

Choosing a School

Choosing a school for your child, whether they are just beginning school or transferring from another school, is a choice that has tremendous implications throughout his/her personal and educational experience. As a parent, you do have choices! For some, the public school closest to home will be adequate to meet the needs of their child. But for others, sadly, a child/school mismatch can result in failing grades, lack of motivation, behavioral problems and a host of other issues.

We at WFLS recognize that the decision about where your child goes to school is one of the most important decisions a parent can face. Remember your child spends more time on a school campus than he does at home during waking hours. As adults, when we are faced with choices that have a lasting impact on our well-being, be it financial, social, professional etc., we wisely take our time, gather the necessary information, consider the long-term implications, and make a decision. We follow this course time and time again throughout our lives, whether buying a house or a car, changing careers, or relationship decisions. These decisions are ones that involve a commitment to learn as much as we can about the impact that our choices will have on our lives. Doesn't it make sense that we should apply the same amount of forethought we take when buying a car to the school and classroom in which our child will be spending the majority of his/her waking hours?

We offer these practical, easy to use guidelines to assist you in your search:

STEP 1. When considering a new school, you have the right to **interview administrators, teachers**, and if they are willing - other parents. Don't be afraid to ask challenging questions - all of those "What if...." questions. Trust your instinct and look for a level of confidence in their ability to address your issues appropriately. Ask to see the school's discipline policy and question administrators and/or teachers to see how they would handle circumstances that you have ever faced with your child at other schools. This is a time to gather as much information as possible in anticipation of any circumstance that you imagine might exist with your child. This is your right, whether considering a public or private school. Keep in mind that the time to propose such interviews should not be the few days before school begins when everyone on staff is busy preparing for the new school year. Be sensitive to their needs as well as yours.

STEP 2 - Consider the nature, energy and personal needs of your child – apart from a strong academic commitment, is he/she socially active or shy and contemplative? Are the extracurricular activities they are interested in supported by the school or can they be supplemented outside? Does the school follow a traditional instruction model (lecture with textbook as a guide) or is it more interactive with a multidisciplinary approach where cooperation among students and teachers is important? Are they child-centered or teacher-centered? Is the incorporation of teacher/student interaction important to you? For those socially minded families, look for strong social curriculum. Ask yourself if quantity that one generally gets in a large classroom/school is important or more of the quality relationships one can experience in a small more intimate classroom. The school should be involved in community service and promote awareness of the community

around them. Overall, make sure that the personality of your child corresponds with the personality of the school. Children are usually able to sense whether the atmosphere of a school is aligned with what is important to them after spending some time on the school grounds and in the classrooms. Keep in mind, there may well be some resistance to the unfamiliar or to change.

STEP 3 - Look for experienced, enthusiastic teachers!! Avoid a campus whose staff is either overwhelmingly young and inexperienced, or older yet have experienced teacher burnout. A healthy balance in age and experience is important and the staff should be representative of the community in which they teach. Look for happy, satisfied teachers who seem to be passionate about what they do and have a positive relationship with open lines of communication with the administration. Look carefully at the demeanor of the entire staff not just your child's teacher. If the teachers are smiling, friendly and helpful, this is a very good sign. If faces appeared to be stressed out and overworked, this is not a good sign.

STEP 4 - Get a sense of environment to see if it feels welcoming and inviting. Take careful note as to how the teachers and administrators interact with your child the first time that they see him/her. Do they bend down and shake their hand and introduce themselves to your child, or do they focus on answering your questions, giving you all of the attention while forgetting about your son/daughter? Look in the teachers classrooms to see if they are decorated in a manner that is inviting and comfortable for students. Look to see if they have books available so students can settle in and feel comfortable learning. Schools develop a culture that can either be healthy and positive, or in a few cases, unhealthy and undesirable.

STEP 5 -When looking at prospective new schools, ask if you can attend a back-to-school night or a parent night in which the school and parents get together and share information with each other. You will quickly discover the respect (or lack thereof) that exist between school and home and know whether this is the right place for your child. These things are vitally important. Inquire if the school offers activities that bring parents, teachers, students, and administrators together. For example – if the elementary school hosts a variety of events all aimed at promoting the home/school partnership. One such example is “Skate Night,” a night held each quarter where administrators, teachers, students and their parents all roller skate together for a few hours in a fun, friendly environment that promotes the home/school relationship.

