

FINDING THE PERFECT SCHOOL

Courtesy of The Washington Post

Step 1: Explore your child's strengths and needs

Does your child seem to thrive in a small, intimate setting? Prefer lots of activity? Need structure? What are his or her interests and skill levels—academically, socially, and physically? What passions and interests can you identify? What are your child's special needs? What insights have previous teachers or other adults had about your child? Start asking yourself these sorts of questions, and continue asking them as you search for the right school.

Step 2: Learn about the schools

Explore your school options by talking with other parents, searching on the Internet or using guidebooks. When you find a school that interests you, check the school's Website or call for a brochure.

As you talk with friends and neighbors about their experiences with various schools, remember that their children are different from yours and may thrive in a different environment. Focus on families that currently have a child at the school. Don't put too much stock in information you hear second or third-hand.

The following Websites can help you find schools by location and other criteria:

- Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington (AISGW): www.aisgw.org – The "Applying to Independent Schools" section of this site shows each school's application deadline date and the dates of upcoming open houses for families of prospective applicants. You'll also find links to each school's Website.
- Association of Independent Maryland Schools (AIMS): www.aimsmd.org – Click on a map to explore schools in Maryland or DC. You can also get information about each school, plus a list of schools' application deadlines and the dates of their upcoming open houses.
- Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS): www.vais.org – Get a list of schools in Northern Virginia or search other parts of the state.
- National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS): www.nais.org – Find schools in any state using various search criteria.
- The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS): www.schools.com – Search for suitable boarding schools throughout the U.S. and in several different countries.
- Catholic Schools Office, Archdiocese of Washington: www.adw.org/education – Lists Catholic schools in Washington, DC and Maryland.

For more information on private and public schools in the DC area, check out Georgia Irvin's Guide to Schools: Metropolitan Washington (Madison Books, 2002). Written by one of the area's most experienced independent educational consultants, it's full of valuable insights and interesting facts about each school.

Another useful guidebook is the February 2004 edition of Independent School Guide: Washington, DC and Surrounding Area. It offers the latest facts on a wide range of schools in the DC area.

Step 3: Select Schools to Visit

As you review information about each school, ask yourself, which ones might best suit your child's strengths, needs and interests. Look for schools that would enhance your family's values and offer an appropriate level of challenge.

Location is more important than you might think. Focus on schools that are within a reasonable commute from your home or workplace, or where convenient transportation is available.

Check which grades have openings. Many schools expand at specific grade levels to accommodate new students, and some schools accept applications only at particular grade levels.

To gain perspective, you might wish to visit a variety of schools: large and small, coed and single-sex, religious and secular. A "big-name" school isn't necessarily your best choice, so be open to visiting schools that you haven't heard much about.

Step 4: Visit Schools

Many schools schedule open houses and tours in October through December. These are optional, but they can be a great opportunity to see the campus and learn more about a school's programs. You can also meet faculty, administrators and some students.

Open houses are generally held in the evening or on a weekend. The AISGW and AIMS Websites list open house dates at many schools in Maryland and DC.

Some schools also offer tours while school is in session. This allows you to visit classes and observe interactions among teachers and students. For advice on making the most of your tour, see "Tips on Touring Schools" on the pages to follow.

Irvin offers these practical tips for visiting: Call to sign up in advance, and plan to leave children under 10 at home unless the school requests that students attend. Try not to have to cancel an appointment. Before you go, get directions to the school, and find out where to park. Be sure to arrive on time.

Be sure to visit your local public school if you don't already know it well. Some schools are a better alternative than many parents realize.

Step 5: Arrange for Testing

Individual schools can tell you, which entrance exams they require at various grade levels and where to go for testing. Many schools require the same test at each grade level, so a child applying to several schools might need to take only one admission test. Common tests include:

- The Detroit Tests of Learning Aptitude – Primary: Second Edition (DTLA-P:2) is often used for applicants to pre-kindergarten. It looks at a child’s verbal processing, attention, fine motor and other skills.
- The Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence - Revised (WPPSI-R), used mainly for kindergarten and first grade, measures verbal skills, fine motor coordination, special perception, logic, and much else.
- The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Third Edition (WISC-III), for second through fifth grade, is similar to the WPPSI-R.
- The Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) is commonly accepted for grades 7 through 12. A few local independent schools use the Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE). Some Catholic schools use The TerraNova Survey Battery at the high school level.

Step 6: Apply!

