

ASG's Choosing a school with confidence



Supporting
Children's
Education



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Disclaimer

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Introduction

One of the greatest gifts a parent can give a child is the opportunity for a quality education. Parents hoping to prepare their children for future success in life recognise the importance of education. Education opens doors to a successful and fulfilling future, helping children to succeed in their life's pursuits.

It comes as no surprise then that many parents feel the responsibility of choosing a school for their child as a heavy weight that rests squarely on their shoulders. You might feel this way too.

With around 9500* schools in Australia spanning the government, systemic (e.g. Catholic), and private education sectors, you face a diverse and sometimes overwhelming offering of education choices for your child, especially if you live in a metropolitan area.

While Australia has significantly more government schools than independent schools, the popularity of independent schooling has risen significantly. Today almost 35 per cent of Australian students attend independent schools (including Catholic).

In years past, choosing the right secondary school for a child was the main focus. More recently, parents' focus has expanded to include gaining entry for children into the right preschool and primary school. You too may want schooling pathways—from preschool to secondary school—to ensure

your child gains the best possible education opportunities and avenues for success.

With all the pressure to gain entry into the right schools, you—like so many other parents—may feel increasing levels of anxiety and pressure.

When parents are looking for a school, what they really want to know is, 'Is this the best school?'

Maybe parents are asking the wrong question.

This e-guide aims to provide parents with some valuable tips about choosing a school for your child along with an overview of the things you should be considering as part of your choice. ASG aims to help you make an informed and confident choice about the schools that will best suit your child.

*Source: www.myschool.edu.au



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End the search for the 'best' school

For most parents choosing schools for their child is a major decision. It requires a good deal of research to learn about schools and their offerings. Throw into the process a determination to gain access to the 'best' schools and you have a very stressful situation where gaining access to schools becomes more about 'getting in' rather than an exciting step in your child's learning and development.

Gaining entry into some schools, and especially perceived 'best' schools has become a competitive process. Many parents want to send their children to the 'best' schools available, when perhaps they're focusing on the wrong target.

What's really important in choosing a school for your child is focusing on the 'right' school—not necessarily the 'best' school.

What's the difference?

Schools strive for education excellence within their circumstances and available resources.

'Best' schools are those schools whose names come up in conversation as 'desirable'. Often these schools are determined by excellence in academic results or reputation, or the opportunity for your child to establish 'social networks', or a number of other factors that aren't made entirely clear. What's important to keep in mind is that these schools may or may not be 'right' for you and your child.

'Right' schools—the schools that you need to look for—are the schools that match (as closely as possible) the combined list of your child's needs and your education preferences.

The 'right' school advantage

Attitudinally, committing to finding the right school for your child can provide an incredibly powerful and positive opportunity for you and your child, especially a teen. Your commitment to exploring your child's strengths and preferences will help your child's self-esteem because you're showing an acceptance for who your child is, just the way they are. Acceptance is tremendously powerful. Plus, in seeking a school that's the right fit for your child, you're demonstrating your desire to help your child be happy at school.



In an interview, Erin Shale, author of *The Best School for Your Child* and Careers Team Leader at Balwyn High School described seeing the difference that selecting an appropriate school has on the happiness of children:

“I guess having worked in schools for well over 20 years, you get to see the best and the saddest. You see students who are flying along absolutely loving school, on top of the world, and they actually look forward to coming to school. And others you can see dragging their feet as they leave the school gates every day. And it's just amazing the difference that the type of school they attend can make.”

Erin describes having taught in a number of different school settings: government, independent, co-ed, and single-sex schools. She says:

“I really believe it's possible to get a good match between a child and a school ...”



Knowing your child – the secret to choosing a school

Who is your child?

If you know and understand your child's strengths, needs and character, you'll be able to find schools that offer the best matches for them.

Write a list

What are the strengths, needs and character traits of your child?

Here are some starter ideas:

- Shy or confident
- Fun or serious
- Boisterous or calm
- Outgoing or introvert
- Sporty or bookish
- Practical or abstract
- Social or solitary
- Adventurous or conservative
- Leader or follower
- Artistic or making things
- Musical or unmusical

Use your knowledge of your child to consider the possible key features of an ideal learning environment and connect these environments to your child's personality and particular qualities.



- Consider whether your shy child will appreciate being able to get lost in a large school or would feel overwhelmed among large numbers of students.
- A child with musical talents will need a school with a rich music program to develop and stimulate their talents.
- A curious child may thrive in a progressive and innovative science-focused school.
- Children who love making things may enjoy some vocational subjects in their curriculum.
- A child who is easily bored may need lots of extracurricular activities, school programs, subjects, and activities to choose from.

As parents, you are in the best position to know and understand your child.

Avoid the traps:

- Look for the 'right' school for your child. Don't get caught up in trying to find the 'most desirable' or 'best' school.
- Don't forget that choosing a school for your child is not a competition between other parents or children.
- What's really important is trying to figure out where your child will be happy.
- Look for the best match between your child's strengths and needs, your education preferences, and the school's offerings.

