

Tips for Finding a Great School

By GreatSchools.net Staff

Whether you're choosing a school for the first time for your child or your child is making the transition to a new school, you probably have many questions. What are your options? How much choice do you really have? What's the best choice for your child and your family? Where should you begin?

School choice options available to parents have increased dramatically in recent years. There's a growing national sentiment that promoting competition in public education may spur schools to improve and that parents who invest energy in choosing a school will continue to be involved in their child's education.

Where to Begin: Needs and Values

Think about your child's needs and those of your family. Consider the personality of your child. A quiet child might fare better in a smaller school or a school with small class size. If you have a budding musician or scientist, you'll want to look for a school that has programs in these areas. Is it important to you that your school be close to home or your place of work? Will you need a school with before and after-school care?

The questions you ask will depend upon your child's needs – social, emotional and academic – and your family's values as well as the practical concerns of your household, like cost and geographic location. Take the time to think about all of these issues, and then prioritize them so that you'll be able to evaluate your choices based upon those criteria that matter most to you and your child.

What Are Your Options?

Your Neighborhood School

For most families, the first option is the neighborhood school. Each public school district sets up its own rules and boundaries for each school in the district, so it is best to check with your local district to find out which school your child will be assigned to, and what the rules are for attending charter schools, magnet schools or other schools within or outside your local district.

Charter Schools

One of the most significant changes in public education in recent years has been the growth of the charter school movement. Charter schools are public schools that are not required to follow some of the traditional school regulations required by the state. Oregon allows for charter schools; Washington currently does not. These



schools are bound by charter agreements granted by local school boards. If they don't meet the requirements of their charter, they can be shut down. Charter school enrollment is voluntary and is not governed by neighborhood boundaries, which means your child can choose to attend any charter school within your district, or outside your district, so long as there is space available. Schools that are in high demand usually have a lottery to determine who will be eligible to attend.

School Transfers

School districts generally set their own policies for transfers from one school in the district to another. Preferences are often given to children who have older siblings in the preferred school. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, if your child is in a school designated as low performing, you may be able to transfer her to another school. To find out more about this option, check with your local school district.

Most school districts have an appeals process if your transfer request is denied. Space limitations often make transfers difficult, and each district's process has its own regulations, so be sure to check with your local district for specific requirements.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are another option offered by many school districts. Magnet schools generally have a particular focus, such as art