

Feature Be Choosy

One School, Two School, This School, That

Choosing the Best School for Your Child

By Tammy Ellingson

It's open season—open-house season that is, and time to get schooled on schools. So round them up, all of them—not your kids, but your questions. If you don't ask, you won't know, and what you don't know could goop up the works like a kindergartener with an uncapped bottle of glue.

Oh, the Places You Should Go

Back in the day, there was a one-room schoolhouse, and life was simple; one room, one teacher, and all the kids within walking distance. Of course, walking distance back then was miles (cue snowy barefoot uphill walkers).

Now it's more complicated. Schools have a variety of approaches. There are magnet programs, private schools, specialty language schools and arts schools, and even reliable neighborhood schools. How do you navigate the options and find the right fit for your little, middle or 'thinks they are an adult' prodigy?

Ask an expert like Teacher Janet. Janet Davis, owner and teacher of Our Children's Place in Hood River, has shared her parenting advice on television for years. According to her, the best place to start your school search is in your backyard at your district office. Janet says, "Check out all the choices in your district, both public and private, and talk to other parents; they are the best resource. Ask friends, family and neighborhood acquaintances what they like, or dislike, about their schools. Talk to parents at schools you are considering, and make use of social networking." It's a great way to find friends of friends to talk to. After you've networked, it's time to go for a visit.

Complicated Questions, Simple Answers

Welcome to open-house night! Come to ask questions, and bring your child so you can observe them in action. When attending an open house, it's important to really attend. Janet suggests you "observe the overall feel of the place, soak up the atmosphere, and watch how the teachers, parents and kids interact." Dr. Alfonso Orsini, Head of the International School, suggests parents take note of the overall environment, including what is on the walls. Is it original work by students or something else? Don't be too quick to judge a program, school or teacher by the "pretty picture syndrome." Dr. Orsini says, "Parents need to feel that the school's culture will be comfortable for their family. If the school's event does not provide enough opportunity to get a sense for this, parents should make an appointment to observe classes." Your level of comfort and ease with the teachers and families will tell you a lot, but question you must.

Gear your questions to the type of open-house setting. If it's a group presentation, limit your questions to a more general scope and sequence. This is not the time to ask how

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School:

the school will deal with your little one's predilection for poking other children in the eye. Instead, ask how teachers help children problem-solve.

Also, ask about class size, overall educational philosophy, the training and experience of the teachers, and what a typical day looks like. What is the party line on homework? How do teachers accommodate a wide range of learning abilities? What resources are available for students who need some assistance, and those who need more challenge? How much autonomy do teachers have in designing projects and the curriculum? Unfortunately, it is also necessary to ask about safety and security procedures and how parents are notified in the case of an emergency.

Then focus on curriculum. For example, what is the school's approach to reading instruction? Is there time for independent research and projects? Is there a science fair? What is the approach to math instruction? Are music, art, drama, languages and P.E. included in the day?

Don't forget the extras! Do they have any before-, during-, and after-school groups, clubs and sports available? Do they schedule field trips, or arrange for special assemblies?

After you've considered the academics, the facilities, resources and overall philosophy, pay attention to the way parents are welcomed and utilized in the school. Is there an active PTA or PTO in the school? Are parent volunteers visible in the classrooms, and is parental involvement invited and encouraged? Karen Bantuveris, founder and CEO of VolunteerSpot, says that when she visited her daughter's school in Austin, Texas, she was "most impressed by the active parent support community that welcomed me. Our PTO is given about 5-10 minutes of 'air time' to talk about our school community."

When Bang-ups and Frang-ups Happen

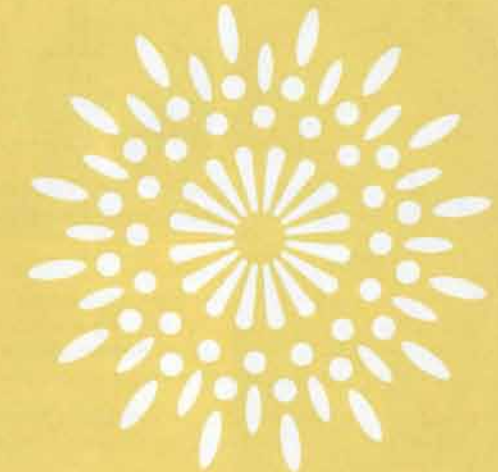
Even after all the thought and care you've put into choosing a school for your child, it may not be the right fit—and that's okay! Teacher Janet says, "You can always change if something's not working for your child. Follow your instincts."

Sometimes relocation to a new city, state and school means the order of things taught, as my friend Ellen discovered, can be vastly different. When her son entered school in their new town, she discovered they had already taught a key mathematics skill that hadn't yet been taught in his previous school. She hadn't thought to ask how the school would address a gap in academics by a student. Ellen said, "The new school did nothing to bring my son up to speed. It would have been nice to know in advance that we were on our own."

*"You can get help from teachers, but you are going to have to learn a lot by yourself, sitting alone in a room."
— Dr. Seuss.*

Sometimes, the school is a good fit for your child, but you have some concerns. If you're not getting the information you need, ask and get involved. The more involved you are, the more information you have. Your participation in your child's school will change over time, but continue to be a presence. Teacher Janet stresses the importance of building relationships with teachers and keeping communication open. And, don't limit your communication to the school; communicate with your child too. Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer, and keep asking them!

Finally, as your child makes his or her way through school, don't be afraid to administer a little medicine from a well-respected doctor when required: "You can get help from teachers, but you are going to have to learn a lot by yourself, sitting alone in a room."—Dr. Seuss.



While Tammy has loved writing ever since she had a poem published in her grade school newsletter, she has mostly written notes in class, Valentine cards for her kid and long-winded e-mails to friends. Visit her blog at mamacandance.blogspot.com.