Identifying your education preferences

Before you go off to research or visit schools, it's worthwhile to discuss your personal views about education with your family and determine your shared or agreed preferences.

Be sure to think beyond just academic results and the school's reputation. Give your family lots of time to consider these issues. They are important and the more honest and clear you are with what you really want for your child from their school experiences, the better chance you have of identifying schools with these qualities.

Schools offer a wide range of philosophies and practices. Which of them will help your child thrive?

Be aware that you need to match your child's needs with your preferences. You and your partner may have to negotiate your preferences and make some concessions and compromises where your own ideas don't agree.

Consider:

- What are your values and preferences?
- What are your hopes and concerns?
- What do you dream about for your child? Is it something that you didn't have?
- What's the journey you want your child to experience during their education?
- What kind of rules should be in the schools?
- What kind of academic record should schools have?

- What kind of reputation should they have?
- What's the outcome you want?
- What do you want your child to take away from their years at school?
- You may have philosophical or religious views that will influence what you look for in an educational setting for your child.

Write a second list

Start a new list and write down your personal education preferences on the list.

You now have two lists:

1. a list outlining your child's strengths, needs and character traits
2. your newest list – a list of you and your partner's personal education preferences.



Matching

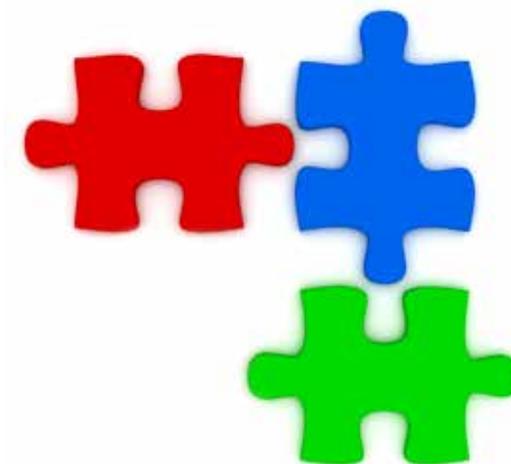
Now take both your lists and start matching these qualities and preferences to schools. It's a good idea to prioritise the not negotiable or top three issues from each list. This will help you focus your school search to these top priorities.

Keep in mind you're looking for the 'right' schools – more than one, preferably three. Applying to three schools will mean you don't have all your 'eggs in one basket' and will reduce anxiety for you and your child.

If you're faced with items from each list that won't match, be prepared to bow to the needs of your child rather than being locked into your education preferences. Your child's needs should come first to ensure quality of life for your family into the future.

On the next page, you'll find some websites that can assist you with your search for schools.

When searching for schools, focus on whether the schools have your top priorities. If you find schools that meet additional criteria on your lists, that's a bonus.



Finding and researching schools

There are so many places to research schools now, especially online. Below are some ideas to get your online search started. But don't forget other sources. You can check in your newsagent for printed guides. Be aware that schools often have to pay for inclusion in printed guides, so while they may be comprehensive, not every school in your area may be included. Also consider:

- collecting brochures and other publications from schools
- asking other parents for feedback
- visiting the school and meeting with the principal and teaching staff
- checking newspaper articles about the school and its relationship with the community
- comparing information about schools from the internet. (Check out the school's website, as most schools now provide information online to their school communities.)

Government sites:

- My School website – www.myschool.edu.au
- State and territory government department websites
 - ACT (Department of Education and Training) – www.det.act.gov.au/school_education/directory_of_schools
 - Government of South Australia (Choosing a school) www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-skills-and-learning/schools/choosing-a-school
 - NSW (Department of Education and Communities) – www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/locator
 - NT (Department of Education and Training) – www.schools.nt.edu.au
 - Queensland (Department of Education, Training and Employment) – Find a school – <http://education.qld.gov.au/directory/schools>
 - Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) – www.education.vic.gov.au/findaservice/Home.aspx



- WA (Department of Education) – Find a school – www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsonline/home.do

School directories:

- Australian Schools Directory – www.australianschoolsdirectory.com.au
- Catholic Schools Guide – <http://catholicschoolsguide.com.au>
- Private School Finder – www.kidspot.com.au/private-school-finder-kidspot.asp
- Private Schools Directory – www.privateschoolsdirectory.com.au
- Private Schools Guide – www.privateschoolsguide.com
- School Choice – www.schoolchoice.com.au
- The Good Schools Guide – www.goodschools.com.au
- which school? magazine – www.whichschoolmag.com.au

Independent schools:

- Association of Independent Schools ACT – www.ais.act.edu.au
- Association of Independent Schools NSW – www.aisnsw.edu.au
- Association of Independent Schools NT – www.aisnt.asn.au
- Independent Schools Queensland – www.isq.qld.edu.au

- Association of Independent Schools SA – www.ais.sa.edu.au/about-our-schools/search-our-schools
- Independent Schools Tasmania – www.independentschools.tas.edu.au
- Association of Independent Schools Victoria – www.is.vic.edu.au
- Association of Independent Schools WA – www.ais.wa.edu.au

