

HOW TO MAKE YOUR LIST OF SCHOOLS

By The Testing Mom

As you begin to research kindergartens for your child, you are going to hear other parents talk about this school or that school being the **“best” schools in town**. Trust me when I tell you this, there is no “best” school in town. For you, the best school in town is one that fits your child and family.

At this point in the process, you probably don’t know too much – only what you’ve heard from friends and family. Before you begin, consider the assumptions you have going into the process of looking for a kindergarten. Here are some very common ones people have.

- The public schools in my district are terrible. I can only consider private school.
- I’d love to send my child to private school but it’s too expensive.
- There’s a Catholic school around the corner that everyone says is fantastic, but we’re Christian. They’d never take our child.
- I hear single sex schools are great for boys in the early years but not so good for girls.
- My child is smart, but he isn’t a genius. We could never get him into a giftedprogram.

No matter what your assumptions are going into the process, it’s important to research all the options available and to have an open mind to what you might discover.

If you’re thinking about private school, I recommend that you do a bit of research and go visit the public school you are zoned for and at least two other public programs that interest you. These could be gifted programs, charter, or magnet schools that you’ve heard of. These are easy to find on-line or ask your nursery school director what she might recommend.

If you are thinking about private schools and you are sure you want a co-ed program, visit at least one single sex school if these are available to you. You may be very surprised about what you find out.

The same thing goes for those of you who are absolutely intent on public schools. Visit a few private schools just for a point of comparison. If you believe you couldn't afford a private school, ask your nursery school director which ones offer financial aid. You never know if your child might qualify.

If you are sure you want to send your child to a religious school, you should still visit a few non-denominational public and private schools.

You might wonder why I'm recommending that you go beyond your first ideas about which type of schools are right for your child. The reason is that I've worked with many clients who go into their school search absolutely convinced about what they want. Then, after touring some alternatives and learning more, they end up sending their child to a school they never would have imagined choosing in the beginning. Their desires change when they see what is available. I just want to be sure that you give yourself the gift of seeing what the choices are before you decide.

As you begin to think about which schools are a fit for your child and family and which are not, consider the qualities that matter most to you in the program you choose. Below is a checklist that will help you figure this out. If you are just starting your search, you may not know everything you're looking for. That's fine. Complete the checklist to the best of your ability. Make several copies of your completed checklist.

Below, I've listed 72 features a school might offer. Go through them and put:

- a "Y" next to each feature that you feel the school you choose MUST HAVE;
- a "L" next to each feature that you would LIKE TO HAVE in any school you send your child to, but it wouldn't be a deal breaker if it wasn't there;
- A "DC" next to each feature that you DON'T CARE whether or not the school has;
- a "NO" next to each feature that you don't want in any school you send your child to;
- and
- a "?" next to any feature you DON'T KNOW and feel you need to do more research to decide how important it is.

After each school you tour, take one of your completed checklists and evaluate the school you visited using colored ink. Does the school offer your MUST HAVE features? As you tour schools, do the research you need to determine if the DON'T KNOW features are qualities you definitely want or could live without. And if you visit schools that offer many of the items that you don't want or don't care about, you'll know that this probably isn't the right school for your child. Finally, don't be surprised if the features you think you want change as you tour schools. That is perfectly fine. The more educated you are, the clearer you'll become about your priorities. Use this checklist to drive your opinion about which is the "best" school for your child and family.

- M - MUST HAVE

- L - LIKE TO HAVE

- DC – DON'T CARE

- NO – DON'T WANT

- ? - DON'T KNOW

1. ___A traditional, structured, teacher-led curriculum.
2. ___A progressive, open, child centered curriculum.
3. ___A private school.
4. ___A private school offering financial aid.
5. ___A public school.
6. ___A public school gifted program.
7. ___A Public charter or magnet school.
8. ___Parents are expected to donate and/or fundraise.
9. ___Prestigious, well-known program.
10. ___A single sex school.
11. ___A co-ed school.
12. ___A school affiliated with a church or temple.
13. ___A school located within walking distance or 10 minute commute.
14. ___A school outside my neighborhood
15. ___Small class size (less than 20)
16. ___Children wear uniforms.

17. ___ Formal environment, teachers called Mr. or Ms.
18. ___ Informal environment, teachers called by first name
19. ___ Competitive environment.
20. ___ Academically demanding environment.
21. ___ Nurturing environment.
22. ___ Intellectual environment.
23. ___ Goes from K through elementary school only.
24. ___ Goes from K through middle school or high school.
25. ___ Offers after-school and vacation programs.
26. ___ Places children in ability groups for math, writing, reading.
27. ___ Offers math, writing, reading specialists to work with children.
28. ___ Encourages parents to get tutors for children needing extra help.
29. ___ Small sized school.
30. ___ Medium sized school.
31. ___ Large school.
32. ___ Bright, modern physical facility.
33. ___ Adequate, well-maintained physical facility.
34. ___ Has a gymnasium.
35. ___ Has playground.
36. ___ Has athletic fields.
37. ___ Has computer labs.
38. ___ Has library.
39. ___ Has science labs.
40. ___ Has cafeteria on-site.
41. ___ Strong athletics program.
42. ___ Strong arts, music, dance, and drama program.
43. ___ Cafeteria offers healthy food choices.
44. ___ Children get daily structured physical education.
45. ___ Children get daily recess.
46. ___ Children get art, music, P.E. 3 times per week or more.
47. ___ Values diversity in student body and teachers, multi-cultural curriculum.

48. ___Values community service.
49. ___Conservative community.
50. ___Liberal community.
51. ___High security.
52. ___Special philosophy or set of values that guides everything.
53. ___Parents are actively involved in setting school policy.
54. ___Parents are involved in raising money and assisting in the classroom.
55. ___A Parent body I feel comfortable with.
56. ___High percentage of mothers who work outside the home.
57. ___Children perform above average on standardized tests.
58. ___Children go on to top on-going schools/colleges.
59. ___Teachers have general education degrees.
60. ___Teachers have specialized degrees and graduate degrees.
61. ___Teachers instruct via lecture.
62. ___Teachers instruct via hands-on learning.
63. ___Head of school has been in his/her job for lengthy tenure.
64. ___Special programs for children with learning issues.
65. ___Special programs for gifted children.
66. ___Emphasis on moral and ethical behavior.
67. ___Homework starts early and increases each year.
68. ___Little homework in early grades.
69. ___Parents are expected to help with homework.
70. ___Quizzes and tests begin in Kindergarten.
71. ___Grades are assigned from Kindergarten.
72. ___Grades aren't given until later grades.

At the end of the day, use this checklist to guide your head. However, when making your final decision, ask yourself what your heart tells you. If it is different from what your head says, think carefully before deciding. I'm much more likely to trust my heart in a decision like this than my head. You know your child better than anyone and your heart will tell you where she belongs