

Private School

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our September issue.



Finding the Perfect School for Your Child

By Judy Molland

7 Tips for Making the Right Choice

As a teacher, parents often ask me about how to choose a school for their child, as if I have a secret formula that I can give them. I don't, but I can offer some helpful tips.

Just as you spend hours buying a car or finding a new home, so you should allot plenty of time to researching schools and assessing how they will work for your child. As Jessica Kelson, senior editor at Oakland-based GreatSchools, says: "This is where your child will spend almost half of their time. This is where your child's curiosity will be fed, interest piqued, friendships made and passion for learning stoked."

Keep in mind, as Harvard education professor psychologist Howard Gardner explains, "There is no such thing as a 'great' school in general. The question is 'What is best for my child?' My advice to parents is that you need to know your child and to be able to match your child's (and family's) interests, needs, values and fears with the school."

1 Get to know your child's unique needs. Your child is her own person, with her own wants, needs and ways of learning. Does she do well in a traditional, hierarchical type of institution or a more liberal environment? Is she introverted or social, and what are her special interests? Talk to your child's caregivers or teachers. And don't forget to ask your child what kind of school she would like to attend.

2 Consider the needs of your family. The perfect school for your child is not necessarily the best

for the rest of your family. If there's tuition, can you afford it? Could your other children all attend the same school? Can you set up carpools? What if you need after-school care because of your work hours? Issues like these are important to figure out before the start of the school year.

3 Go for a test drive. Visit the schools you're interested in during a regular school day. As you walk through the school, check out what the hallways look like. Does student artwork hang there? Is this a place where you would want your child to be? Ask to observe a classroom. Are all the students engaged, and is the classroom atmosphere lively? If the students are doing group work, are they on task or are they chatting about One Direction?

4 Check out multiple measures of achievement. These days, it's easy to go online and find all the test scores for a particular school. GreatSchools.org is an excellent place to do this, but use those scores with caution. As Gardner advises: "High test scores are great if they are a dividend of good teaching and serious learning – not if they are a product of teaching to the test." He urges parents to check out multiple measures over time, and also suggests that by asking to see student work, parents can tell whether schools are addressing issues of deep understanding.

5 Talk to other parents. Talk to friends and neighbors whose kids attend local schools. Question teachers you meet about where they would

School-Level Specifics

CHOOSING AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Kelson offers this advice: "Elementary school is so important – and so difficult because you need to pick the right fit for your kindergartner today and your future first-grader who'll be learning to read and do addition and subtraction, as well as your future fifth-grader who'll be writing reports, doing presentations and mastering long division." She suggests asking about these key grades, as well as researching reading groups and what extra programs are available, both for low achievers and for gifted students.

CHOOSING A MIDDLE SCHOOL

Consider middle school as the beginning of preparation for high school, and ask about where their graduates go to high school. Middle school can be tough for students (and for their parents!) as they may be changing classrooms throughout the day for the first time. Find out how the school works to make their students feel welcome. School

culture is especially important at this level because social interaction with peers is a top priority for middle school kids. Math tracking typically starts in middle school, so you'll want to find out what math classes each school offers and where those classes lead.

CHOOSING A HIGH SCHOOL

"When it comes to looking for a high school, the earlier you start your search, the better," Kelson advises, warning that the task can be overwhelming. "Take a look at course offerings. What classes get your teen excited?" You also want to know the school's graduation rate, as well as where students go after they graduate, whether to college or to other careers. In many high schools today, shadowing is a big event that happens every fall, as eighth-graders spend a day with a ninth-grader, experiencing the school firsthand. This is the best way for your child to know if a school is a good fit for him.

What are My Choices?

First, a note of caution: “public” or “private” doesn’t really tell you much about a school. There are terrific and lousy schools in both the public and the private sector.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Each school within a public school district serves students living in a specific area. But what if you’ve decided you want your child to attend a school he is not zoned for? Find out if your district offers any of these options:

- **Open enrollment.** This program allows you to choose where your child gets an education rather than simply being assigned to a school, based on where you live.
- **Magnet schools.** These special-focus schools may be located outside of your zoned school boundary. They usually have something special to offer that is distinct from a regular school, such as language immersion or an arts focus.
- **Charter schools.** These are publicly funded schools that have been exempted from certain regulations, in exchange for producing specific results set forth in each school’s charter. The application process for all three of these options varies by city and school district.

Different districts may also have varying school assignment policies, not solely based on geography. In San Francisco, for example, demand for the highest-performing schools is much greater than the capacity. For these schools, the district prioritizes applications from students with siblings already at the school, students who live in the

school’s attendance area and students who live in parts of the city with the lowest average test scores. The rest of the placements are determined by lottery. In Berkeley, elementary schools are grouped into three geographic zones. Students are assigned to one of the schools in the zone in which they live, based on preference rankings, but not necessarily the closest school. Sibling priority is given, and the district says 72 percent of families receive their first choice.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Most private schools charge tuition for their services, although a few schools are tuition-free, while others offer financial aid.

- **Religious or parochial schools.** These make up the majority of private schools in the United States and are most commonly operated by Catholic or Protestant churches. In general, your child doesn’t have to be a member of the related faith in order to attend the school. Many do not use the standardized tests required in public schools.
- **Independent schools.** These are nonprofit schools governed by elected boards of trustees. They are funded through tuition payments, charitable contributions, and endowments. These schools should all be accredited by the National Association of Independent Schools.
- **Homeschooling.** A growing number of parents are choosing to educate their own children, a choice supported by a wealth of online resources, including sites where parents can connect with other homeschoolers.

send their own kids if they had a choice. You can also ask local children what they think of their schools. If you’ve settled on one or two schools, find out how the parents of currently enrolled students feel about the schools.

6 Find out about after-school activities. This is especially important if you know you’re going to need regular after-school care. But you also want to see if the school offers sports, clubs or other extracurricular programs. The sense of community could also extend to evening and weekend events. Some wonderful examples I’ve helped create in my years teaching include a Maypole celebration and a “Welcome to Egypt” evening presented by an excited group of fifth-graders.

7 Follow your instincts. Once you’ve completed all the hard work of investigating potential schools, your final decision should come down to

what feels right, both to you and to your child. As a 10th-grader, my son was accepted into a high-achieving private school, but he and I both felt uncomfortable during our visits there and so decided on a different, less pretentious environment, where he did really well. Unlike the first school, this one was very diverse, and the principal immediately made my son feel welcome. ■

Judy Molland, a Redwood City freelance writer and teacher, writes frequently about education for *Bay Area Parent*.

Video Tips on Touring

- **Elementary school:** www.greatschools.org/gk/videos/choose-elementary-school-video/
- **Middle school:** www.greatschools.org/gk/videos/types-of-middle-school/
- **High school:** www.greatschools.org/gk/videos/types-of-high-school/