and parents.

"So, whereas waitlists are for guaranteed spots for years to come, this is very much about those vacancies that are hard to fill. So, they may have come up because a family has moved interstate or overseas but its left the school with a last minute vacancy that is very difficult to fill through traditional enrolment methods."

It's based on a model that's worked for hotels and airlines chasing last minute bookings.

The online tool was launched in Victoria in April.

Natalie Mactier says the website is expanding nationally and hopes to be in every state by the end of the financial year.

"We had over 35,000 searches conducted in the first 24 hours alone, so its been very well received in the Victorian market and we think that we'll have a similar response today in the NSW market."

Masada College in the northern Sydney suburb of St Ives is one of a handful of schools that have already signed up.

The school's principal, Wendy Barel says discounts of up to 30 per cent are on offer for classes with vacancies.

"We are a Jewish day school but we have children from all different cultural backgrounds and by exposing it to more people it gives them the opportunity to join us, and if we have a space in a particular year - and at the moment we've got spaces in two years we've advertised for - it gives us that opportunity. We're running the class anyway and if we've got the vacancies, why not fill them?"

The New South Wales Association of Independent Schools says its up to each school to decide how they enrol students.

But they do warn that offering discounts to some families might create resentment amongst full fee-paying parents.

And they say it could lead to an environment where parents choose not to wait on a list, instead opting for last minute specials.

But Principal Barel disagrees.

"I think our families are always welcoming new families, and they understand that filling up the class gives their kids more social opportunities, it gives them more opportunities in terms of the more students there are the more opportunities there are in running electives and sporting opportunities, etcetera."

For mother Rosio Chiha, anything that's in her children's best interests.

"I would definitely consider another school if they had a discount. It's always good to have a back up plan."