

Tip Sheet – How To Choose A School With Confidence

When choosing a school, the question most parents want answered is: *will this school provide my child with a good foundation for the future and an environment in which to thrive and develop?* The reality is no one can answer that question. Many parents feel the responsibility of choosing a school for their child weighs heavily on their shoulders. Australia has almost 10,000 schools spanning the government, systemic (eg Catholic), and private education sectors that offer a huge variety of education choices, especially in metropolitan areas. So how can parents make an informed and confident choice about which school would best suit their child?

The Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) has prepared this comprehensive tip sheet and summary checklist to provide parents with some guidelines about selecting a school as part of its mission of supporting children and families. As a not-for-profit friendly society of more than 30 years and formed from a co-operative of parents, ASG specialises in education benefits programs.

- 1. Know and understand your child**
 - Use your knowledge of your child to consider the key characteristics of an ideal learning environment for your child based on his or her personality and particular qualities. Start writing a list.
- 2. Recognise your education preferences and values**
 - What are your views about education? You may have strong philosophical or religious views that will influence what you would look for in an educational setting for your child. Schools offer a wide range of school philosophies and practices. Be aware that you need to match your child's needs with your preferences. Add your preferences to the list.
- 3. Match your preferences with your child's needs and personality**
 - Armed with an understanding of the type of school that might best meet your child's needs and your own preferences, you can begin to put together a list of desired qualities that you seek in a school community. Refine the list as you gather more information.
- 4. Gather information about schools – consider:**
 - School location – long daily traveling and inconvenient travel arrangements can make children very tired
 - Philosophical or religious focus of the school
 - The education curriculum offered
 - Your affordability of the school fees and associated costs
 - The predominant emphasis of the school – academic achievement, social-emotional wellbeing, balanced individual, etc
 - The facilities offered by the school and its focus – science, sports, performing arts, etc
 - Class size and structure
 - Reputation and education performance of the school
- 5. Where to source information**
 - Collect brochures and reports from the schools
 - Compare information about schools from the Internet – check out the school's website, as most schools now provide information online to their school communities
 - Ask other parents for feedback
 - Visit the school and meet with the principal and teaching staff
 - Check newspaper articles about the school and its relationship with the community
- 6. School location**
 - How far is the school from your home? Consider how your children will get to school every day, especially if you're not in a position to drive them.
 - Also, your child will want to play with classmates after school and on weekends so distance is a consideration.
 - Choosing a school that is close to your home will help you and your child integrate into the community.

7. School affordability

- Consider the total costs involved in sending your child to the school of your choice, not just school fees.
- Total costs include tuition fees and levies, requisites, clothing, incidentals, computer and internet costs.
- ASG provides a free online secondary schooling costs calculator that enables you to explore the total costs associated with sending one or more of your children to government, systemic (eg Catholic), or private schooling and presents a year-by-year view of the impact of those choices. You can access the calculator at www.asg.com.au/calculator

8. Visiting the school

- Try to understand the school's policies and support available for students
- Observe the interaction between teachers and students
- Speak to students of the school and their parents

9. The curriculum

- While specifics differ from state to state there are guidelines that schools must adhere to within each state and stage of education in respect to core curriculum subjects.
- Ask schools for detailed explanations about what knowledge and skills they will be working to develop in your child, how they will do it, and how you can help.
- Is the school teaching government-developed courses or their own?
- What is the range of academic and elective courses on offer? Is there a balanced or skewed offering and if so do you support this emphasis for your child?
- If your child excels or has difficulty, how would the school assist him or her?
- Does the school have policies on social development, such as a Buddy program?

10. Other curriculum matters of importance, include:

- Does the school have a homework policy?
- How much homework should your child expect to receive?
- What commitment is required of your child for extra-curricular activities? What opportunities and choices are available?
- Does the school participate in representative cultural and sporting activities?
- What is the school's technology policy – when will students start using computers? Will you need to buy or hire a computer for your child?

11. Reporting student progress

- However the school reports its students' progress, you need to understand the process and what it means for your child's performance and development.
- Does the school rely on grades that compare your child within the class or report progress against set criteria or both?
- Does the school provide annotated samples of your child's work to illustrate emerging skills and areas requiring attention?
- What other methods are used to communicate with you about your child's learning, such as regular parent-teacher interviews? Are students welcome to attend the regular interviews with their parents?
- Are the teachers happy to discuss your child's progress without appointment before or after school?
- Is your presence in the classroom welcomed and do the teachers allow you to observe lessons? (This is a real test of a school's openness.)