Although you may wish to visit more than a half-dozen schools to help narrow down your choices, education consultants often advise applying to only three to six schools. If your public school is a good option, you could safely apply to fewer than three private schools.

In addition to test scores, schools generally require a transcript and recommendations from teachers or others who know the child. A recommendation from a personal friend can be useful if it’s from someone who knows the child well.

Parents may be asked to write an essay when applying for a child in the lower grades. Older students may need to write an essay, submit a paper written for school, or both. The more succinct and well-focused your written answers to questions on the application, the more likely an admission officer will have time to read it thoroughly. For detailed advice, see Georgia Irvin’s Guide to Schools.

CONFIRMATION AND TIMING

Many schools have an application deadline in January or February. Pay close attention to these deadlines. At a school with very competitive admissions, missing a deadline could greatly decrease your child’s chances of being admitted. If you are applying for financial aid, you may need to complete an “SSS” form in January using estimated tax information and later send the school a copy of your tax return.

The sooner your application is complete, the sooner a school can set up a date for the student to visit. For younger students, this often means a group visit where teachers can observe each child’s social interactions, concentration and other skills. Older students often have individual interviews. Schools also like to meet both parents if possible.

E-mail or call each school to make sure your file is complete. You wouldn’t want a missing recommendation form, test score or transcript to ruin your child’s chances of admission.

When all is complete, try to sit tight and focus on other pursuits. It's normal to feel anxious, but try not to think too much about the fateful admission letters due to arrive in March or so. Fortunately, there's a lot more to your child's life than just getting into schools.

TIPS ON TOURING SCHOOLS

You can get information about a school's class sizes and test scores without setting foot on campus, but to get a feel for a school's culture and climate, try to tour the campus while classes are in session. If a school doesn't offer extensive weekday tours in the fall, you can return for a more in-depth tour after your child has been admitted.

Even if you think you know which school you want your child to attend, try to visit at least two or three schools. You can learn a lot by observing how schools differ.

First and foremost, "Watch how students interact with one another and with the adults, especially the teachers," advises Pat Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent Schools. Is there an atmosphere of respect? Comfort? Exuberance? Trust your intuitive reactions.

At any grade level, spend five minutes or so in a classroom to see if students seem engaged and on task. Check whether all students are involved in the lesson or activity. Also spend time outside of class—in the hallways, on the playground, in an arts studio or watching a sports practice. If possible, arrive when school opens in the morning and observe what students do as soon as they get off the bus or out of the car. What's the general mood as students start their day?

In addition to visiting your child's grade level, "Observe the next grade, both outdoors and in class," suggests Bassett. Follow these tips for the particular levels that interest you:

FIVE KEYS TO KINDERGARTEN

"Parents usually know their children better than they think they do," says Susan Piggott, director of the National Child Research Center, a preschool in Washington, DC. She suggests paying close attention to your gut feelings as you observe the following:

- 1. Teachers.** Observe how teachers interact with the children. Do they encourage students and help them gain independence? How well do they respond to children's questions and requests? Look for flexible, creative teachers who will get to know your child individually, structure the right learning experiences and provide an appropriate amount of challenge. Find out how long teachers have been at the school and what types of ongoing training the school provides.
- 2. Classroom structure.** Some parents prefer a structured, teacher-directed setting that emphasizes organized, whole-class activities. "This often requires a good attention span," says Nancy Schuler, director of admissions at Westminster School in Annandale, Va. Look for a structure that suits your child. Some kindergartens focus on small group activities and allow students to move independently from one activity to another.
- 3. Size.** Make sure the classroom and playground are not too crowded. A comfortable class size is about 10 to 18 students per class, or up to 25 or so students in a class with two teachers. Other plusses include an even ratio of boys to girls and at least two classes per grade throughout the elementary school years.

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4. **Schedule.** Would you and your child prefer a half-day or full day kindergarten? In a full day program, make sure the afternoon offers stimulating activities, not just day care. Look for a variety of experiences, such as physical education, art and music taught by different teachers.
 5. **Outdoor play.** Naturally, you'll want to see plenty of space and safe equipment. Ask how much recess time the children get each day. Spend a few minutes watching children play. Is there plenty of supervision? Do students include one another or form exclusive cliques? Try to stay long enough to see how disputes between children are resolved. Do teachers intervene when appropriate? Is there an effort to help kids work out their problems without anyone getting hurt?