Catholic schools:

- National Catholic Education Commission – www.ncec.catholic.edu.au
- Catholic Education South Australia – www.cesa.catholic.edu.au
- Catholic Education Commission of NSW – www.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au
- Catholic Education Commission of Queensland – www.qcec.catholic.edu.au
- Catholic Education Tasmania – <http://catholic.tas.edu.au>
- Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd – <http://cecv.catholic.edu.au>
- Catholic Education of WA – <http://internet.ceo.wa.edu.au>



Considerations – more than just results and reputation

Academic results and school reputation, such as Year 12 results, university entrance rates, and NAPLAN scores, are important factors in evaluating the suitability of a school for your child. But they're just one series of measures. In fact, you're more likely to find the school that best matches your child if you consider more than just academic performance.

According to author Erin Shale, many parents don't look at their child to really understand what kind of school would best suit his or her needs. She says:

“They're [parents] caught up in looking at school reputation and academic results and they forget to look at that little person who's going to be in the school.

Obviously all parents want their child to do well academically, it is important. It's not the only thing though that a school provides. I think there is far too much emphasis on looking at the academic results – sometimes that is the prime motivational factor for choosing a school ... They may not have considered the other programs, school climates, and school culture enough.”

Remember your child will have only one experience of school. They may be able to get similar academic results in a school where they're really happy as opposed to one where they're not. Sure, they've got the piece of paper, but not the memories you'd hoped for, or the experience of school to encourage their lifelong learning.

Other considerations include:

- school location – long daily travelling and inconvenient travel arrangements can make children very tired
- single-sex or co-educational schools
- selective entry high schools
- zoning – many schools have strict boundaries dictating where they can accept students from
- philosophical or religious focus of the school
- the educational curriculum offered
- 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.

We explore these issues more on the following pages.



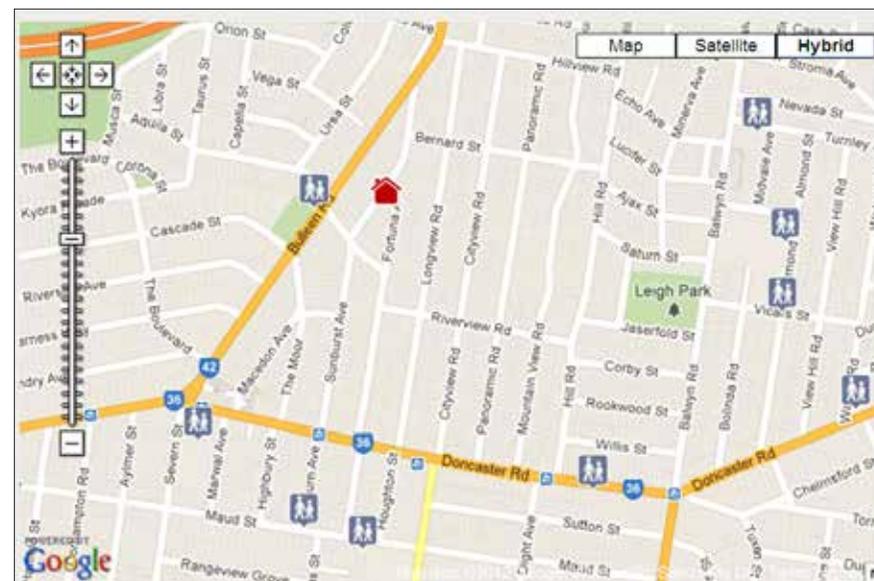
School location

Why is school location important?

Many schools only allow students to attend their school if the child is located in the local school enrolment area. This is especially true for government schools and especially **popular** government schools.

But there are other reasons the distance from your home to the school is important:

- Children get tired at school. If your child has a long commute from your home to school, you can expect a very tired child at the end of the day, every day. This is especially so if you're not in a position to drive them, at least occasionally.
- 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.
- If your child wants to participate in after school and weekend activities, getting to and from school on these days, in addition to school days, could be a challenge.



Single-sex or co-educational school?

There's so much misinformation passed around in relation to this topic that it's hard to know what to believe. That's because there's research available to make a convincing argument for either of your choices. Be sure to consider your child's characteristics and your family values when making a decision about a single-sex or co-educational school for your child. You may also have cultural or religious reasons for wanting your child to attend a single-sex school or family tradition may dictate that a child attends the school where their parents (or even grandparents) were students.

Most single-sex schools are also private schools so any research findings should be approached with caution because the research is often sponsored by private schools. When you are making a decision about whether to send your child to a co-educational or single sex-school, in most circumstances you are also making a decision about public or private education. Anecdotal evidence will give you a better view of whether a single-sex school will suit your child, so ask friends, neighbours and relatives about their schooling experience in single-sex or co-educational schools.

The following quote from Professor Ruksana Osman, the head of Wits School of Education, implies the single-sex versus co-education school debate is irrelevant to children accessing high quality schooling:

“Boys and girls do well in schools that are well organised, with teachers who are well-prepared, where parents are supportive of learning and where principals take teaching and learning seriously. Parents should think about whether the school they are selecting has strong leadership, teachers who are accountable and whether they, as parents, are willing to participate in the life of the school. Schooling is a joint enterprise between home, school and community.”



