

INFORMATION ABOUT ADMISSIONS

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Choosing a school can be challenging. The key is to focus on the setting that's best for your child even as you navigate the ins and outs of the application process.

Browse through this document to learn about:

- Creating a school wish list
- Asking the right questions to help narrow down your choices
- Getting the most out of open houses, school visits, and interviews
- Considerations as you try to find the right school fit
- Understanding the nuts and bolts of the application process
- Working within the admissions timeline
- Frequently asked questions
- Other resources that may be helpful to you

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CREATING A WISH LIST

Work with your family to determine your ideal educational community. Ask yourself whether the school would be:

- Small or large
- A day school or boarding school
- Coeducational or single-sex
- Traditional or progressive
- Religious or secular
- A source of special programs in, for example, the arts, sports, or computers
- Representing a diverse community
- Sensitive to your child's special needs, whether for rigorous intellectual preparation, for programs devoted to average learners, or for a curriculum geared to students with learning disabilities

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QUESTIONS TO ASK SCHOOLS

Call potential schools to request admissions literature, and examine their websites. Then compare what you read there with what you're looking for in your ideal school. Among the questions you should ask yourself about each school:

BASIC FACTS

- How many students does the school have?
- Where is it, and how does the location affect your transportation needs? Does the school provide transportation? How much does it cost?
- For high schools, what are the graduation requirements? What percentage of students enter college, and what kinds of colleges do they attend?
- Is the school accredited, and if so, by whom?

EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

- What is the school's mission, and does its philosophy appeal to you?
- Does it have a particular educational focus?
- Is the atmosphere competitive? Nurturing? Or what?

BEYOND THE BASICS

- What types of learning experiences are available—in class, on the playing field, in extracurricular activities, and in community service?
- If the school has a religious orientation, how does it fit your family?
- Does the school appear to have a diverse student body and faculty?
- Do the school materials discuss parental involvement?
- Do the kids in the pictures look like your child?

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COSTS

- What is the tuition?
- Are there extra charges, such as for books, lab fees, transportation, and so on?
- What are the school's financing options?
- What is the financial aid application process? When are the deadlines?

AND FINALLY

- Does the school seem to meet your child's needs?

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SCHOOL VISITS & INTERVIEWS

As important as it is to read admission materials and websites, there is no substitute for visiting the campus.

All schools have their own timelines and procedures. You'll have to check each one to see the order in which they recommend attending an open house, scheduling a parent visit or student visit, and setting up a personal interview. In addition, some schools allow prospective students to attend school for a "shadow day," often with an assigned buddy, so they can experience the school first-hand.

THE OPEN HOUSE

When you're narrowing down your choices, an excellent early step is attending the open house.

Although the majority of open houses occur in the fall, some schools have one right after the first of the year. Most schools list open houses in the admissions section of their websites; if you can't find the information there, call the admissions office. Check to see if you need to register or if you can just drop in.

Also find out if there will be a formal welcome at the open house and what time it will occur. This brief presentation is an ideal opportunity to hear how the school head and admissions director speak of the school.

What an open house is good for:

- Seeing how the facilities look.
- Gathering some information, in writing or by talking briefly to teachers, about particular programs.
- Getting a first impression of what the students, teachers, and families are like.

What an open house is not good for:

- Asking in-depth questions about almost anything, including your child—it's just too crowded and busy. Save those questions for a personal tour or interview.

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Tip: If at the open house you take a tour conducted by a current student, try to ask:

- Where else did you apply?
- Why did you choose this school?
- If you could change anything about this school, what would it be and why?

Write down any additional thoughts on the day you visit, while impressions are fresh in your mind. These notes will be useful for making comparisons as well as forming a list of questions for personal tours and interviews.

THE VISIT AND INTERVIEW

A campus visit and personal interview are crucial for understanding the atmosphere and the people that make up a school.

Inquire at each school about how the tour and interview are handled. Some schools schedule both at one time. Others offer tours first (sometimes in a group) and then invite actual applicants back later for an interview and a half- or full-day classroom visit. Some schools ask the parents to sit in on the interview with the student; at others, an admissions officer will talk to the student alone.

The Tour

When you schedule your visits, allow enough time to get a feel for each school. Bring your wish list, and, once again, be prepared to take notes. Among things to notice during the tour:

- Do the students you see seem productive, engaged, and happy?
- Is the campus clean, well-lighted, and secure?
- Does what you see reflect the school's stated mission?
- Does the school feel like a community? Are students interacting with teachers outside and inside the classroom?

The Interview

Think of the interview as a two-way process: You should find out more about the school. And you should help the admission officers to better understand your child. But you won't have time for everything. Set priorities so you can find the answers to the five to eight questions that matter most to you and your child.