WHAT MATTERS IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES

In the primary grades—ages 6 through 8—look for signs of a developmentally appropriate program. The National Association for the Education of Young Children suggests checking the following:

- **Intellectual.** Does the curriculum include hands-on learning and interaction with teachers and classmates? Do third graders have an opportunity to explore a topic in depth, rather than just exploring a large number of unrelated topics?
- **Social and emotional.** Do teachers encourage students to respect and support one another? Do they give each child opportunities and support to attain goals that are within reach, without underestimating a child's abilities? Do they encourage collaborative learning among students?
- **Physical.** Does the daily schedule include gym or outdoor time? As children's small-motor skills mature, do teachers support their growing abilities as writers?
- **Language.** Do teachers help to stretch and refine children's use of language by introducing new words, talking about words, find books that interest them, write and share work with each other?

In the later elementary grades, it becomes increasingly important to see how students interact. As you observe, advises Louise Plum, head of Primary Day School in Bethesda, Md., "Ask yourself if you see your child feeling comfortable there."

Since Primary Day School ends after the second grade, Plum often advises families with children who will be entering a school at the third grade. She tells them to observe the school's fourth and fifth grades too. "See if you can imagine your child fitting into that particular environment," she says. By fifth or sixth grade, the peer environment can be the most memorable part of a student's experience.

SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR SEVENTH GRADE

At the middle school level, many students benefit from a sense of routine and order. They need an environment that feels safe and that's neither too rigid nor too structured. As you and your child visit classrooms, "Pay special attention to the relationship between students and teachers," advises Peter Sturtevant of The School Counseling Group in Washington, DC. "Make sure there's appropriate supervision."

While those criteria are very similar to what you'd look for in the earlier grades, there are also important questions that pertain specifically to middle school. You can get answers to some of the following questions by studying the school's literature.

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1. How many students are in each classroom? "Ten to 18 is great. Up to 25 is okay," says Nancy Schuler, admission director of Westminster School in Annandale, Va. Also consider the total number of seventh graders. "Having fewer than 100 makes it easier for counselors and other adults to get to know each child," says Schuler.
 2. How does the school help students deal with cliques and bullying? Some schools have excellent programs to help prevent bullying.
 3. What are the sports options? Some students want opportunities to play a particular sport, but middle school students also benefit from opportunities to try out new activities.
 4. What are the arts options? Middle school is a great time for exposure to a range of different arts courses and extracurricular activities. Drama instruction, for example, helps to build self-esteem and confidence even for students with no special talent.
 5. What kinds of field trips and community service projects take place? "Hands-on experiences are important," notes Schuler.
 6. How much homework is assigned? Some students work much faster than others do. Find out the range of time that students are expected to spend on homework.
 7. How do the teachers help students stay organized? Find out how the school makes sure that all students acquire the organizational skills they will need in high school.

CHOOSING A HIGH SCHOOL

As you and your child tour high schools, remember that schools are looking at you as well. Before you go, "Encourage your child to think about his or her interests and favorite activities," suggests Susan Rosenbaum, the Middle School principal of Norwood School in Bethesda, Md. Because Norwood ends after grade 8, Rosenbaum often counsels families of 8th graders in choosing a high school.

Much of her advice is directed at the students themselves. At each school they visit, Rosenbaum encourages students to ask themselves, "Can I visualize myself here? Do I like the interactions between teachers and kids? Is this the type of classroom atmosphere where I'd learn best?" She also encourages kids to keep a journal and record their first impressions of each school they visit.

Rosenbaum's primary advice for parents on a tour is to try to be gracious, honest, and interested. "Be ready with questions about matters that are important to you and your child, but don't overdo the questions," she warns.

Asking too many questions can give the impression that you are a demanding parent, and it can also embarrass your child. "Taking a tour together is especially difficult with an eighth grader," says education consultant Georgia Irvin. "Don't expect to know everything. You can ask more questions once your child is admitted."

Irvin and her associate Pamela Tedesche offer this advice to students: Check the school's dress code, and dress accordingly. Don't chew gum during the tour, don't have a cell phone turned on, and try not to slouch. A student tour guide might welcome questions by e-mail from prospective students.

FINANCIAL AID: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

On average, about 20 percent of students at independent schools receive financial aid, mainly in the form of grants. The average grant totals 50 to 60 percent of tuition. If you're thinking of applying, check out these answers to some common questions about financial aid.

Q: We're interested in a school that costs more than \$20,000 per year. Our family can't possibly begin to afford that much. Is it still worth applying for admission?

