

Searching for a school?

What you need to know

By Susan Sheffloe Speer

Private school. Those two words conjure images of ivy-covered brick walls and mannered, high-achievers in crisp uniforms.

Are you considering private school for your kids? Maybe you've always known that your children would attend private school. Either way, there is one basic truth: Private – or independent – schools are not created equal. Each school offers to impart certain values and bears its own distinct personality.

How do you know which school is right for your child?

Independent? Private?

What's the difference? Both private and independent schools are defined as non-public schools, funded by their own resources and not by tax dollars. The difference lies mostly in the legal structure. Independent schools are non-public schools with distinct missions and are supported by tuition, charitable contributions, and endowments and led by an independent board of governors or trustees. A private school can be affiliated with another entity, such as a for-profit corporation or a not-for-profit organization such as a church or synagogue.

Know what's important to you and your family. What do you want your kids to learn and how do you want them to learn it?

For most families, qualities like low student-to-teacher ratio, goal-oriented curriculum and academic achievement are high on the list.

Some typical questions require deeper probing. "Parents should ask why the school feels their student/teacher ratio is the right one; why are the classes as large or small as they are; what is the school's philosophy about things like homework," says Dorothy Tarbox, Admissions Director at St. Luke's Episcopal School. "Until a parent knows *why* certain things happen at a school, the answers they receive are only words."

For instance, Tarbox explains, class size is set for a variety of reasons beyond the level of

attention teachers give to students. "Ask, "*why* is the class 20 students instead of 12?" The answer could be anything from the physical size of the classroom, to accommodating students with learning difficulties, or perhaps the school creates larger classes in some cases to allow for more project and team-oriented work.

The surface answer parents may get about the school's approach to homework is that students can expect two hours of homework each night. A follow-up question can tell parents why homework is assigned in the first place. Is homework a continuation of the curriculum, or is it a reinforcement of what is learned in the classroom?"

Setting priorities

"I am the primary educator of my children," says Lisa Bastian. "I wanted to find schools that I could trust to follow through on our family's values and beliefs." Bastian and her husband, Ed, looked first to Catholic schools. "The blend of academic and spiritual teaching is important to our family," she explains.

Next, Bastian says they examined reputation and academic offerings. Their son, Nicholas, 19 graduated from Central Catholic High School in 2005. "We chose Central Catholic because it is consistently rated as one of the

best private schools in the state and has a legacy of producing leaders in business, commerce and politics,” Bastian says.

Daughter Rachel, 14, enters Antonian College Preparatory High School as a ninth grader this fall. Bastian credits the decision to Antonian’s curriculum and the ability to select a combination of honors and non-honors courses, blended with Catholic teaching. “Sending my kids to a blue ribbon school is important, but the ability to authentically blend faith teachings with the natural world is key.”

The benefits

What can parents expect to see right away, and what benefits lie further down the road for their children?

A school’s organization around its stated mission is important. In other words, what does the school claim it will do for its students? Does the school walk the talk in academic achievement, classroom structure and accelerated or enriched curriculum? Smaller classes – one of the more recognizable attributes of non-public education – allow teachers to spend more time with each student. Education experts claim the result is better grades and test scores and a closer student-teacher relationship.

Short-term virtues that you should notice from day one include good parent-teacher communication, clearly defined goals for

students and the Three As: A balance of academics, arts and athletics. Also, examine the faculty. How are teachers selected and hired? What’s the school’s faculty retention rate?

What about the long term? Advocates say that private education in the primary years is an excellent foundation for later learning. “Values are formed and carried into the teen years and adulthood,” says Mary Wilde, admissions director at San Antonio Academy, which is open

to boys from Kindergarten through eighth grade.

Getting accepted

Long characterized in popular culture as an arduous, even arbitrary process, acceptance into a private school is a process that, in real life, is driven by the school, the prospective student and parents.

The basics involve completing an application for admission, an on-campus visit, and an evaluation of records from the child’s current school. Many private schools also request written recommendations, which can come from current teachers, clergy or others who know the prospective student and the family well.