Education benefits by gender and school type		
Gender	Single-sex schools	Co-educational schools
For girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May perform better on achievement tests or exams • Show more interest in taking more difficult courses • More ambitious educational and career aspirations • After completing secondary school, more likely to stick with full-time enrolment in tertiary education • Place greater value on higher grades • Teaching can more readily focus on the learning styles and needs of girls • May choose subjects such as science or technology • Fewer distractions from boys' inappropriate and/or attention-seeking behaviours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually a wider selection of subject choices, especially subjects usually reserved only for boys, including boys' non-traditional subjects that are not provided in single-sex girls' schools • Just as likely to be successful in gaining entrance to tertiary education as girls from single-sex schools.
For boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May perform better on achievement tests or exams • Show more interest in taking courses with higher difficulty levels • After completing secondary school, more likely to stick with full-time enrolment in tertiary education • Place greater value on higher grades • Teaching can more readily focus on the learning styles and needs of boys. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider selection of subject choices, including non-traditional boys' subjects that may not be available in single-sex schools • Just as likely to be successful through to tertiary education as boys from single-sex schools • Academic performance outcomes are the same as for boys from single-sex schools.

Social benefits by gender and school type		
Gender	Single-sex schools	Co-educational schools
For girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less social pressure • Girls can become more competitive in single-sex schools (which has positive and negative consequences) • May be less likely to follow gender stereotypes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students feel the social environment is more appealing. Some evidence that student harassment and bullying is lower at co-educational schools • Students feel more confident to express their views in the presence of members of the opposite sex • Tend to make friends with both genders more easily • Co-educational schools demystify the opposite sex.
For boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less social pressure • May be less likely to follow gender-biased subject choices and experiment more • May have difficulty establishing relationships with girls • Some evidence of peer pressure to follow male stereotypes, e.g. choosing sport over drama classes • May increase aggressive behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have a positive impact on self-esteem • Some students feel the social environment is more appealing. Some evidence that student harassment and bullying is lower at co-educational schools • Brings out competitiveness in boys • Students feel more confident to express their views in the presence of members of the opposite sex • Tend to make friends with both genders more easily.



Other benefits by gender and school type		
Gender	Single-sex schools	Co-educational schools
For girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased leadership opportunities • More likely to take part in competitive sports. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits post-school for females employed in traditionally male-dominated careers, e.g. engineering and mining • Differences more likely to be tolerated • More opportunity to collaborate with boys in extracurricular activities, such as musical productions and school socials.
For boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive effect on career aspirations • Increased leadership opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences more likely to be accepted • More opportunity to collaborate with girls in extracurricular activities, such as musical productions and school socials.



Selective or open entry government school?

When considering school choices, one of the options that you may wish to consider is selective entry schools. These are government high schools that accept students based on their academic achievement. There are no selective primary schools, but depending on your locality, there may be a selective class available in the local primary school. Entry to these classes is by examination.

There are some selective entry high schools in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, but New South Wales (NSW) has by far the greatest number of choices. There are also a number of 'partial' selective high schools in NSW that have gifted and talented classes. NSW has a long history of selective high schools with the first being established in the 19th century. There has been much debate around the establishment and maintenance of selective schools, but each NSW government has made a decision to either maintain or expand the selective school system.

If you want your child to attend a selective high school, they will need to sit an academic entry examination. Applications well exceed the number of available spaces and only the highest performing students are offered positions. Each year approximately 13,000 students compete for the 3600 places available in NSW selective schools.

For information about test centres and timeframes you can contact your local government primary school. Children sit the test at the beginning of their final year of primary school and results are sent to parents by the end of term three.

Some children who are not successful in the first round may be placed on a waiting list and could be offered a position later in the year. Sometimes selective schools have spaces available in the later years of high school and will advertise for applicants to fill vacancies, so it is a good idea to keep in touch with the school to find out when places might come up.

Parents with academically gifted children may consider a selective high school in order to enable their child to reach their full potential. However, some students crumble under the expectations of the intensely competitive environment (not being 'top of the class' anymore) so it may not suit some children. The appointment process for teachers is the same as for regular schools and the teachers are no more qualified or competent than teachers in the local neighbourhood schools.

You need to be cautious of promoting a selective high school as the only option for your child because if they don't meet the selection criteria they may become overly disappointed or distressed. A selective high school should only be one of the options considered by your family as entry is not guaranteed.



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Zoning

Many schools have strict boundaries dictating the specific areas that families can live in for their children to be able to attend school. Popular schools can and do enforce these boundaries to the letter.

A popular government secondary school in Melbourne has a zone or 'catchment area' of four square kilometres. The school is very popular with a long waiting list, therefore it strictly enforces its policy of accepting only children of families who live in the zone.

