



JUST RIGHT

**HOW TO CHOOSE THE
BEST PRIVATE SCHOOL
FOR YOUR KIDS**

COURTESY OF



BEREAN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

BEFORE YOUR CHILDREN WERE EVEN BORN—AND PERHAPS BEFORE THEY WERE EVEN CONCEIVED—YOU PROBABLY DREAMED ABOUT MAKING THE BEST CHOICES AND CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEM.



Creating Opportunities for Your Children

WHERE YOU LIVE, what you eat, how you spend your money, and how you spend your time all make an impact on your child's wellbeing. Deciding how and where each child's education happens is just another step in a long process.

Education can and should serve as a springboard or launch pad for their future endeavors. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Every child is different, so enrolling each child in the best school for his or her needs, gifts, and personality can mean a different school. One size doesn't necessarily fit all.



Goldilocks & The Three Bears

JUST AS GOLDBLOCKS traipsed around the home of the three bears, sampling porridge, chairs, and beds, you are traipsing through the world of educational choices, searching for that elusive "just right" feel that our friend Goldi discovered.

Perhaps that search has led you to investigate private education. Perhaps you just couldn't make yourself like the chipmunk mascot of the public school in your district. Okay, that probably wasn't the

determining factor, but in all likelihood, you seek an alternative to public school for other reasons: academics, safety, extracurricular options, quality of faculty, size of school, or some combination of these and others.

In this overwhelming world, you can often identify what you don't want, but when faced with the breadth and variety of private school options, it's harder to figure out what you do want.



Getting Down to Business

LET'S BREAK DOWN THE PROCESS and then dig into the details. The first step in the private school selection process is identifying your needs and the needs of your child. Once you have assessed and prioritized those needs, you will want to do a "survey" of the prospective schools by scheduling campus visit.

After that, you can make a confident decision and move on to other less important but more enjoyable to-dos, such as shopping or meeting other parents.

Even Goldilocks sampled three bowls of porridge before settling on her breakfast of choice.

STEP NO 1: IDENTIFY NEEDS

BEFORE YOU FLIP THROUGH THE GLOSSY PAGES OF A SCHOOL'S RECRUITMENT MATERIALS OR VISIT THE ATTRACTIVE WELCOME PAGE OF THAT FANCY ACADEMY'S WEBSITE, YOU SHOULD TAKE AN HONEST, CRITICAL LOOK AT THE NEEDS OF YOUR FAMILY AND THE NEEDS OF YOUR CHILD.

THINK OF SCHOOL SHOPPING AS SEARCHING FOR THE PERFECT HOUSE. You list yours needs, wants, and would-love-to-have bonuses before you call the realtor or start trolling on Zillow.

If you skip this crucial listing step, you might fall in love with the charming 2-bedroom, 1-bath bungalow, complete with granite countertops. That house will NOT accommodate your family of 8. Shop the smart way and do a little more planning on the front end.

Planning may or may not be your forte, but it will lead to a much happier outcome.

Knowing your family's education needs will help find the perfect fit for each of your children. As you embark on this journey, pay heed to education expert Robert Kennedy, who advises breaking down your requirements into three categories: **PRACTICAL, DESIRED AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR.**



PRACTICAL NEEDS are non-negotiable. If a school does not deliver on your family's practical needs, it cannot make the cut—no matter how well-manicured the grounds or how friendly the Principal. You have to be ruthless, in a certain sense of the word. Options abound, and you need a measuring stick for ruling out possibilities that would otherwise seem attractive. One example of a non-negotiable might be up-to-date curriculum.



DESIRED REQUIREMENTS come after a school has successfully survived the gauntlet of practical requirements. In the end, these desires are the real determining factors. They may not be absolutely “necessary,” but they take precedent over certain extracurricular activities. For example, you might prefer smaller student-to-teacher ratios.



EXTRACURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS are the icing on the cake. They may seem like a nice benefit to you but like a life-or-death necessity for your child. If your child loves basketball or football, then going to a school without a strong athletics program would be a crushing disappointment. If your child is a gifted or aspiring musician or thespian, then a school with a competitive music and drama programs will provide the ideal habitat for your child.

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LET'S EXPLORE EACH OF THESE CATEGORIES IN MORE DEPTH ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

STEP NO 1: IDENTIFY NEEDS

Practical Requirements



THESE REQUIREMENTS are the nitty-gritty elements that affect your child’s daily life and future success. For example, that boarding school in Switzerland might be highly appealing but the practical reality of a trans-Atlantic commute cancels out the benefits. Just think of it, the Alps! Or think about all the hassles, traveling expenses, and months without seeing your baby.

LET ME REITERATE: YOU HAVE TO BE RUTHLESS.

You would do well to document these practical considerations for each school:

- DISTANCE/COMMUTE:** How far is the school from your home? From your workplace?
- TRANSPORTATION:** Can your child walk or ride a bike? Do you need to drive them? Is a bussing system in place or does the school provide transportation?
- AFTER-SCHOOL CARE:** Do you need this service? Does the school provide it? Can you afford the school’s offering, or do you need to look for something more economical?
- SPECIAL NEEDS:** Does your child need individualized attention or specialized instruction? Does he or she have specific physical, emotional, learning, or linguistic needs?
- COST:** What is your budget? Honestly. What does the school cost? If the latter is greater than the former, can you apply for financial aid? If not, are you willing to make other sacrifices to make up the difference.

- SPECIALIZATION:** Do you want a school with a particular academic specialty—i.e. science, music, arts, or foreign language instruction? Is it important to you to enroll your child in a school with a religious affiliation?
- YOUR PERSONAL PRACTICAL REQUIRMENTS:** _____

As you look at the pool of prospective schools, these practical considerations will help you eliminate some options. After you’ve pared down your list, move on to desired requirements.

Desired Requirements



LET “ROUND TWO” BEGIN! These factors will allow you to take the smaller pool of schools that meet practical requirements and reduce them to a short list of possibilities. Here are some things to consider:

- FACILITIES:** Does the school have modern facilities? Are the science labs up-to-date? Is the school large enough for the student population? Does the cafeteria double as the math lab, art studio, or music room?
- SIZE:** How large is the school? How large are the classes? Does your child thrive in an institution with a teeming population that transforms into a large, raucous football cheering section on Friday night? Or, does she function better in a smaller, more intimate setting where all the students know one another?

STEP NO 1: IDENTIFY NEEDS

- ❑ **ACADEMIC RANGE:** Do you want your child to start kindergarten and finish 12th grade at the same school?
- ❑ **INVOLVEMENT/COMMUNICATION:** Do you want to be a part of the life of the school and to be involved in your child’s education? How often and in what manner do the faculty and administration communicate with parents? Are you a welcome part of the classroom environment? Or does the school favor a more laissez-faire, hands-off approach?
- ❑ **INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL:** Do you want a traditional, classical, or alternative approach to learning? Is it important to you that technology be integrated into most aspects of the classroom experience?
- ❑ **YOUR PERSONAL DESIRED REQUIRMENTS:** _____

After you have thought through these considerations and discuss them with your child, go back and prioritize them. When you visit schools, you will find that each one has a unique combination of them. That’s why you need to decide in advance which ones are the most important and allow them to factor more heavily in the decision-making process.

STILL AT AN IMPASSE? This is where the extracurricular activities enter into the decision-making process. It’s time for “Round Three.”

Extracurricular Requirements



NOW, LET’S BE HONEST. Extracurriculars are not actually requirements. They’re more like bonuses, which are nice but not deal-breakers. That being said, they do act as the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back and can help you make a final decision.