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Among the questions you could ask during the interview:

Educational matters

- What will students of your child's age be expected to study? (This information may be available in a curriculum guide the admissions director can give you.)
- About how many hours of homework does the typical student have each week?
- How does the school measure individual achievement and progress—through grades, portfolio review, or something else?
- Does the school use a system of faculty advisers to guide students? How does it work?
- What is the school's educational emphasis: Is it competitive? Nurturing?
- How deep are the offerings in any areas of particular interest to your child, such as music, writing, or a certain sport?
- If there's a religious component, how does it mesh with the academics?

About the teachers

- What's the student-teacher ratio in your child's grade?
- If this is an elementary school, how many teachers are in each room?
- What are the backgrounds of the faculty? (You may be able to get this information from faculty profiles on the website or in admissions materials.)
- Is the faculty diverse enough to provide a variety of kinds of role models?
- Do teachers have opportunities for continuing professional development?

About the administration

- Are faculty and staff involved in decision-making and curriculum development?
- What kind of counseling and support services are offered?
- What kind of leadership and governance does the school have?

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School-family relations

- How does the school encourage parents to get involved?
- How, and how often, does the school communicate with the family?
- Can you call or e-mail teachers when you need to? How difficult is it to make an appointment with the school head?

General questions

- Have students from schools your child has attended also attended here? Did this seem to be a good fit?
- What is the school's attrition rate?

Most important of all, at the end of each interview and visit, ask yourself:

- Can you picture your child growing in this environment?

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FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

As you study school materials and visit campuses, pay especially close attention to these factors:

1. **Location.** Convenience matters, especially if you want your child to take part in school productions and go to ball games. Having to drive 45 minutes each way to school is a serious drawback.
2. **Size.** Find out both (a) average class size and (b) overall number of students in the school. Then think about what these statistics mean. Social opportunities may not be as great in a small school, but your child may have more of a chance to be captain of a team or president of a club.
3. **Educational philosophy.** Dig deep into this issue. Ask questions such as: How are classes actually taught? How are expectations conveyed? How are students tested? Then sit in on classes to see how the philosophy plays out. If there's a religious component, also think about how well it fits your family.
4. **Curriculum.** Look carefully at the order in which such core courses as math, the humanities, and science are taught. Can you see a logic to how the subjects fit together? Is there a strong interdisciplinary emphasis, so that what students study in English meshes with history?
5. **Faculty.** Examine the faculty list (often found online or in the recruitment materials). Where did the teachers go to college? Do their degrees match what they teach? Do they have advanced degrees in the subjects they teach?
6. **Facilities.** In addition to considering the overall condition of the school, think about special needs. If your child is interested in drama or sports, does the school have a good theater and playing fields? How plentiful and up-to-date are computers for student use?

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THE APPLICATION PROCESS

You've created your wish list, researched several schools, and gone to open houses. Now it's time to create a short list of the schools your family wants to pursue and begin to apply. Keep in mind that each school's admission office is there to help you with the process. The staff wants to be sure that the match between your child and the school is a good one.

What you'll need to provide in the typical application package:

- A completed application form, available from the school website or by calling the admission office
- Your child's most up-to-date academic transcript, with grades, from his or her current school
- Past standardized test results
- Teacher recommendations
- Results of any required standardized admissions tests and/or school-administered entrance exams
- A formal interview with your child (Note: Elementary schools often require other kinds of evaluation, such as teacher observations, school-administered group tests, and/or individual diagnostic tests for young children. These methods offer a more useful measurement of a child's readiness, intelligence, and developmental abilities.)

Depending on your child's age, some schools may also ask for:

- parent statements
- student writing samples
- student artwork/portfolios

Don't forget:

- All schools have different admission procedures. Review each school's requirements carefully.
- Generally you must complete each selected school's application form to trigger the rest of the admission process and be considered by the school. It's up to you to keep track of what each school requires and make sure all the parts get turned in by that all-important deadline.
- If you're applying for financial assistance, it makes sense to work on the admission and aid applications at the same time—even though they probably have different deadlines.

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- Do not miss the application deadlines. But if you do: Realize that some schools have what are called rolling admissions. They admit students throughout the academic year and during the summer until their classes are full.

THE NOTIFICATION PROCESS

When Will You Find Out?

Some schools notify all families by a specific deadline, often in March or April. Other schools offer rolling admission—meaning they don't set one deadline but continue to accept applications until their classes are filled. They may give you a decision once your child's application file is complete.

Around the time you receive word about your child's acceptance, you should also learn about financial aid awards. If the grant you receive does not meet your needs, or if you are not awarded any aid, contact the school's financial aid officer to learn about other options.

What Determines Who Gets In?