Zoning issues

- While supporting the concept of choice, states and territories usually have policies and procedures regarding geographic zones for government schools.
- Some dioceses also apply zoning for systemic Catholic schools to encourage parents to support the school (and church) in their local area.
- Most private schools place less emphasis on zoning. But be sure to check with the individual school to ensure this is the case.
- If your child lives within the designated boundaries of a school's zone—other than in exceptional circumstances—your child is entitled to attend the local school.
- Some parents wanting to send their child to a 'sought-after' government school choose to move into the school's zone to increase the chances of their child's entry. If you are considering such a move, be aware that property values

and rental costs in the zones around popular schools reflect the value parents place on accessing quality education for their children.

- You may wish to send your child to a school outside of your local area for a number of reasons. These may include availability of subject choices, the reputation of the school, emphasis on extracurricular activities such as drama or dance, safety and security while travelling to and from school, availability of before and after school care, proximity to friends and peer groups, or educational philosophy and programs.
- If you wish to apply for your child to attend a non-local school, the school will consider your request according to schools and education authorities' policies and procedures, the needs of your child, your family's circumstances, and available places at the school.

Tips for applying to a non-local school

- Enquire about the process early
- Understand any differences in the application process compared to the local school
- Determine if there is a waiting list, and whether your child will be placed on the list
- Collect any additional information required for your child's application
- If the school is popular, have a back-up plan



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Waiting lists

Popular schools in all education sectors—government, systemic Catholic, and private schools—often have waiting lists. Policies and rules regarding waiting lists can vary greatly from school to school, and can change over time within the one school. Policies at some schools, such as class size and gender balance, can influence the number of students a school will accept each year. These policies in turn affect the size of school waiting lists, especially for places at popular transition points, such as Prep or kinder, Years 4, 7 and 10.

Things to consider before placing your child on a school waiting list:

- You can increase your child's chance of getting into the school of your choice if you place your child's name on the waiting list as early as possible, and following the application procedures to the absolute letter. Some private schools charge a non-refundable fee to place your child's name on the list, which could be up to \$300.
- You may want to put your child's name on a popular school's waiting list very soon after your child's birth. It's a good idea to review your choice periodically to ensure that the school will match your child's needs.
- Most systemic (e.g. Catholic) schools have quotas in place for the number of non-religious children they will take into a school. The numbers will vary from around 10 to 35 per cent depending on the policies within the area and the popularity of the school. These schools will give preference to children following the school's religious philosophy, and some schools look for families that are active within their faith.
- Most systemic schools will have faith-based activities as part of their school program. These activities can include prayers, church services, and religious education classes.
- Even though you may prefer one school above others, you may wish to put your child's name on several school waiting lists in case your first preference is not available. With waiting list placement fees, this can prove an expensive exercise so consider your options carefully before making applications for listing.
- You should also consider keeping in periodic contact with the schools where you have placed your child on waiting lists to ensure that you're aware of any changes in application policies or procedures that may have occurred over time. The onus is on you to do this, not the school!
- If you already have one child attending a school, you're likely to gain a place for additional children, but some schools say they cannot guarantee entry.



School affordability and value

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the cost of schooling has risen by 35 per cent over the past five years. ASG's research shows that education is one of the fastest rising components of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), rising at over twice the rate of inflation over the past 10 years.

[ASG's Planning for Education Index](#)

Why mention these figures?

Education is rapidly becoming one of life's most expensive items, especially if you choose independent education, although a Catholic education will set you back considerably less than private schooling.

In 2014, some private schools were charging almost \$30,000 in fees for Years 11 and 12 (especially in Sydney and Melbourne). That's a lot of money for most families, and represents the cost of a higher end small car for each year of schooling without considering all the additional costs, such as uniforms and necessities, that you'll need to pay for the school of your choice.

It is important to consider the effect that coming up with these amounts will have on you and your family.



Tips to consider:

- Understand 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 (including government voluntary levies)
 - extracurricular costs for items such as outings, camps, private tuition and coaching, sports equipment and gym, art, drama, or dance classes
 - clothing costs – uniforms
 - necessities such as stationery, textbooks, school bags, art and craft materials
 - travel – car travelling expenses, public transport tickets, or school bus costs
 - computer costs – including computer hardware and software, and internet access.
- ASG provides free online education costs calculators that enable you to explore the costs associated with sending one or more of your children to preschool, primary, or secondary schooling at government, systemic (e.g. Catholic), or private schooling settings. The calculators present a year-by-year view of the impact of those choices, and total amounts. You can compare options and view the results when you have more than one child at school. You can access the calculator at www.asg.com.au/calculator

The curriculum

While specifics differ from state to state, there are guidelines that all schools must adhere to within each state and stage of education in respect to core curriculum subjects. The Australian Government's Department of Education and Training (www.education.gov.au) has been negotiating the move to a national curriculum, and it is important to understand how each school applies government guidelines to their curriculum.

- 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 a range of subjects?
- 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 them?
- Does the school have policies on social development and wellbeing, such as a 'Buddy' program?