One of the most important factors, though, doesn’t involve paperwork and glowing referrals. It’s that simple-yet-complicated formula of fitting in. San Antonio Academy gives students the opportunity to “test drive” the school by placing a prospective student in a classroom setting for a period of time. “This gives the child a chance to see what the environment is like and gives the teacher a chance to see how the child fits in,” says Wilde.

Tarbox says that fitting in is a critical part of the equation. “Parents should always ask about approaches to discipline and how social relationships are fostered, from friendships and cliques, to birthdays and the school’s philosophy on dating,” she says.

School checklist Top Six

When researching schools, be sure and evaluate these six attributes, making sure they fit with your vision of your child’s education:

1. The school’s mission
2. Values, standard of respect and integrity
3. Teacher quality and retention
4. Curriculum and integrated curriculum
5. Connectedness – a sense of belonging
6. Teacher-to-student ratio

Is it the *right* school?

The National Association of Independent Schools recommends that parents visit a school, observe carefully and ask themselves these questions:

1. Do the students seem productive, engaged and happy?
2. Does what you see reflect the school’s stated mission?
3. Does the school feel like a community? Are students interacting with teachers outside, as well as inside, the classroom?
4. What are the backgrounds and the experiences of the faculty?
5. Does the school provide teachers with opportunities for continued professional development?
6. Is the campus clean, well lighted and secure?

“Children should feel comfortable in and out of the classroom, and know that they are valued within the school community.”

While searching for the “right” school for your child can seem daunting, Tarbox reminds parents to listen to intuition and to find ways to enjoy the time spent looking at schools. “You are making decisions for your child that will create memories for them they will carry throughout their life.”

Online Resources

Any of the schools you visit should have abundant information on varying topics related to private education, but there is also a wealth of information online.

Here are a few Web resources:

The National Association of Independent Schools

www.nais.org

Independent Schools Association of the Southwest

<http://www.isasw.org/independentschoolfaqs/index.asp>

About Education: Private Schools

<http://privateschool.about.com>

Texas Education Agency

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index.html>

Texas Private School Accreditation Commission

www.tepsac.com

All boys? All girls?

Is a single-gender education right for your child?

As a society, the pendulum swings on gender roles and preferences, starting in early childhood, but the issues go beyond whether boys or girls prefer trucks to dolls or pink and blue. The differences are “real, biologically programmed and important to how children are raised and educated,” writes Dr. Leonard Sax, in “Why Gender Matters.” (The Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2005)

“Single sex schools recognize, understand and make use of the biologically different ways in which children think, feel and act,” says John Webster, Head of San Antonio Academy. “Recognizing gender-specific learning styles enables teachers to custom-design their teaching methods to meet the needs of their students.”

Webster believes that his school fosters an environment that guides and channels the natural exuberance and drive of boys. “Teachers at single-gender schools generally say that most children feel more comfortable in a single-sex setting, and, as a result, are more likely to lower their guard and express their feelings. Peer relationships are typically better and the rapport between students and their teachers is stronger.”

National research on the topic suggests that girls are more responsive and engaged in all-girl settings. “I enjoy seeing girls participate so much in class discussions. ... And, like it or not, girls seem to talk more in class in an all-female school. I often see a whole classroom of eighth graders sharing ideas in an animated manner,” said Sharon Johnson-Cramer, author of [What a Single-Sex School Is Really Like](#), published in [The Christian Science Monitor](#) (electronic edition).

However, some experts challenge portions of the single-gender argument. In 1998, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) published [Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls](#). The report “challenges the popular idea that K-12 single sex education is better for girls than coeducation.” According to the report, boys *and* girls thrive on a good education, regardless of whether the school is single-sex or coeducational. The report does say that girls in single-gender classrooms tend to perform better in math and science.

Bottom line? Every child’s needs are different. Examine your child’s learning style and tendencies, then make a decision that’s based on knowledge, research and knowing what’s best for your child.