12. Values and attitudes

- Regardless of the affiliation or philosophy of the school, it is worthwhile finding out about dominant attitudes of the principal and staff.
- Read the school's charter or philosophy statement and its parent newsletter to assess these qualities
- Can you detect the school's core values and the climate of the school? How does the school celebrate and showcase its values and attitudes?
- Talking to students' parents can help you assess the school's level of inclusiveness, acceptance, welcoming attitude and whether students feel listened to, comfortable and enjoy attending school.
- Does the school celebrate diversity or does it encourage conformity? How do you feel about it?
- What is the attitude towards competition between students?
- How does staff engage children who are very bright or gifted?
- How do they help children who have challenges with school work or sport?
- Some schools ensure teams contain a mixture of students to provide a taste of success for all while others value individual excellence above other values.

13. Relationships between students, parents and teaching staff

- How are students at the school encouraged to openly express their views?
- How are students consulted? What programs does the school have in place to encourage student participation?
- Does the school provide an Annual Report to parents – this is now compulsory for many government schools
- How are children encouraged to support each other?
- What is the bullying policy? Bullying can thrive in schools where student concerns are ignored.
- How does the principal ensure that he or she is approachable and accessible to the students?
- How can parents assist in the school's programs?
- Does the school welcome parent concerns and discussion? Ask to see the procedure for resolving parental concerns.

14. Student Welfare and Wellbeing

- Children have the right to feel safe and respected during their school years.
- Explore the school's focus – is it on discipline, nurturing of children and their happiness (also known as pastoral care), or on skill and academic development, or behavioural management. Seek out the approach and balance that seems right for your child and your education goals.
- You may also want to explore the school's Student Wellbeing Policy, Student Code of Conduct, the Attendance Policy, Alternative Programs (for children with individual needs), how it handles Child Protection and Mental Health Promotion.
- What happens if your child becomes ill or is injured at school?
- Does the school have a first aid or medical facilities and trained medical staff or trained first-aid providers?
- If your child has specific health needs, such as an allergy, be sure to ask detailed questions to determine how the school will cope with these.

15. Facilities and Environment

- Ensure the school's facilities and environment are adequate, clean and in good repair
- Check out the technology facilities and the policy for updating computer equipment, software, internet access and technology-based teaching tools
- Do you require a school with a before or after school care program?
- Does the school have access to an oval for recess times, for sports?
- Is the playground attractive, with appropriate equipment for children's different developmental levels?
- Is there sufficient shade, and seating around the playground?
- Can the children visit the school library throughout the school day?
- Are other supervised extra-curricular programs available at lunchtime?
- Are there quiet play areas?
- Is there sufficient space for more children to run and play safely?

16. Class Size And Structure

- Satisfy yourself that the school policies are based on best educational philosophy and practice with a clearly articulated plan to provide for the progress of all students.
- The number of children in a class is usually determined by the policies of the relevant education department or the operating system of the school.
- Small classes are more likely to be found in private schools, with Catholic schools generally having larger class sizes than government schools.
- Occasionally schools operate multi-age or composite classes. These may contain students from two or three grades. In small country schools the entire primary school may be in a single classroom. This need not be a concern, as it offers opportunities for children to work at their own levels of ability and interest.

For a checklist summary of How to choose a school with confidence, please go to the next page.

How To Choose A School With Confidence Checklist Summary

- Assess your child's personal qualities
- Determine your education preferences and values
- List your education goals for your child
- Match your child and your preferences to the school
- School location
- Philosophical or religious focus of the school
- The education curriculum offered
- Curriculum focus
- Academic courses offered
- Elective courses offered
- School affordability
- Focus of the school
- Welcoming and open
- Student welfare and wellbeing
- Clear and open school performance reports
- Assess the facilities and environment
- Class size and structure
- Reputation
- Education performance
- School's relationship with its community
- Approach to student welfare and wellbeing
- Handling of health issues
- Student engagement or assistance
- Diversity or conformity
- Individuality or student body
- Representation of student body
- Disciplinary or laissez faire
- Homework policy
- Elective courses offered
- Cultural development
- Sporting achievement
- Student support systems
- Computer and technology policy
- Attendance requirements
- Bullying policy
- Parent concerns resolution

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