Other curriculum matters of importance include:

- What types of subjects are available? Is there a subject area in which the school excels? Does the school offer a wide breadth of subjects or focus within particular subject streams?
- Does the school have a homework policy? How much homework should your child expect to receive?
- What commitment is required of your child for extracurricular activities? What opportunities and choices are available? For example, is sport compulsory after school and on weekends?
- 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?



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Reporting student progress

All states have signed an agreement with the Australian Government to report to parents twice a year on a five-point scale (usually A-E, but this can vary). School funding is dependent on this occurring. All other school sectors must also follow this guideline to receive Commonwealth funds.

Questions to ask the school:

- 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 (e.g. learning portfolio)?
- 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.)
- Does the school report on other areas (e.g. social development, extracurricular activities)?



Values and attitudes

Tips to understand school values:

- Read the school's charter or philosophy statements 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, and welcoming attitude and whether students feel listened to, comfortable and enjoy attending school.
- Does the school celebrate diversity or does it encourage conformity? Is this important to you and your family?
- What is the attitude towards competition between students?
- How does the 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 in order to provide a taste of success for all, while others value individual excellence above other values.



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Visiting the school

Schools vary in their approaches in encouraging parents to visit the school. Some offer 'open days' and scheduled school tours; while others have more of an 'open door' policy encouraging school visits anytime during school hours. Check with each school for its policy on school visits. In general, private schools will offer open days and school tours, and often individual school visits whereas government schools may need to focus more of their staff resources on teaching so will prefer visits during their 'formal' school visit events.

Tips for school visits:

- Visiting a new school can feel overwhelming for both you and your child, irrespective of your child's stage of schooling. Your child's level of comfort while visiting the school can be an indicator of whether the school may be right for them.
 - Do your homework before visiting the school. Read the website, the prospectus, annual report, newsletter, and check out any relevant websites, such as the Australian Government's MySchool website (www.myschool.edu.au) that profiles schools.
 - Gather your questions and bring them to your school visits. Most schools will appreciate you asking questions during a scheduled visit, rather than during a number of ad hoc contacts.
- Try to visit any school you're considering more than once, but this will depend on the school's visiting policies. Open days are great introductions to the school, but visiting the school on a 'normal' school day may give you more insight 'behind the scenes' into the school's day-to-day operations.
 - Don't take your young child to every open day. In fact, it's advisable to keep young children away from open days altogether. With lots of people attending, it's often an unsettling and overwhelming experience. Take them when you've made the decision and you're introducing the school to them. For older children, be selective about the number of school visits you take your child to depending on their level of interest and ensure you're getting an honest answer about their thoughts.

- Try to meet the head of the school. They have the ultimate responsibility for the focus of the school. You'll get a real feel for the academic priorities, focus, policies, values, discipline, classroom support, and the relationship between the teachers and the school principal.
- Explore the school's care options. Irrespective of your work or care commitments now, there may come a time when you need before or after school care for your child. Most schools now recognise the importance of providing these services to parents, but it's a good time to double-check.
- Every parent hopes their child will do well academically. But if your child struggles with learning at any point during their schooling, it's good to know what kind of classroom support your child will receive at the outset.
- Trust your instincts. Try to imagine your child sitting at a desk in one of the classrooms—forget about the detail and focus on the atmosphere. If you can't imagine your child at this school, try another school.



Possible questions to ask during your school visit

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?
- 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 they are 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.

Student welfare and wellbeing

- Children have the right to feel safe and respected during their school years. How does the school ensure this?
- 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), and 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 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.



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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 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 extracurricular programs available at lunchtime?
- Are there quiet play areas?
- Is there sufficient space for children to run and play safely?
- Are there designated play areas for children based on class levels, i.e. Preps vs Grade 6?

Class size and structure

- Satisfy yourself that the school policies are based on best educational philosophy and practice with a clearly articulated plan to support the progress of all students.
- While small classes used to be found in private schools, this is no longer necessarily the case so check with the individual school for its policy.
- Frequently 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.

Look for the right school

- Sometimes a school is not for your family. Remember, not every school is right for every child—it's about getting a good match.



How to choose a school with confidence checklist

- Assess your child's personal qualities – write a list
- Determine your education preferences and values – write a list
- Research schools to match your child's qualities and your preferences and values
- List your education goals for your child
- Match your child and your preferences to the school
- Look for 'right' schools not 'best' or 'perfect' schools
- Enrol into more than one school. A backup plan is never a bad idea
- School location – is the school close to your home?
- Zoning – are you living within the school zone?
- Philosophical or religious focus of the school – does this match your preferences?
- The education curriculum offered and the subject focus of the school
- Academic courses offered
- Elective courses offered
- School affordability – is it within your budget?
- School affordability – does it offer value? How will you evaluate the school's value?
- Welcoming and open attitude?
- Size of the school
- Before and after school care programs
- School holiday programs
- Clear and open school performance reports
- Assess the facilities and environment
- Class size and structure – number of students in each class
- Does the school place students in classes ranked by academic performance?
- Computer facilities and resources
- Reputation
- Education performance
- School's relationship with its community
- Approach to student welfare and wellbeing – what support and programs are offered?
- Handling of health issues
- How does the school engage its students?
- Diversity or conformity
- Individuality or student body

- Representation of student body
- Disciplinary or liberal
- Homework policy
- Cultural development
- Sporting achievement
- Student support systems
- Computer and technology policy
- Bullying policy
- Parent concerns resolution



What would you be prepared to do to get your child into a school?

