

Strategies for Choosing a School

Write Down Five Things That Are Most Important to You

You may wish to write down five things that are most important to you as you consider the choice of a school. As you go through the selection process, you may want to add to and revise your list.

Four Steps for Selecting the School That Is Right for Your Child

Step 1: Consider your child & your family.

Start your search for the best school by thinking about what you want a school to do for your child. Perhaps your child has special language or education needs. Keep these in mind. After all, you know your son or daughter better than anyone else does.

Step 2: Gather Information About Schools

If you were looking to buy a car, vacuum cleaner, or refrigerator, you could talk to friends and family and find information on the Internet, in consumer magazines, or in other published resources. Similarly, when investigating schools, you may also have to make phone calls, collect written material from different schools and look for reports in your local paper to get the information you need. You can check public school report cards and go to parent fairs and school open houses. The hard work will be worth your while if you find a school that brings out the best in your child.

Along with the schools' curricula and philosophy, you will want to know about school policies and services. Parents may also wish to consider the after-school programs a school offers, for example, sports, clubs, tutoring, or academic enrichment. Some schools have after-school activities. These centers provide educational activities outside of the regular school hours'before and after school or during summer vacation' that complement what is taught in school. You may also

want to ask if the school has supplemental educational services, including free tutoring.

Step 3: Visit and Observe Schools

Contact the schools you are interested in and make an appointment for a visit. If possible, tour the schools during regular school hours and visit a few classes. Avoid visiting schools during the first or last week of a term in order to get a realistic sense of how the school operates.

A good way to have your questions answered is to schedule an appointment with the school principal. If possible, attend an open house, parent-teacher meeting, or other school function that would also provide valuable information about the attitudes of staff, students, and parents.

Listen closely to what teachers say about the school. The teachers will be the adults closest to your child, and you will want to know if they are well prepared, dedicated, and happy in their work.

Step 4: Apply to the Schools You Choose

Once you select the school(s) that you think will be best for your child, you will go through a process of applying to a school (or schools) of your choice and enrolling your child. Consider applying to more than one school, in case your child is not admitted to their first choice.

You will want to begin this process as early as possible in order to ensure you meet all the deadlines.

Admissions processes can vary. Your child may need to be tested or interviewed, and you may need to provide a school transcript, recommendations, or other information. It would be helpful to learn about admissions criteria for the schools. You will want to double check to be sure you have accurate information on when and how to apply.

Appendix

Step 1: Consider your child & your family.

Your Child's Needs

- ⌚ Does your child need a more structured environment?

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- ⌚ Does your child need more challenging work?
- ⌚ Does your child need more individual attention?
- ⌚ Does your child generally need extra help or more time to complete an assignment?
- ⌚ Does your child have any special learning needs?
- ⌚ Does your child need an environment that fosters creativity?
- ⌚ Does your child need an English language acquisition program?

Your Child's Learning Style

- ⌚ Does your child learn best by seeing how things work?
- ⌚ Does your child learn best by reading about how something works?
- ⌚ Does your child learn best by listening?
- ⌚ Does your child like to participate in discussions?
- ⌚ Does your child like to learn through physical activity?
- ⌚ Is your child logical or mathematical?
- ⌚ Is your child musical or artistic?
- ⌚ Does your child like to learn in groups?
- ⌚ Does your child like to work alone?

Location of School

- ⌚ Do you want your child to go to a school within walking distance of your home?
- ⌚ Can your child's talents be nurtured outside your neighborhood?
- ⌚ How far are you willing to have your child bused?
- ⌚ How far are you willing to drive your child to school?
- ⌚ Does your child want to be in a school with his or her friends?
- ⌚ Do you want your child to go to a school near your after-school care? Near where you work? Near a close relative?
- ⌚ Does your child have any special transportation needs that must be considered in choosing a school?

Step 2: Gather Information About Schools Curriculum

- ⌚ Does the school have a strong program of core academic subjects such as English, history, mathematics, science, arts, and foreign languages?
- ⌚ What courses does the school offer in addition to the core subjects?
- ⌚ What evidence is there that the school is effectively teaching students to read?
- ⌚ Does the school have a special focus or theme for the curriculum?
- ⌚ Does the school offer challenging courses such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and high school honors courses?
- ⌚ Does the school provide enrichment opportunities for all students? For gifted students?
- ⌚ Does the school have extracurricular activities that support what is taught?
- ⌚ Is there an effective English language acquisition program for children who need it?
- ⌚ If your child has special learning needs, does the school have a curriculum and the necessary supports to appropriately accommodate those needs?

