

CHOOSING BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

By The Testing Mom

When you are thinking about kindergarten for your child, one of the first things to consider is whether you want a private school, public school, or religious school (which are private). This is a very personal decision for every family. Money is an obvious consideration, but there are other factors as well, which we will explore.

Here is my personal opinion on this question. I'm not saying it's right; it's just how I feel after my own experiences with both private and public schools. If money is no object for your family, choose private school. If money is an issue for you (and it is for most of us), do your homework and get your child into the best public school that you can for the elementary years. You can always rethink your decision later when you understand your child's learning profile better and the type of school situation that will work best for him in middle and high school.

A few years ago, I wrote an editorial for the *New York Times* on this subject and essentially said exactly what I said above. People called me an elitist, which I didn't think that was very nice. I've had my children in both public and private schools and I've counseled families who have put their kids in both. There are amazing private schools and marvelous public schools. There are lousy private schools and rotten public schools (and everything in between). There is no right answer to the question, "is private or public school better?"

Your beliefs about what matters in a school are different from mine and from your neighbor's. The quality of your child's teacher each year will have more of an impact on his experience than whether he goes to a public or private school. Your child's personality will make a difference in whether public or private is best for him – a very shy, quiet child could fall through the cracks in a large public school, for example. Ultimately, the choice between public and private will depend on what feels right for your child and family given your personal situation and values. I find that whatever parents choose, they usually end up feeling very good about where their child lands. And if it doesn't work out, they move them.

Here are some of the advantages and disadvantages of private and public schools. Remember, these are generalizations. You must look at each of these points play out at the actual schools you are considering:

Private School Advantages

- They typically have better facilities;
- Classes are smaller – 15:1 in private school vs. 30-40:1 at some inner city schools – children who get individualized attention perform better;
- The curriculum is superior – private schools aren't subject to the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which means they don't have to spend months teaching to the standardized English and math tests – more time can be devoted to the arts, history, language, geography, literature, sciences and physical education;
- The government doesn't set the curriculum so teachers don't have to rush through material to cover everything mandated. If kids need more time to grasp a subject, they'll get more time;
- A small community atmosphere is created for parents and kids;
- More “extras” in every area – from physical facilities – swimming pools, theaters, science and computer labs, gymnasiums – to field trips, specialists, exceptional parents contributing to the classroom experience (i.e. Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins used to coach kids in drama productions at my son's private school);
- There are fewer disciplinary problems – private schools can expel kids who are a problem;
- There is a higher intellectual quality of students because children must qualify to get in;
- Parents have more of a say in how things are done;
- Private Schools offer all-girl and all-boy options; this may be the best choice for some kids.
- Under performing teachers can be more easily removed.

Private School Disadvantages

- Tuition is expensive, plus they'll hit you up for additional donations;
- Diversity is limited;
- Teachers are paid less than public school teachers, so the more experienced, qualified educators often choose public. It isn't unusual to see young, newly minted teachers in private school classrooms;
- When private school kids are applying to college, they'll be compared against other private school kids applying. Since more private school kids apply to college, admissions become more competitive for them and the standard for being accepted is higher;
- Kids from big donor families may be given advantages (i.e. better teachers, parts in the play, a place on the team, more lenient treatment for misbehavior);
- There are fewer teachers per grade to choose from if things aren't working out with the assigned teacher or class;
- Often, there is a "tutoring" culture, which may put pressure on you to pay for extra help;
- Many private schools do not tolerate children who learn differently. They are not obligated to provide special education services. If your child can't keep up, she will be "counseled" out. This happened to us at the first private school our daughter attended. On the other hand, some private schools have amazing learning centers that kids can take advantage of, usually for additional tuition. We found this at my daughter's last school and the program and staff were a Godsend.
- Did I mention the tuition expense?