Here's some amazing tales of the lengths that parents have been prepared to go to in order to achieve their school choice for their child.

	<p>A non-Catholic family had their child baptised and began attending the local church in order to get their child into the local Catholic school. It depends on the area, but most Catholic schools will only take a relatively small proportion of children who are non-Catholics. Catholic children from the local community are always the priority for a Catholic school.</p>
	<p>Using a false address is a favourite way for parents to try to get their children into their preferred school with a long waiting list. Because government schools usually must take all children living in their designated zone, a residential address in that area is highly desirable. One school reported that parents have used the addresses of shop fronts, the fire station, the park, and the local cemetery. When asked whether the cemetery address was in the school's zone, the parent replied, "of course it was, as it was in the dead centre of town". Technology makes it much easier to check on these scams.</p>
	<p>More false address examples include: parents physically moving to live with friends and getting the address changed on their licence and showing it at the school as proof of address, and then moving again within a week or two of obtaining a position in the school. Schools are on to this and ask for up to three documents as proof of address, will not send documents to P.O. Boxes, and do spot checks on families' addresses regularly.</p>
	<p>Some parents actually rent a house in the desired school area in order to obtain an address in the location even though they have no intention of living there. They consider the cost an investment in their child's education. Others offer 'incentives' to local real estate agents to bump them up the list for rental accommodation in a school area or to provide false rental agreements. Having a desirable school in their locality works for real estate agents as well who will advertise that a property for sale is in the zone of a particular school. Parents have been known to sell their homes and move a few blocks in order to be in a particular school zone.</p>

	<p>One family was desperate to move their children from the local school, even though they only lived across the road. Appeals to get into the school in another neighbourhood were not successful because of long waiting lists, so the parents cooked up a plan. The family told the school the parents had separated resulting in the mum and her children moving into her parents' home, which was in the desired school's zone. The holes appeared in the story when the mother applied for the children's bus pass and gave the previous home as the address. The principal of the new school checked with her colleague at the local school who had a clear view of the house and reported that everyone was still living in the family home.</p>
	<p>Badger the school staff to accept the enrolments. When that fails, threaten contacting staff within the state or territory's education department or to report school staff to the media (shows like <i>A Current Affair</i> and <i>Today Tonight</i>). Some parents also threaten legal action. While these actions are rarely (if ever) successful, they do set up a climate of confrontation between the school and the family which is unhelpful and not in the child's best interests.</p>
	<p>A blended family (mum and her two children and partner and his two children) lived together in a home near their local school. However, the relationship broke down and, not wanting to disturb the children's education, the former partners remained in the home so the children could attend the local school. In time, both partners became involved with other partners who subsequently moved in with their children into the home so that all the children could attend the local school. The computerised enrolment system went into overdrive trying to reconcile six children at the same residential address with eight different parents.</p>

What would you be prepared to do?

Factors that influence secondary school selection survey results

The results of a survey of 116 parents and guardians showed their priorities for selecting a secondary school. Survey respondents were given a choice of four options when rating considerations – *essential, preferred, not important, or I'm against this*.

(Source: Australian Schools Directory - www.australianschoolsdirectory.com.au/survey/AustragResults.html)

Parents ranked the following considerations essential when choosing a secondary school.

The school considerations are presented here in order of highest ranking.

- 74 per cent – has an anti-bullying policy
- 70 per cent – teaches good student values
- 64 per cent – is nurturing and caring
- 57 per cent – emphasises rules and discipline
- 56 per cent – caters to individual learning needs
- 49 per cent – neatly-attired, well-behaved students
- 45 per cent – very good academically
- 43 per cent – good Year 12 results
- 42 per cent – has comfortable, well-equipped classrooms

- 41 per cent – offers both academic and vocational subjects
- 40 per cent – has very good facilities (theatre, sports centre, etc)
- 40 per cent – extensive computer facilities
- 39 per cent – small class sizes
- 28 per cent – offers many extracurricular activities
- 24 per cent – very good sports program
- 22 per cent – offers before and after school care
- 21 per cent – very good performing arts/music program

How would you rate these factors?