You may want to add to this list:

- ❑ **SPORTS:** What sports are offered? In which sports does your child currently participate or hope to in the future? Is participation highly competitive or more inclusive?
- ❑ **CLUBS:** Does the school have a variety of clubs and groups that appeal to more specific interests? Are there outlets for service and/or volunteer opportunities? What about scholastic competitions in and outside of the school?
- ❑ **RELATIONSHIPS:** Does your child have friends/acquaintances at this particular school? Does the student population come from a wide geographic area or a more centralized region? Do the teachers seem to care about the students and treat them as individuals?
- ❑ **YOUR PERSONAL EXTRACURRICULAR REQUIRMENTS:** _____

STEP NO 2: SURVEY SCHOOLS

THE INITIAL CHALLENGE IS OVER. YOU HAVE DONE THE HARD WORK OF OUTLINING YOUR FAMILY'S NEEDS. NOW THE REAL SHOPPING BEGINS. GOLDILOCKS, IT'S NOT DINNER TIME QUITE YET, BUT YOU CAN SEE WHAT'S ON THE TABLE.



AS YOU BEGIN YOUR SURVEY of the school short list, your goal is to collect as much information as possible before setting foot on the campus. The challenge of this step is to be critical and yet open, giving proper weight to what you can discover through observation while recognizing that firsthand experience is indispensable. In this stage, you are a fact-finder. Break open the glossy brochures and start scouring the Internet.

Get the stats and numbers and look for the following:

- ❑ **PHILOSOPHY:** What is the mission statement of the school? What beliefs and tenets guide the administration and faculty?
- ❑ **SERVICES:** What services are provided? Guidance counselors, career counselors, psychologists, an on-site nurse, librarians, secretaries, learning/reading specialists, a nutritionist, or a dedicated food service?
- ❑ **CALENDAR/SCHEDULE:** When does the school day begin/end? When does the school year begin/end? Does the school use block or more traditional school-day scheduling? When and for how long are the vacations?
- ❑ **FACULTY:** How are teachers chosen, trained, and evaluated? What are their backgrounds and average level of education?

- ❑ **ACCREDITATION:** Is the school accredited? If so, how and by whom?
- ❑ **CURRICULUM:** What is the curriculum and how is it chosen? What are the homework and grading policies?
- ❑ **DISCIPLINE:** What is the discipline policy and how is it enforced? Does the approach and do the consequences seem fair and appropriately strict? Is there enough discipline to enable students to thrive? Or does chaos prevail?
- ❑ **SAFETY/EMERGENCY PLAN:** Does the school have an effective emergency plan and do school leaders test and practice it? How are parents notified in the event of an emergency? What is the policy with regards to guns, knives, bullying, and other issues?
- ❑ **YOUR PERSONAL SURVEY:** _____

After you have acquired this information, make a list of final contenders and schedule campus visits. Dress well, bring a list of questions, and let the ruthlessness begin!

STEP NO 3: VISIT SCHOOLS

SCHOOL VISITS ARE PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THIS PROCESS. STEP ONTO A CAMPUS, AND YOU CAN QUICKLY KNOW WHETHER OR NOT THOSE WIDE-ANGLE PHOTOS AND FLATTERING DESCRIPTIONS ON THE WEBSITE WERE THE TRUTH OR SMOKE AND MIRRORS, MASKING A SUB-PAR INSTITUTION.



DON'T BE TOO QUICK to discount a school whose marketing materials were so-so. An outdated brochure might simply mean that the school spends its money on rigorous education rather than slick television commercials and big advertising campaigns.

Visiting a school and interacting with the administration, faculty members, and students themselves can provide answers to your questions and give texture to an experience that help you make an informed decision.

Be bold and advise your child, regardless of personality, to do the same. Engage with everyone, and make the most of your visit.

While group tours and specified “visit days” are okay, try to schedule an individual time. Being a part of a herd and going on a choreographed trip has its place, but a more casual visit will probably give you more insight into the school’s day-to-day life and culture.