A: Yes. Most independent schools have some type of financial aid program. It's best to apply at several different schools so that you can compare offers. Financial aid resources can vary widely from one school to another.

Q: Would applying for financial aid hurt our daughter's chances of being admitted?

A: Some schools may hesitate to admit a student if the school can't offer enough support. However, a few schools have "need-blind" admissions, which mean that they admit students regardless of their financial circumstances and then try to meet the demonstrated need of each financial aid applicant.

Q: Where do financial aid funds come from?

A: Schools get much of their aid money from their operating budget. In fact, some schools devote well over 10 percent of their tuition revenue to financial aid. Some schools also have a large endowment that helps support financial aid, and many schools have an annual scholarship auction or other events to raise financial aid funds. Some students qualify for grants from outside organizations such as the Black Student Fund or the Latino Student Fund.

Q: Our family can almost afford tuition, but we'd have to change our lifestyle in a lot of ways. Should we apply for financial aid?

A: Financial aid is intended to make it possible to attend a private school, not to support an expensive lifestyle. If you are following a reasonably modest lifestyle and still don't have enough for tuition, don't be embarrassed to ask the school if you should apply.

Q: How do schools determine how much we can afford?

A: Most schools use the School and Student Service (SSS) form for financial aid. No matter how many schools you're applying to, you only need to fill out one SSS form. The service uses a formula to determine how much your family can afford to pay. An individual school will then adjust this "expected contribution" based on the school's own resources, the local cost of living and other factors. If, for example, you need to help support a grandparent, some schools might take that into account.

Q: Is a family with two children in private school expected to be able to afford twice as much as a family with one child?

A: Not if the family qualifies for financial aid. Schools consider the amount a family needs to pay for all dependents enrolled in tuition-charging schools, including preschool, private elementary and secondary school, and college. For example, let's say that Family A and Family B both have about the same income and asset levels, but Family A has one child and Family B has two children in private school. If Family A has an expected contribution of \$20,000, then Family B's expected contribution might also be close to \$20,000, or about \$10,000 per child.

Q: How can middle class families possibly afford the high tuitions that many schools charge these days?

A: "We're very worried about middle class sticker shock," says Patrick E. Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent Schools. Strictly speaking, most middle class families would qualify for financial aid, since average household income in the U.S. is around \$43,000. Locally, however, many families with income between \$75,000 and \$120,000 could qualify for some financial aid at an independent school. Even above \$150,000, a family with two or more children in private school might receive a small amount of financial aid at some schools.

Q: Will schools expect us to drain our college savings to pay tuition?

A: No. Income counts much more heavily than savings or other assets in determining how much tuition a family can afford. Generally, parents are expected to contribute less than 5 percent of their total net worth.

Q: Does it matter whether or not we put our savings in our child's name?

A: Yes. Although you pay lower taxes on savings in your child's name, such savings can reduce your eligibility for financial aid. Families are generally expected to contribute less than 5 percent of parents' savings but a much higher percentage of students' savings.

Here's how contributions in a child's name are calculated: A student who is entering, say, 9th grade, can expect to spend four years in high school and four years in college, for a total of eight remaining years. Therefore, one-eighth of the student's own assets would count toward 9th grade tuition. In other words, if \$8,000 were saved in the child's name, the family would be expected to contribute \$1,000 of this toward 9th grade tuition. The following year, the child will have seven remaining years of schooling. The child's savings will now be \$7,000 if no additional funds are added. The expected contribution for 10th grade would include one-seventh of this, or \$1,000. For 11th grade, one-sixth of the child's savings would go toward tuition, and so on.

Q: The value of our house has been skyrocketing in recent years. Could that prevent us from qualifying for financial aid?

A: Home equity that exceeds three-times your income is exempt from the financial aid formula, according to Mark Mitchell, Director of Financial Aid Services at the National Association of Independent Schools. In general, schools do not expect families to take out a home equity loan or a second mortgage to afford K-12 tuition.

Q: Are any scholarships based on merit rather than need?

A: A few. For example, choir singers can get scholarships to attend St. Albans School for Boys in Washington, DC.

Q: Which schools offer the most financial aid?

A: Georgia Irvin's Guide to Schools lists schools' financial aid budgets. Individual schools can also tell you what percentage of their students receives financial aid and the average grant amount.

Q: My ex-husband refuses to contribute toward our son's tuition. Can I qualify for financial aid without his participation?

A: Check with the school. Many schools expect both divorced parents to complete financial aid forms. If either of you were to remarry, your spouse's resources would also be considered.