Admission officers take many factors into consideration before making a decision on each applicant. Among the factors influencing your child's candidacy:

- Past academic performance and previous school records
- Recommendations from teachers/counselors
- Special strengths and talents (academic, artistic, etc.)
- Results of standardized tests
- Personal insights from your child's essay
- Impressions gathered from the formal interview with your child
- Your alumni connections to the school
- Your sibling or other connections to the school
- Your child's potential contribution to the life of the school
- Number of applicants and number of spaces available

Note: No private school weighs factors in the same way, or follows this exact list. One school may value your child's achievement record highly; another might be impressed by his or her theatrical talents.

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WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE ACCEPTED

If more than one school offers your child admission, most families advise you to follow your heart. Discuss your decision as a family. Revisit your notes and wish list one last time to make sure you've fulfilled your priorities. Be sure that your child will thrive in the school community you choose.

If you still just aren't sure:

- Consider a second visit to the school. Perhaps your child can do a "shadow day" with another student.
- Ask to meet some teachers, especially in areas of particular interest to your child.
- Talk to alumni or current families—especially ones who've come from the same school as your child.
- Encourage your child to talk to other students, especially ones with similar interests.

Once you do decide:

- Be sure to contact the school you choose by the reply deadline.
- Let all schools where you were admitted know of your final decision so they can contact other families on their waiting list.
- Return your signed enrollment contract and tuition deposit.

After you send in your contract and deposit, your family will be considered part of the school community. You may have the opportunity to participate in a student match/buddy program, or special gatherings. If all has gone well, you'll feel that you've done more than just find a good school. You've found the right school for your child.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE REJECTED

Consider other schools. If you've noticed other schools in your area that have rolling admissions—meaning they don't set one deadline but continue to accept applications until their classes are filled—this is the time to look into their suitability for your child.

Ask the school for feedback about what factors made the difference. Try to approach the issue in a nonjudgmental way; tell the admissions staff you want to get information that can help your child do better in the future.

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ADMISSION TIMELINE

Although each school has a different admission process and different deadlines, the following offers a typical picture of a school admission timeline.

AUGUST

- Finalize schools that you plan to inquire about.

SEPTEMBER

- Request admissions and financial aid material by phone or online.
- Check with schools to see if they're participating in a local school fair where you can gather material and impressions from several schools at once.
- Review admissions materials to determine which schools to visit.
- Note and keep a calendar of pertinent deadlines for admission and financial aid and procedures, such as when schools start taking reservations for individual tours and interviews.
- Register for any needed standardized tests.
- Review the test websites to learn procedures and see sample questions; consider whether you want to buy a test-preparation book.
- Call to schedule individual tours, interviews, class visits, and "shadow days." Ask elementary schools about their test schedules and how to make an appointment.

OCTOBER

- Visit open houses.
- Call to schedule tours, interviews, class visits, and school-based tests if you haven't already.
- Attend information sessions and take tours.
- Finalize school(s) to which you will make application.
- Take standardized test.

NOVEMBER

- Follow through on activities you may not have completed, such as scheduling tours, interviews, class visits, and standardized or school-based tests.

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- Continue to watch for open houses you may want to attend.
- Start lining up teacher recommendations.
- Start working on applications, financial aid forms, student questionnaires, essays, etc.

DECEMBER

- Continue to watch for any open houses of interest.
- Complete any remaining applications, questionnaires, etc. Most application materials are due in January or early February.

JANUARY

- Pay attention to deadlines: Most schools' applications, tests scores, references, transcripts, and financial aid forms are due in January or February.
- Request transcripts from the current school at the end of your child's first semester.

FEBRUARY

- Don't miss the deadlines: Most schools' applications are due in February at the latest.
- Do school visits or shadow days for the student if you haven't already.

MARCH

- Watch for school decisions starting in mid-March.
- Watch for financial aid decisions about this same time.

APRIL

- Sign and return enrollment contracts and deposits.

MAY TO SEPTEMBER

- Attend events and activities for new parents and students during spring and summer.

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ADMISSION FAQs

MAKING THE BEST IMPRESSION

Are there things we should not do on the school tour and interview?

Students shouldn't chew gum, shake hands limply, or fail to say hello and make eye contact. Parents shouldn't smoke or use their laptop or Blackberry. Everyone should turn cell phones off. No one should text or tweet.

How should students dress for the tour and interview?

Look at the pictures in the catalog and on the website and dress the way the other students do—whether that means a coat and tie or blue jeans. (No matter what, leave the baseball cap at home.) Parents, too, should avoid overdressing or underdressing—the tour is neither a party nor a trip to the grocery store.

When meeting with admissions officers, how many questions are too many questions?

On the one hand, admissions officers definitely want to provide you with the information you need. On the other hand: Especially during group tours, no one likes a time hog—the type who dominates discussion with questions that pertain only to their child or that could easily be answered in admissions materials or on the website. Don't get yourself labeled as picky and difficult from the start.