As you walk the halls, consider everything: the look and feel of the facilities, as well as all those touchy-feely qualities that are difficult to quantify or advertise. The website, **WWW.GREATSCHOOLS.ORG**, offers these three broad things to look for as you visit a school:

- ❑ **ENGAGED KIDS:** Look at the students in the classrooms you visit, but also steal glances into the classrooms you do not visit. Is the teacher engaging effectively and drawing the kids into his or her academic world? Do students as a whole look interested or bored?
- ❑ **HIGH EXPECTATIONS:** As a parent, you obviously want the teachers to have high expectations for your student, but high expectations should bleed into every aspect of the school. From the way the faculty and administrators dress and present themselves to the tidiness of the rooms and the cleanliness of the bathrooms, look for excellence and attention to detail. After all, your child will could potentially spend a lot of time with those people and in those places.
- ❑ **POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE:** How do individuals at the school interact with you and interact with each other? What is the ambiance in the cafeteria? On the playground? In the hallways between class periods?

STEP NO 3: VISIT SCHOOLS



ASSESS THE SCHOOL in a general way with the previous guidelines, then move on to these considerations from the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP):

- ❑ **FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE:** Look for a well-equipped, modernized library that integrates books and technology. Look for an auditorium and/or large classrooms for presentations and gatherings. Assess the functionality of athletic facilities and physical education spaces.
 - ❑ **TEXTBOOKS AND CLASSROOM MATERIALS:** How often are they updated? Is there an adequate number for all students and in what condition are the materials?
 - ❑ **POLICIES:** What is the homework policy? The safety policy? The playground rules and the guidelines for visitors on school property?
 - ❑ **COMMUNICATION:** How often and in what ways does the school communicate with the parents? Can you attend meetings? If so, attend one or two to get a feel for these interactions in person.
 - ❑ **APPLICATION PROCESS:** How many students apply and for how many spaces? Assess how competitive the school. If getting your child into the school is not guaranteed, you may need to apply to multiple schools.
 - ❑ **ATTRITION:** Do students who start attending the school tend to graduate from it? Knowing this statistic will help you gauge how the level of satisfaction of families who send their kids there.
- ❑ **POST-GRADUATION:** What percentage of students enrolls in college? Do these graduates go on to attend good colleges and universities?
 - ❑ **FACULTY TURNOVER:** The satisfaction of teachers with their jobs is very important because it has such a profound effect on student and family satisfaction. Typical turnover is 10-20% because of factors such as retirement or relocation. A higher percentage is a red flag.
 - ❑ **CLASS SIZE:** Smaller class sizes are important, especially in the primary grades. Large class sizes in public schools often cause families to seek out private education, so make sure that this need is actually being met.
 - ❑ **MONITORING:** How does the school monitor the progress and success of the students? How do faculty and administrators address the needs of students who struggle in some way? Does the school have specialized curriculum and staff for students with academic, social, or emotional challenges?
 - ❑ **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** What opportunities are provided for the teachers in terms of continued development? Is it required? Does the school pay for these opportunities?
 - ❑ **DISTINCTIONS:** Has the school earned any awards or distinctions?

STEP NO 3: VISIT SCHOOLS

Elementary School

- How does the school determine student placement in classes?
- How does the school communicate with parents with regards to school activities and information?
- Is there a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) or something similar? What other opportunities are there for involvement?
- Is before and after-school childcare available?

Middle School

- How does the school prepare students for high school success?
- Are foreign language classes offered? Music classes? Art classes?
- Are the students able to express themselves well through the spoken and written word? Does this competency help them earn desired placements in high school and college?
- What worldview do the teachers endorse and how are ethics and values taught and reinforced in the classroom?
- Is there a platform to discuss differential learning and ways to set all students up for success in the future?
- How are standardized tests factored, in terms of both charting growth and predicting future learning opportunities?
- Will extracurricular events and trips expose students to new ideas and values?
- What is the graduation rate of those that begin in 6th grade?
- How is technology integrated in the school's learning environments?

