

Choosing a Great School

SELECTING A SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD

How do you select the best school for your child? Careful planning and research are a must. Remember, you are seeking a school placement for your child that will make the educational experience for your child and you as rewarding as possible. You may wish to start by writing down five things that are most important to you as you consider the choice of a school. Important steps in the selection of a school include: considering your child and family's needs, gathering information about the schools, and visiting the schools. The following sections outline questions to help you consider each element to responsible school selection.

YOUR CHILDS NEEDS

Does your child need a more or less structured environment?

Does your child need challenging work?

Does your child need individual attention?

Does your child 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?

Does your child need special education or educational supports for their disability?

YOUR CHILDS 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 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?

SCHOOL LOCATION

Do you want your child to attend a school that is walking distance from your home?

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 their neighborhood friends?



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Do you want your child to go to a school near your after-school care? Near where you work? Near a relative?

Does your child have any special transportation needs that must be considered in choosing a school?

SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Does the school have a strong program of core content academic subjects such as English, History, Mathematics, Science, Art, and Foreign Languages?

What courses does the school offer in addition to 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 activities that support what is taught?

Is there an effective English Language Acquisition program for children who need it?

If your child has special needs or a learning disability; 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 (groups projects, individual performance, frequent testing)? If yes will your child 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?

Does the school staff communicate in a language that your child understands?

Are children with limited English skills, learning disabilities, or other special learning needs performing well on tests?

What is the homework policy? Does it match your expectation for how much homework your child should do?

Do you want your child to go to a singlesex (all-boy-all-girl school) or a coeducational school?

How large are the classes?

What are the students to staff ratios?

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

How do school test scores compare to other schools?

In the past few years have test scores risen or declined? Why?

How have children similar to yours performed on the tests?



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How do students moving on to the next level of school perform in their new schools?

How many students leave the school prior to completing the last grade?

What special achievements or recognition has the school received?

BEHAVIOR

What does the school do to 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 problem behaviors?

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 the students are absent?

Does the school have a drug and alcohol prevention program?

Does the school have a dress code?

Does the school 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 abuse behavior?

What measures does the school take to ensure safety? What security measures are in place?

What is the schools relationship with the local police?

Is there a police officer on duty during school hours and during extracurricular activities?

What information is available for 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 administrations and staff know the emergency plan? Are there drills?

How does the school notify parents about emergencies or emergency closings?



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SPECIAL OFFERINGS

What extracurricular activities does the school offer afterschool or on weekends?

Do all students have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities?

What interscholastic 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 available for parents in diverse languages?

FACILITIES AND SERVICES

Is there a well-stocked library where students can check out books and do research?

Is there interlibrary loan?

Is time provided 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 there a reduced or free program available?

Is supervised before and afterschool care offered?

Are there tutoring programs?

Are counseling services available to students?

Is the school accessible to children and families with mobility issues?

ADMISSION PROCEDURES

Is there an application process?

What is the application deadline?

Is anything else required in the application (test scores, interview, recommendations, and application fees)?

Are test scores required for admission?

What are the ranges of scores for admitted students?

Do admission requirements include a portfolio, an audition, or statement of interest?

Are there any other admission requirements?

What are the fees and expenses (room and board, uniforms, books, transportation, lab and computer fees, activity fees, testing fees)?

QUESTIONS FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS

What is the tuition?

Is there a payment plan?



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Is there a sliding fee for tuition?

What are the fees and expenses (room and board, uniforms, books, transportation, lab and computer fees, and activity fees)?

What scholarships and loans are available?

Are students and 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?

QUESTIONS FOR HOMESCHOOLS

Have you identified curriculum materials for your child, and how much will they cost?

Is there a suitable place for your child's study and instruction?

Do you, your spouse, or another homeschooling parent have adequate free time to be available to your homeschooling child?

Do other families in your area homeschool their children?

Is there a support group of homeschoolers near you?

If you are interested in some outside instructional support, have you checked your local library, parks department, scouting organizations, public and private schools, and similar resources?

Have you searched the web for resources on instruction, legal issues, support groups, and other matters?

Have you identified other resources you will need?

Have you checked state regulations? (They are available on the web or from your local public school or school district).

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 or administrator. If possible attend a school function to gain insight into 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.

SCHOOL CULTURE

Is the school secretary and office staff friendly and helpful?

Is the school orderly and neat?

What does the bulletin board look like?

How is the student work displayed?



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How does the school communicate with parents and students (weekly/monthly, newsletter, email, website, and social media)?

Do the students appear to be courteous, happy, and disciplined?

Is there a welcoming attitude toward all parents?

How are students with diverse learning needs treated (students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency)?

Do teachers appear to be helpful and friendly?

MEET THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

What is the principal's philosophy on 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 the teachers?

What does the school do to keep good teachers and improve teacher performance?

How does the principal respond to parental complaints or concerns?

What is the principal's attitude toward students with diverse learning needs?

According to the principal, what are the school strengths?

According to the principal, what are the school weaknesses?

According to the principal, where can the school improve?

MEET THE 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 and parents 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?

Are teachers highly qualified to teach in their subject area?

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 (speech, occupation, or physical therapists, psychologists, counselors, instructional aides, social workers)?

Do teachers know the individual students in their classes?

Are teachers willing to provide some extra help to students?



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What is the school's policy regarding teacher response to parental inquiries?

Do teachers have websites with class notes and other information for students and parents?

MEET THE STUDENTS

What is the attendance rate for students?

What do students say about the principal?

What do students say about their 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 community 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 are events attended by parents?

Are families expected to be involved with homework?

How frequently and by what methods 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 and review of school policies?

SCHOOL 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 who 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?



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RESOURCES

National Assessment of Educational Progress

www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

Great Schools Organization

www.greatschools.org

Common Core Standards 101

www.greatschools.org/common-core-state-standards/7708-common-core-questions-and-answers.gs

Parent Training and Information Centers
(Disability and Special Education Rights)

www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/

US Department of Education www.ed.gov

No Child Left Behind Flexibility Waivers

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/index.html>

United States Department of Education
Office of Special Education

www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html

US Department of Education Links to State
Departments of Education

www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html

APEC IS HERE TO HELP

APEC provides free training, information, and consultation to families. Visit our training calendar for more information about learning opportunities at www.alabamaparentcenter.com or call our center.

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