
A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right School for their Child

A PARENT'S TASK



AMERICAN FEDERATION
for Children

From the time most children are born, their parents begin contemplating the “what ifs” of their child’s life and their responsibilities as his or her parent. One of the most crucial questions a parent faces is choosing which educational environment to place their child in with the hopes of maximizing that child’s growth academically, socially and in the development of their personal character. Fortunately for parents, the days of not having a choice and being forced to send their children to the nearest public school are over, and with open enrollment, the advent of charters and school choice programs, families have more options than ever before.

Many schools claim to present the most dynamic educational experience, seeking to gain the parent’s trust and the ability to educate their child, but evaluating school quality can be a challenging task. While school websites and social media accounts tend to present the best of what the school has to offer, the inner workings of the school and its methods in educating students and working with parents to promote growth in their child are not always as obvious or out in the open. For a parent to truly assess the quality of a school, there are some important aspects to focus on that help paint the picture of school quality.

The American Federation for Children’s “Parent School Chooser Guide” is designed to help parents identify their priorities for their child’s education and formation in an organized process that allows for the collection of information and organized interactions with prospective schools that may serve their children. This tool not only provides the steps to engaging in the school assessment process, but also provides key questions parents can ask to ascertain the necessary information to make informed decisions about the educational landscape their child will be immersed in daily.

STEP 1:

RECOGNIZING YOUR PRIORITIES FOR YOUR CHILD

There are numerous options available to families in choosing a school. Keeping in mind there is no “one size fits all” option that is right for every student makes examining your priorities for your child’s education vitally important. Begin the process by giving thought to what aspects of your child’s education will be most important to you and them as you research schools, tour them, and speak with school personnel. Write the priorities in the tool below taking some time to add a note or two about why these things are important to you and what you hope to see from the ideal school as it relates to these priorities.

Common priorities to consider are: academic program, teacher preparedness and educational background, overall instructional philosophy of the school, school safety, student formation, location, class size and school population, cost to attend, co-curricular programs, administration background and vision for school growth, student and teacher diversity, faith formation opportunities (in parochial schools), course offerings, services for students with learning needs, community dynamics, and student graduation and matriculation rates.

Priority 1:	
Notes:	
Priority 2:	
Notes:	
Priority 3:	
Notes:	
Priority 4:	
Notes:	
Priority 5:	
Notes:	

STEP 2:
**WHICH TYPES OF SCHOOLS
WILL YOU CONSIDER?**

It is important for parents to realize that the school landscape today is very different from the one they were educated in. School options abound in most states and cities, and there are many different types of schools than best fit the needs of their student(s). Listed below are the various forms of schools that exist in most areas for parents to choose from. As you read the list, take a moment to write pros and cons of each model as it pertains to the needs of not only your child, but also you as their parent.

TYPES OF SCHOOLS TO CONSIDER:

- **Private Schools-** Established and operated by private organizations. Families must pay tuition for their child to attend the school. Tuition rates vary; however, scholarships are usually available through school choice programs such as tax credit scholarships, ESA's, and vouchers.
- **Public Charter Schools-** Public charter schools are funded by public education dollars and are free to attend and open to all students. Charter schools have more program flexibility than traditional public schools.
- **Magnet Schools-** Magnet schools are traditional public schools with focused curriculum revolving around topics such as performing arts, STEM, business and humanities. These schools are free and funded by public education dollars.
- **Traditional Public Schools-** State run schools that adhere to state mandated policies, academic programs and procedures. Public schools are free to attend and are funded by state education dollars. Students are traditionally zoned to attend traditional public schools in their boundaries set forward by the state unless open enrollment options exist.
- **Virtual Schools-** Virtual learning schools are available over the internet, and in some cases, in person. These courses can be administered 100% online. Virtual schools can be in the form of a public, public charter, or private school. There are also hybrid models where some content is offered virtually, and other content is offered through a brick and mortar school.

STEP 3:

RESEARCHING PROSPECTIVE SCHOOLS

Now that you have your priorities outlined and have assessed the types of schools you are willing to consider for your child, let's move into the next and most important phase, research.

It is important to take a multi-faceted approach to researching prospective schools. Recognizing that no one source of information can provide a completely accurate picture of a school, it is important to do research in a variety of ways.

Some of the ways a school can be researched are:

Assess the school through its online presence: school website and social media accounts

Most school websites are meant to be recruiting tools. Here you should find the attributes of the school they think are most important to prospective parents and students. School websites should contain information about academic programs, schedules, co-curricular activities, and student discipline expectations.

Take a tour of the school

This may be one of the most important research opportunities a parent has. When touring the school, parents and students have the chance to see the school facilities in-person, ask questions of school personnel, and see if what they have seen on the school website matches what they see in person.

Talk with current families and students to assess their level of satisfaction

This type of research can prove to be very informative and fruitful for prospective parents and students. Talking with families who are currently enrolled in the school can offer a true picture of what the school, faculty, administration, and programs are like. It can also confirm prospective parent perceptions about the school. One word of caution for this type of research; make sure you talk to at least three different parents from three different families. One family's experience, be it positive or negative, may not be a complete indicator of the school's overall performance.