High School

- Is there opportunity for specialized academic focus —i.e., science or humanities?
- Are there school-to-work programs offered? Technical training?
- How much emphasis is placed on college attendance and what provisions and efforts does the school make to support students in that endeavor?
- Is there a good selection of Advanced Placement (AP) classes? How well do students score on the Advanced Placement tests for the courses offered by the school?
- What percentage of students takes the SAT and/or ACT? What are the average scores?
- What is the graduation percentage for students who start at the school in 9th grade?
- Where do students go post-graduation? What kind of guidance/counseling is offered to them during their high school career to prepare?



WHILE ON CAMPUS, meet with as many people as you can and ask questions. Look for administrators who are confident, teachers who are enthusiastic, and students who are satisfied. If possible, shadow a student and attend a class. Eat lunch in the cafeteria, and spend time in the hallways and on the playground. The more experiences and information you have, the easier the final decision will be.

STEP NO 4: MAKE THE DECISION

**HANG IN THERE. YOU’VE ALMOST ARRIVED!
YOU’VE DONE ALL THE LEGWORK AND SAMPLED ALL THE FIGURATIVE PORRIDGE.
NOW YOU NEED TO DECIDE WHICH SCHOOL IS “JUST RIGHT” FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILD.**



PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS have eliminated a large number of schools, and your other desires and extra-curricular requirements have helped to differentiate among the remaining prospects. Research gave you the facts and campus visits armed you with experiences to inform your decision.

Next, you will want to rank the schools and ask your child do the same. See how those lists match up and apply to those that rank highly for both of you. The competitiveness of the schools will determine the number of schools to which you apply. And let’s be honest: your commitment to filling out applications is also a factor!

Whether you fill out one or 100 applications, make sure that you apply to enough schools to ensure that your child will be accepted. Don’t put all your eggs in one scholastic basket.

SOME ADDITIONAL THINGS TO CONSIDER:

❑ **PREPARATION:** Most private schools (especially the more competitive ones) make admissions decisions for the coming school year by January of that year. Be aware of this deadline so that you can start your search, plan your visits, and submit your applications with time to spare. Don’t underestimate the details

involved in the applications—everything from documentation and test scores to vaccines and references.

- ❑ **FINANCIAL AID:** You will also want to stay abreast of the financial aid process. This is often secondary to admission but can be a prohibitive factor.
- ❑ **REFERENCES:** Ask any school you are seriously considering to provide references and individually seek out people (friends, family, acquaintances) who have had students attend those particular schools. Some of the most enlightening information will come from these sources. Every school comes with strengths and weaknesses. Try to get the most complete and honest picture possible to avoid dissatisfaction.

CONCLUSION

AS OVERWHELMING AS THIS PROCESS MAY SEEM, DON'T GET DISCOURAGED. THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION. EACH SCHOOL WILL PROVIDE DIFFERENT BENEFITS AND COME WITH DIFFERENT CHALLENGES.



WHEN YOU HAVE WEIGHED all the factors and examined all the facts, you must ultimately trust in the power of intuition. In the end, you have to listen to your own “gut.” Listen to your children in their needs and watch their reactions. Shake up all these factors and see what rises to the top.

MAY YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN FIND WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AND MAY YOUR FUTURES BE BRIGHT!

REFERENCES

- *Evaluating and Choosing a Private School* by Robert Kennedy
- www.greatschools.org
- “How to choose a school for your child” by Jamie Gumbrecht (cnn.com)
- “How to pick the best private school” by Blythe Grossbery (about.com)
- “Class Struggle” by Jay Mathews (voices.washingtonpost.com)



HOPEFULLY, THIS GUIDE has helped your family make the best private school choice for your children. If that choice leads you to **BEREAN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL**, we can't wait to meet you!

BEREAN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

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