How much information should we disclose?

Seeking admission to a school is a lot like interviewing for a job. You and your child want to make a good impression and get the offer. You don't want to trip yourselves up by telling tales that may reflect on your child in a less-than-ideal way. At the same time, if your child has special needs that you hope the school will meet, it's understandable that you would want to address them—and that the school would benefit from knowing about them.

It's best for you and the school if you're honest about the child's needs. Maybe the need concerns ADHD, or the fact that the child is in counseling, or in occupational or speech therapy.

If that means your child is not admitted, perhaps it's because the school already has a maximum number of time-intensive children at that grade level or doesn't have the facilities or expertise to meet your child's needs. And in that case, the school wouldn't be right for your child anyway. As one

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educational consultant notes, if you mislead the school or withhold information, it won't know what it needs to ensure a successful experience.

My child has learning disabilities. When and how should I bring this up?

To find out if a certain school offers special services for learning disabilities, look carefully at its website and admission materials. Your state's independent school association could be another resource. If this research indicates that the school has the services your child needs, talk to the admissions staff about it during your interview.

If nothing points to the availability of these services, the question of when to bring it up depends on how severe the disability is. The more severe, the sooner you should ask, so you know whether or not the school should even be on your list.

If the disabilities are not severe, during the interview ask a question like this: "What do you do for students with mild learning disabilities?" and "What kind of training do your staff members have in regard to learning disabilities?" The latter is a good way to find out if the school has a learning specialist on staff. From there you can ask about specific accommodations, such as extra time during tests.

The presence of learning disabilities should not be a strike against your child. However, just as you wouldn't accept a school that couldn't serve your child's needs, schools that lack the necessary programs and teachers would probably not see your child as a good fit for their offerings.

ADMISSION NUTS AND BOLTS

How should we request the needed materials from our child's current school?

Chances are your current school has a routine for handling parent requests for academic transcripts and teacher recommendations. Early on, talk to the members of the office staff to find out:

- When they start accepting requests
- How many stamped, self-addressed envelopes you should include
- Anything you can do to make the process go more smoothly

Remember: The school is doing you a favor by providing these materials. The staff is more likely to help if you allow plenty of time and make a point of saying thank you.

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How do we choose the right people to provide recommendations?

To get a sense of what your child is like as a student and an individual, most schools will give you forms that you need to give to two or three references. Often schools want recommendations from teachers of a couple of core courses, such as math and English, and possibly from one other person. But be sure to check. Exactly what a school wants in the way of references will depend on your child's age and the school's own requirements.

Don't solicit letters from people just because they're prominent members of your community unless they know your child well. For example, don't request a letter from your congressperson unless your child interned with the person. And take care to provide the number of recommendations the school requests—no more and no less.

How important are entrance tests?

Some private schools assign great value to test results. However, it is just as true that many schools regard testing as only one part of the application process. Many place equal value on the applicant's campus interview, the student's record of achievement, teacher recommendations, and student/parent written statements.

In short, test scores cannot tell the full story about your child—and members of the admission staff recognize this limitation, even as they require testing.

What if, instead of being accepted or rejected, we get wait-listed?

Call the school and ask:

- How many students are on the waiting list?
- How many on the list are boys and how many are girls? How many are alumni children or siblings?
- How long is the staff likely to keep the waiting list active?
- What's the best time to check back in?
- Realistically speaking, how many students are likely to come off the waiting list?
- Realistically speaking, what are your child's chances?

If the school is definitely your top choice, and if you'll attend if accepted, say so. If you have other supporting materials that will help your case—such as a later report card with improved grades, or an award notice—send that in. Show your enthusiasm, but don't badger.

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What if we missed the application deadlines?

There is no harm in calling the schools you're most interested in to ask if they will still accept your application. If they're highly competitive and received many more applications than they have room for, they will probably say no. If they still have openings, they may encourage you to go ahead and try.

Otherwise, look for schools in your area that have rolling admissions—meaning they don't set one deadline but continue to accept applications until their classes are filled. Also, take a look at the website of the test provider, SSAT, which includes a listing of schools (searchable by location, type, and name) that may not be fully enrolled by their usual deadlines.

Beyond the admission criteria, how do schools make their decisions?

Here are some factors to keep in mind.

- Schools want to admit the students for whom their programs will be most rewarding. If your child has needs that a given school can't meet, neither the child, nor you, nor the school will be satisfied with the experience.
- Schools have to consider a particular class as a whole. A school wants all its activities, clubs, and sports to be well subscribed—which is why it doesn't want to admit more soccer players than its team has slots for while leaving the orchestra without a first violinist. The school needs to develop a well-rounded complement of kids who will learn from each other and from the teachers already on staff.