Public School Advantages

- It's free! The money you save can be spent on summer camp, enrichment classes, and college;

- Many public schools offer excellent gifted and talented programs with smaller class sizes and enhanced curriculum;
- Parents willing to do the research and legwork will find excellent charter and magnet schools that their kids can attend;
- There are more and a broader range of friends for your child to choose from; Classes are shuffled each year so your child isn't stuck with the same small group of kids;
- There is a widely diverse population – your child is exposed to rich, poor, smart, struggling students, high achievers, slackers, disabled children, multiple ethnicities, kids speaking different languages, practicing a variety of religions, coming from families with diverse values and support systems; Public schools emphasize inclusion and accepting all kinds of people; Kids emerge from public school with a more realistic view of the world;
- In a good public school, the parents pitches in whenever there is a need, often creating a closely knit community;
- In better districts, schools may have more choice of classes and better facilities than those offered by small, private schools;
- Public schools are better equipped than private schools to recognize, diagnose and deal with learning disabilities. By law, they must offer extra help to kids with diagnosed learning issues – they cannot counsel them out as private schools can. Public schools must also meet the needs of physically disabled and other special needs kids.
- Larger, better public schools offer in-house speech and occupational therapists, psychologists, and nurses. Private schools often don't have these on staff;
- You have to respect what public schools are trying to do with limited resources; there is a lot to be said about supporting your local public school;
- If things don't work out, you can switch to private later.

Public School Disadvantages

- With so many budget cuts these days, classroom equipment, books, materials and facilities are often compromised; art, music and PE are often the first classes to go; At our local school district in NYC, parents had to supply everything from lined paper to toilet paper;
- Teachers in public school must stick to government determined lesson plans; Unless your child is in a gifted program, magnet or charter school, kids learn the same curriculum at the same time at the same pace and in the same way;
- There is an emphasis on subjects schools are rated on (reading and English); Creativity and a broader education are sacrificed;
- Children are often tracked into slow, average and advanced groupings and that label may get perpetuated throughout their education;
- Teachers are unionized so it is difficult to get rid of ineffective educators who have tenure;
- Much classroom time is spent getting children ready for standardized testing; Many feel testing has become not just a way to measure student achievement, but an end to itself;
- With large classes, kids do not get as much individualized attention; With No Child Left Behind requirements, teachers put their energy into pulling up the bottom 25% rather than challenging the top 25%; If you have an intellectually brighter child, he may not be challenged unless you can get him into a gifted program;
- Schools often test for gifted programs at the kindergarten level; if your child misses that entry point, it can be almost impossible to get her admitted later;
- If your child is having a problem, public schools are less likely to be flexible and fashion an individual solution; they often have a “if we do it for you, we have to do it for everybody” mentality;
- There are more discipline issues in public school.

You may also want to consider religious schools. Here are a few things to consider when looking at these...

Religious School Advantages

- Your child can grow up practicing her religion on a daily basis, not just at church or temple;
- You can also choose religious schools that are more loosely affiliated with a denomination, welcoming students of all faiths; These schools teach religious, moral and ethical values without being evangelistic; It is important to visit the religious schools you are considering because they differ widely in terms of how deeply integrated religious teachings are in their curriculum;
- If your local public school is underperforming and secular private schools are too expensive, a local religious school may be a good compromise;
- Religious schools aren't subject to *The No Child Left Behind Act*, so teachers won't spend months getting children ready for those standardized tests;
- If you are from a family of faith, a religious school may be a good match for your family's values.

Religious School Disadvantages

- There is tuition, although it is often less than tuition of non-sectarian private schools;
- Even if the school underplays religion, do you want your Jewish child going to a school that displays crucifixes throughout the building? Do you want your Catholic child going to Meeting for Worship at a Quaker school? At any faith based school no matter how much they low-key it, there will always be religious overtones that a child of a different faith can't avoid;
- They tend to be less diverse;
- They are often smaller schools, lacking the wider curriculum and extras that you would find in a non-secular private school and even a public school;

- Teachers are paid less than those in public school;
- It is difficult to find general statistics on academic performance of children in religious schools; if you are considering this option, do the research with regard to whichever religious school you are considering.

In my book, *Testing For Kindergarten*, we reviewed many of the factors that were predictive of a child's accomplishments in school. Kids who achieved the greatest success came from higher socioeconomic family homes (which indicated more parental involvement in a child's life), lived with parents who valued education and reading, surrounded them with language, and instilled the quality of high self-control in them. Academic success had little to do with whether a child went to private, public or religious school. My advice is to tour and apply to both public and private schools (if private is an option), and then make the decision that feels best to you. As long as you're doing the right things at home, your child will be fine.