Approach to Learning

- ⌚ Does the school have a particular approach to teaching and learning (e.g., group projects, individual performance, frequent testing)?
- ⌚ If yes, do you think your child will enjoy and learn from this approach?
- ⌚ Does the school do all it can to make sure each child learns? Does it provide opportunities for children to get extra help when they need it?
- ⌚ Is the school staff able to communicate in the language that your child understands?
- ⌚ Are children with limited English language skills, learning disabilities, or other special needs learning and performing well on tests?
- ⌚ What is the homework policy? Does it match your expectations for how much homework your child should do?
- ⌚ Do you want your child to go to a singlesex (all-boy or all-girl) school, or a coeducational school?
- ⌚ How large are the classes?

Academic Performance

- ⌚ How do the school's test scores compare to those of other schools? (Check the school's report card if it is a public school or ask for information from the school if it is a private school. See 'Parent Tip' on school report cards.)
- ⌚ In the past few years, have test scores risen or declined?

- ⌚ How does the school explain the rise or decline? How well have children similar to yours performed on these tests?
- ⌚ How do students moving on to the next level of schooling perform in their new schools?
- ⌚ How many students leave the school before completing the last grade?
- ⌚ What special achievements or recognition has the school received?

Behavior Policy

- ⌚ What does the school do to help develop character and citizenship?
- ⌚ What is the discipline policy? How does the school handle students who misbehave?
- ⌚ Are teachers fair in their responses to students? Does the school have a program and supports to prevent and address behavior problems?
- ⌚ Are students allowed to leave school by themselves?
- ⌚ What measures has the school taken to ensure safety? What security measures are in place?
- ⌚ What is the policy on school absences? How does the school encourage daily attendance?
- ⌚ Do school personnel call parents when students are absent?
- ⌚ Does the school have a drug and alcohol abuse prevention program?
- ⌚ Does the school have a dress code?
- ⌚ Do students wear uniforms?

Safety

- ⌚ Is the school safe?
- ⌚ How does the school prevent and handle problems with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco?
- ⌚ How does the school prevent and handle violence, bullying, harassment, and other forms of abusive behavior?
- ⌚ What measures does the school take to ensure safety? What security measures are in place?
- ⌚ What is the school's relationship with the local police?
- ⌚ Is there a police officer on duty during school hours and for extracurricular activities?
- ⌚ What information is available on serious crime in the school?
- ⌚ What information is available on students bringing weapons to school?
- ⌚ Does the school have an emergency plan for local and national emergencies?

- ⌚ What does the school do to ensure that parents and all school administrators know the emergency plan?
- ⌚ Are there drills?
- ⌚ How does the school notify parents about emergency closings? How does the school communicate with parents in other languages?

Special Offerings

- ⌚ What extracurricular activities does the school offer after school or on weekends?
- ⌚ Do all students have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities?
- ⌚ What interscholastic activities are available to students?
- ⌚ What intramural activities are available to students?
- ⌚ What activities receive the most attention and resources?
- ⌚ Are there school and student publications?
- ⌚ Does the school sponsor field trips?
- ⌚ Are they available to all students?
- ⌚ Are publications for parents available in other languages?

Facilities and Services

- ⌚ Is there a well-stocked library where students can check out books and do research? Are reading materials available in other languages?
- ⌚ Is there interlibrary loan?
- ⌚ Is time provided in the day for students to go to the library?
- ⌚ Do students have access to computers and to the Internet in the classroom and library?
- ⌚ Is use of the Internet monitored?
- ⌚ Is there an auditorium or a large room for school assemblies?
- ⌚ Is a school nurse on duty daily?
- ⌚ Is there a cafeteria, and does the school offer a nutritionally well-balanced lunch program? Breakfast program?
- ⌚ Is supervised before- and afterschool care offered?
- ⌚ Are there tutoring programs?
- ⌚ Are counseling services available to students?
- ⌚ Is the school accessible to children with mobility limitations?

Admissions Procedures for Public Schools of Choice and Private Schools

- ⌚ Is there an application process?

- ⌚ What is the application deadline?
- ⌚ Is anything else required in the application (test scores, interview, recommendations, application fees, etc.)?
- ⌚ Are test scores required for admission?
- ⌚ What are the ranges of scores for admitted students?
- ⌚ Do admissions requirements include a portfolio, an audition or statement of interest?
- ⌚ Are there any other admissions requirements?
- ⌚ Are admissions requirements published in languages other than English?

Additional Questions About Private Schools

- ⌚ What is the tuition?
- ⌚ Is there a payment plan?
- ⌚ Is there a sliding scale for tuition, based on parish, church affiliation, or family income?
- ⌚ What are the other fees and expenses (room and board, uniforms, books, transportation, lab and computer fees, activity fees)?
- ⌚ What scholarships and loans are available?
- ⌚ Are students or their parents required to be of a particular faith?
- ⌚ Does the school have a policy on student participation in religious instruction and worship?
- ⌚ Does the school close for religious and federal holidays?
- ⌚ Does the school have the same schedule as the local public school?