Attend school events open to the public

Attending events at the school such as athletic contests, fine arts performances, and other community gatherings can provide great insight to the type of community your family may be joining. Attending these events is also a good way to meet new parents and ask questions about the school.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK

Knowing what questions to ask is not always the easiest task in assessing the school. Just know there are no questions you shouldn't ask when it comes to the wellbeing of your child and the environment you will be placing them in.

In order to help the "what to ask" conundrum, here are some suggestions broken down by area of interest.

Assessing Academic Quality:

1. What methods for instruction are used with students?
2. What testing tools does the school use to collect student data relating to academic performance?
3. Where can I find a copy of the curriculum standards the school uses?
4. What is the school's grading scale and are there homework policies?
5. What tools are available to the students to engage and enhance their learning? What technological supports are students given access to? Can parents access these supports at home?
6. What support systems are in place to bolster student learning and help those with deficiencies?
7. How are grades and behavior progress communicated to parents?

Assessing Student Formation

1. Are retreats, assemblies with topics relating to social and emotional issues students encounter, parent information sessions on engaging and supporting students, and community service projects offered throughout the year?
2. What co-curricular opportunities are available to students?
3. What are the behavioral expectations of students and how is discipline handled?

Assessing the Overall Vitality of a School

1. What parent groups operate in the school and how can a new parent join?
2. Does the school have, and annually review, safety and crisis management plans? Is local law enforcement engaged in the formation of these plans and do they participate in the school's safety drills?
3. What percentage of students graduate to high school/college? Which high schools/colleges do your students attend?

Assessing Cost

1. What is the annual cost of tuition?
2. Can tuition payments be broken down to a monthly payment plan?
3. How is tuition money collected?
4. What scholarships are available to offset the cost of attending the school?
5. What groups or organizations do you work with that can help us find scholarships?
6. Where can I find a list of scholarship providers your school works with?
7. Are there any tuition discounts for being members of the church?

STEP 4:
**ASSESS YOUR DATA AND CHOOSE
YOUR SCHOOL**

By now you likely have a stack of notes, handouts from prospective schools, and printed materials from school websites. The best way to make final decisions and sift through all this information is to make a pro/con list for each school. Your “pros” are the positives of the schools that meet or exceed your expectations and would make you want to send your child there. Your “cons” would be the negatives or things that did not meet your expectations. Keep in mind that it is unlikely you will find a school that has no “cons”. No school is completely perfect, but you are seeking the schools that check the most boxes in terms of your priorities. Here is a sample of what a pro/con worksheet for a school could look like:

SCHOOL DECISION MAKER PRO/CON SHEET					
School Name:					
School Type:					
Tuition:					
<p style="text-align: center;">My Priorities:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> <p>5. _____</p> <table style="width: 100%;"><tr><td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"><p>Pros:</p><p>1. _____</p><p>2. _____</p><p>3. _____</p><p>4. _____</p><p>5. _____</p><p>6. _____</p><p>7. _____</p></td><td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"><p>Cons:</p><p>1. _____</p><p>2. _____</p><p>3. _____</p><p>4. _____</p><p>5. _____</p><p>6. _____</p><p>7. _____</p></td></tr></table> <table style="width: 100%;"><tr><td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"><p>Overall Positives:</p><p>_____</p><p>_____</p><p>_____</p></td><td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"><p>Overall Negatives:</p><p>_____</p><p>_____</p><p>_____</p></td></tr></table>		<p>Pros:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> <p>5. _____</p> <p>6. _____</p> <p>7. _____</p>	<p>Cons:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> <p>5. _____</p> <p>6. _____</p> <p>7. _____</p>	<p>Overall Positives:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>Overall Negatives:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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Keep in mind that the pro/con sheet can have as many entries as you like on either side. In the positives and negatives position write out your thoughts. It is important to emphasize that this should be a family exercise. Allow your child to give their thoughts as well to create buy-in with the process and choice.

Now that all the leg-work is done, it is time to make your decision on which school will best serve your child and the needs of your family. Hopefully, the right choice will be evident to you and your child. If not, look back through your notes again and see if either you or your child have any other questions you have not gotten answers to. If this is the case, contact the schools you are trying to choose between and get those answers to serve as your tie breaker. You can also consider expanding your priority list to help make a final decision.

Once you have chosen the school that fits your needs, there is still one last step.

STEP 5: THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS AND ENROLLMENT

After making your decision, contact your chosen school and let them know you are interested in enrolling. If the school has an admissions process, the administration or school employee responsible for enrolling students will explain in more detail the steps you need to follow to apply/enroll. Please keep in mind that it is important to start this process immediately, especially if there are scholarships available for schools that have tuition requirements to attend.

It is also important, if you are choosing a private school, to learn more about the scholarships you may be able to take advantage of to help off-set the cost of your child attending the school. Many schools accept school choice scholarships in various states that make private schools more affordable for parents. To find out what states have private school choice legislation to off-set the cost of tuition, visit the American Federation for Children website and click on your state in the interactive map. Once you have learned about what options may be available to you, make sure to talk to school personnel about eligibility and applications for the scholarship available.

Whatever school you have chosen for your child, make sure to be an active participant in their education. Talk with their teachers, read materials that come home from the school, and most importantly, don't be afraid to ask questions or make inquiries when you have them. Enrolling your child in a particular school is only the beginning. Their success is as dependent upon you as what goes on in the classroom each day.