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References



Page 3: **"...9500 schools in Australia spanning the government, systemic (e.g. Catholic), and private education sectors"**. My School® reviewed 1 April 2015 www.myschool.edu.au

Page 3: **"Today almost 35 per cent of Australian students attend independent schools (including Catholic)"** Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA), Independent Schooling in Australia Snapshot 2012, viewed 10 July 2012 at: <http://isca.edu.au/publications/independent-schooling-in-australia-snapshot/>

Page 5: **"I guess having worked in schools for well over 20 years, you get to see the best and the saddest. You see students who are flying along absolutely loving school, on top of the world, and they actually look forward to coming to school. And others you can see dragging their feet as they leave the school gates every day. And it's just amazing the difference that the type of school they attend can make."** Shale, Erin interviewed by Vignando, Yvette, The best school for your child at happychild.com.au, viewed 10 July 2012 at: www.happychild.com.au/articles/interview-with-erin-shale-the-best-school-for-your-child

Page 5: **"I really believe it's possible to get a good match between a child and a school..."** Shale, Erin interviewed by Vignando, Yvette, The best school for your child at happychild.com.au, viewed 10 July 2012 at: www.happychild.com.au/articles/interview-with-erin-shale-the-best-school-for-your-child

Page 11: **"They're [parents] caught up in looking at school reputation and academic results and they forget to look at that little person who's going to be in the school."** and **"Obviously all parents want their child to do well academically, it is important.**

It's not the only thing though that a school provides. I think there is far too much emphasis on looking at the academic results – sometimes that is the prime motivational factor for choosing a school..... They may not have considered the other programs, school climates, and school culture enough." Shale, Erin interviewed by Vignando, Yvette, The best school for your child at happychild.com.au, viewed 10 July 2012 at: www.happychild.com.au/articles/interview-with-erin-shale-the-best-school-for-your-child

Page 13: **"Boys and girls do well in schools that are well-organised, with teachers who are well-prepared, where parents are supportive of learning..."** Gumede, Sinenhlanhla. Co-ed classes benefit social learning, ioL Services, viewed 3 August 2012 at: <http://www.iol.co.za/lifestyle/family/kids/co-ed-classes-benefit-social-learning-1.1111156#.UDWSoKniYk8>

Page 14: **"Education benefits by gender for single-sex schools and co-educational schools"** sourced from Mael, Fred; Alonso, Alex; Gibson, Doug; Rogers, Kelly; Smith, Mark, Single-sex Versus Co-educational Schooling: A Systematic Review. Doc # 2005-01, Office Of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, US Department of Education, viewed 3 August 2012 at: http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED486476&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED486476

Page 16: **Selective entry or open entry government schools information** sourced from state and territory government department websites (see website listing on page 10) and Education and Communities Department, NSW Government, *Secondary Schools - Selective High Schools*, NSW Public Schools, viewed 3 August 2012 at: www.schools.nsw.edu.au/gotoschool/types/selectiveschools.php

Page 17: **"According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the cost of schooling has risen by 35 per cent over the past six years."** ABS, Household Expenditure Survey, Australia, 6530.0, Summary of results, 1984 to 2009-10, page 30 – Consumer Price Index (a) – CPI Group – Education, viewed 13 August 2012 at: [www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/CB07CC895DCE2829CA2579020015D8FD/\\$File/65300_2009-10.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/CB07CC895DCE2829CA2579020015D8FD/$File/65300_2009-10.pdf)

Page 19: **"ASG's research shows that education is one of the fastest rising components of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), rising at almost twice the rate of inflation over the past 10 years."** ABS, Consumer Price Index (CPI), 6401.0, TABLE 13. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from previous quarter by Capital City, All Groups and Education Indices, September 2011, Time series spreadsheets, viewed 13 August 2012 at: www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6401.0Sep%202011?OpenDocument

Page 20: **"In 2014, some private schools were charging almost \$30,000 in fees for Years 11 and 12 (especially in Sydney and Melbourne)."** <http://www.exfin.com/private-school-costs>

Page 32: **"Factors that influence secondary school selection survey results"** Australian Schools Directory, results of a survey of 116 parents and guardians with school-aged children, viewed 10 July 2012 at: www.australianschoolsdirectory.com.au/survey/AustragResults.html



Resources



There are some great books to help you choose a school for your child. Here's a short list of some you might want to explore to give you more information.

- Campbell, Craig; Proctor, Helen; and Sherington, Geoffrey. *School Choice: How parents negotiate the new school market in Australia*, Allen and Unwin, NSW, Australia, 2009.
- Irvine, Dr John, and Stewart, John. *Thriving at School: A practical guide to help your child enjoy the crucial school years*, second edition, Finch Publishing, Sydney, Australia, 2008.
- Shale, Erin. *The Best School for your Child: Selecting a secondary school that matches your child's needs*, Finch Publishing, Sydney, Australia, 2008.



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About ASG

ASG's Choosing a school with confidence e-guide is provided to parents as an education support initiative of ASG.

ASG provides a range of products, information and resources to support children's education from their early learning stage right through to post-secondary studies.

We have been helping parents plan for the cost of their children's education for more than 40 years. During this time, more than 515,000 children have been enrolled with ASG and more than \$2 billion in education benefits and scholarship payments have been returned to members and their children.

Because we are member owned, benefits are returned to our members and their children, rather than shareholders. Parents make regular contributions to an education benefit fund that helps offset fees and other expenses.

For more information about ASG and its range of education and parenting support initiatives visit www.asg.com.au or call 1800 648 945.