Step 3: Visit and Observe Schools

Culture

- ⌚ Is the school secretary helpful and friendly?
- ⌚ Is the school orderly and neat?
- ⌚ What do the bulletin boards look like?
- ⌚ How is student work displayed?
- ⌚ How does the school communicate with students and parents (weekly/monthly newsletter, e-mail, Web site)?
- ⌚ Do the students appear to be courteous, happy, and disciplined?
- ⌚ Is there a welcoming attitude toward all parents?
- ⌚ How are the students with diverse learning needs (e.g., students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency) treated?

- ⌚ Do the teachers appear to be helpful and friendly?

Principal

- ⌚ What is the principal's philosophy about education?
- ⌚ What is the principal's attitude toward discipline?
- ⌚ In what extracurricular activities is the principal most interested?
- ⌚ What is the principal's reputation in the community?
- ⌚ Is the principal usually at the school and available to talk to parents?
- ⌚ Does the principal get to know the students?
- ⌚ How often does the principal observe teachers?
- ⌚ What does the school do to keep good teachers and improve teacher performance?
- ⌚ How does the principal respond to parental concerns/complaints?
- ⌚ What is the principal's attitude toward students with diverse learning needs (e.g., students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency)?
- ⌚ According to the principal, what are the school's strengths?
- ⌚ According to the principal, what are the school's weaknesses?
- ⌚ According to the principal, where can the school improve?

Teachers

- ⌚ How do teachers grade student work?
- ⌚ Do teachers have high expectations for all students to achieve to high academic standards?
- ⌚ How do teachers inform students of their expectations?
- ⌚ Do teachers share the course content and objectives with parents?
- ⌚ When and how frequently are teachers available for parent conferences?
- ⌚ Do teachers assign homework? Is it rigorous? Frequent? Sufficient?
- ⌚ Are the teachers highly qualified to teach in their subject areas (do they know the subjects they are teaching)?
- ⌚ Do teachers have the skills and knowledge to address students with special learning needs?
- ⌚ Are specialized staffs available to address the special learning needs of a child (e.g., speech therapist, psychologist or aides)?
- ⌚ Do the teachers know the individual students in their classes?
- ⌚ Are teachers willing to provide extra help to students?
- ⌚ What is the school's policy regarding teacher response to parent inquiries?

- ⌚ Do teachers have Web sites with class notes and other information for students and parents?

Students

- ⌚ What is the attendance rate for students?
- ⌚ What do students say about the principal?
- ⌚ What do students say about the teachers?
- ⌚ Do the students have school spirit?
- ⌚ What do students say about homework?
- ⌚ Do students participate in and enjoy field trips?
- ⌚ Do students feel safe and secure at the school?
- ⌚ What do student publications say?
- ⌚ What else do students say about the school?

Parent and Community Involvement

- ⌚ How does the school encourage parental involvement?
- ⌚ What are the ways parents can get involved?
- ⌚ Are parents encouraged to volunteer?
- ⌚ Does the school have an active parent- teacher organization?
- ⌚ Does the school hold meetings and events at times when parents can attend?
- ⌚ How well attended are back-to-school nights by parents?
- ⌚ Are families expected to be involved with homework?
- ⌚ How frequently does the school communicate with parents?
- ⌚ Are community leaders involved with the school?
- ⌚ Does the school partner with local businesses and organizations?
- ⌚ Are parents involved in the development of school policies?

Reputation

- ⌚ How is the school regarded in the community?
- ⌚ How is the school viewed by other parents?
- ⌚ Is the school respected by other schools, particularly those that receive its students (when they move to the next level)?
- ⌚ Has the school won any awards?
- ⌚ Do people move to the community to go to the school?
- ⌚ What do the graduates of the school say?
- ⌚ Have graduates from the school made significant contributions to the community and their field of choice?

Step 4: Apply to the Schools You Choose

Select One or More Schools to Apply to

- ⌚ To which schools do you want to apply?
- ⌚ What is the application deadline at each school?

Submit paperwork and applications before the deadlines

- ⌚ Have you completely filled out the application for each school?
- ⌚ Have you included all of the required additional information with the application (deposit, student transcript, test scores, letters of recommendation)?
- ⌚ Have you submitted applications before the deadline set by each school?

Follow up

- ⌚ Have you contacted each school to check on your child's application status?
- ⌚ When will the schools notify you that your child has been admitted?
- ⌚ When will you need to notify the school that your child plans to attend?
- ⌚ When will you notify the schools that your child will not attend?

Congratulations

Congratulations on all the planning you have done to reach this point. Your child will benefit tremendously from your active concern and involvement with his or her education. By collecting information, talking to other parents, visiting schools, and exercising your right to choose, you can now take the lead in making sure your son or daughter gets the best possible education. However, this is only the beginning. By staying involved in your child's education, encouraging your child to work hard, and providing additional opportunities to learn at home and in the community, you can help your child go further still. Remember it is your right, as well as your responsibility, to seek the very best education for your son or daughter.