STEP 6 – Get Involved! - Find out if the school has committees in which parents can serve. Ask if these committees are ones in which decisions are made about the way the school operates, not merely fund-raising events. Good schools recognize that there is an abundance of wonderful talent in the parent body of a school and they choose to involve the parents.

STEP 7 – While you gather information about the new school, you may share your findings with your child if they desire. Your findings should be impartial and should demonstrate to your child that you are preparing yourselves so that you can make a well-informed decision. Be sure to let your child know that after the research stage and interviewing stage, a decision will be made by such and such a date. Remember that you are the parent. Reassure them that while his or her continued input is a very important component in your decision-making process, ultimately the choice will be made by “you the parents.” Children in their younger years are not emotionally or intellectually capable of making such decisions and can find the pressure to do so very stressful. Making a school choice can be agonizing work for a parent as well, but as your child sees your commitment to making the best choice for his/her well-being, they are learning valuable lessons about how to make well-informed, intelligent choices. Through your modeling such practices, the likelihood of your child having a successful school year is dramatically increased.

STEP 8- - To ease the burden of changing to a new school, consider facilitating your child meeting potential classmates by enrolling your child in a summer program prior to the start of the new school year, with both old and new friends. Find other kids that your child is friends with and see if they can participate in summer programs sponsored by the new school so that your son/daughter will have an opportunity to meet teachers and classmates from the new school well in advance of the first day of classes. In other words, avoid having your child show up to school the first day as a complete stranger and feeling alienated from the administration, teachers and other students. Discuss the importance of establishing a connection with their classmates by offering to facilitate after school activities that are fun and aimed at making new, healthy friendships.

STEP 9- Transitioning from one school to another can be difficult. Moving from pre-school to elementary school is challenging enough without having to experience it more than once. It is important that your child not change schools any more often than needed. If a new school is chosen, it is imperative that you provide your child with everything you can do to make this transition as smooth as possible and then stand behind your commitment both for you and your child as well as the school. This is vital for all involved.

IN CLOSING: The key to the start of a successful school year is knowing that your child has found an appropriate learning environment in which administration, staff, and students, all have a healthy respect for each other and are in alignment with the values important to you and your family. In addition, it is important to know that your child is seen and respected as an individual who is there to learn about the world around them as well as to discover wonderful things about themselves and gain character development. An extraordinary learning environment offers life-long skills for living and assists students to create their path to a happy purpose-filled life.

*The staff at Wisdom For Life School
honors you and is here to support you on your journey.*

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In Summary.....

1. Do not be afraid to ask questions of the administration, teachers, and most importantly, parents whose children have attended the school and whose opinions you value and trust.
2. Respectfully challenge the administration in anticipating any issue your child might face to see if they can confidently address your concerns.
3. Consider the nature of your child and see if it is closely aligned with the nature of the school. Trust your child's instincts!
4. Look for happy teachers! Go beyond merely looking at your child's potential teacher and examine the overall staff to get a feel for the culture of the school.
5. Get involved. Don't wait until a progress report rolls around in order to participate in your child's learning experience. Join a committee and volunteer to help the school in any way that you can. Successful schools depend on parents just as parents depend on successful schools.
6. When considering attending a new school or transferring to a new school, ask to attend a back-to-school night, an open house night, or parent night. Look to see how teachers interact with administration, other teachers, and in particular your child upon their first meeting.
7. When considering a new school, keep your child involved in the process. Reassure them that their feelings are a priority in your decision-making, but let them know that ultimately the decision is yours. By modeling the process of making well-informed decisions, you are providing an invaluable lesson for your child.
8. Prevent your child from feeling like a “stranger” in his or her new school by facilitating play dates, summer camps, or summer activities that begin to introduce them to new classmates and perhaps new teachers well in advance of their first day of school.
9. Transition between schools is difficult for most children so make wise decisions from the start and stand behind your decision with full commitment to it being a positive experience for everyone.
10. Look to see that the school values your child as an individual and that his/her learning needs are recognized by the entire teaching staff.