

THE SCHOOL TOUR CHECKLIST

By The Testing Mom

General

- Tours are a must. A school may sound perfect by reputation, but when you arrive, your instinct may tell you it's not a good fit. The most important question to ask is, "Can I imagine my child learning and being happy in this environment?"
- Be on your best behavior. Even if a parent is leading the tour, she may report back to the admissions director on the parents she met.
- Don't ask questions that might insult the tour guide or the director if she hears what you asked. For example, avoid asking if the school has a drug problem or if the scandal you heard about the principal ditching his wife for his secretary is true.
- Don't take notes. Turn off your cell phone.
- Create a notebook with dividers that list each school you are visiting (or create an on-line version of the same). Fill in this checklist for each school you visit. Write notes about what you saw. After you tour many schools, your impressions will all run together. Get your impressions and thoughts down on paper right away and it will help you make your decision in the end. If you saw something specific that impressed you, write it down. It may be something you can bring up during your interview or in a thank you note.
- When you're touring, don't monopolize the group with your questions.

Note: Some of the qualities below can be observed, and other will require that you ask. It is unlikely that everything on this list is equally important to you. Focus on the areas you care most about. Look for answers or ask.

Overall Impression

- ___Do you feel safe, comfortable, walking into the school?
- ___How good is the security at the front door? At other doors?
- ___What does the atmosphere feel like to you? Nurturing? Structured? Laid back? Competitive? Formal? Informal?
- ___Is the building clean and well maintained? Is it in good repair?
- ___Is there a cafeteria? Is it clean? Would the menu appeal to your child?
- ___Are the facilities up to date and well maintained? (library, computer lab, science lab, gym, playground)
- ___Does it have all the facilities that are important to you? A gym? A pool? Out door space? Dance studio? Art room? Theater? Computer labs? Playground?
- ___How do students and teachers interact? In and out of the classroom?
- ___How diverse is the student body? The teacher body?
- ___Do students wear uniforms? If not, are you comfortable with the dress code?

School Philosophy

- ___What are the school's educational goals? Do they live up to them?
- ___Does the school have a special philosophy? What is it? How is this brought to life in the school?
- ___What role do teachers, administrators, parents, and students have in setting school policy or planning curriculum?
- ___How involved are parents in the school? Do they have an active Parent's Association?
- ___What are the administration's highest priorities?
- ___Is there a strong sense of community here?
- ___How does the school foster ethical and moral behavior? What are the standards for student behavior and rules for discipline? Is discipline enforced appropriately?

Facts and Figures

- ___How do students perform on standardized tests?
- ___Where do students end up going to college?
- ___What is the average class size? What is the student-teacher ratio?
- ___How qualified are the teachers? Do they have specialized degrees, such as math or chemistry? Or did they graduate with general degrees? What is the average tenure?
- ___What kind of faculty turnover has the school had? 10-20% is average and understandable. Schools that treat the faculty well won't have high turnover.
- ___Has the head of the school been here a long time? If there have been several heads over the last few years, find out why (you'll have to do some digging outside of the tour).
- ___Is the school fiscally sound? How large is the endowment and how is it used?
- ___Are parents expected to donate to the school each year? What is expected?
- ___What is the ratio of applications to acceptances?

In the classroom

- ___Are the children engaged and interested? Do they seem courteous, happy, relaxed?
- ___Are teachers enthusiastic, responsive to students?
- ___How large are the classrooms? Are they well organized? Light? Full of interesting materials? Would this be a place where your child would be happy spending the day?
- ___How does the school encourage and monitor a student's progress?
- ___Do kids work in small groups or spend most of their time in large group instruction?
- ___Are children taught in different ability groups? How often are children re-evaluated and allowed to change ability groups? Does it happen often?
- ___What is the work on display like? Does the artwork allow for individual creativity or is everyone making the same shaped bowl?
- ___Are the kindergarteners already writing?
- ___Do they leave the classroom for some classes? Which ones?
- ___How do the little children mix with the older children?
- ___Are there special programs for students with special needs? (gifted, learning disabled, tutoring, counseling)

- ___How do they ensure consistency of learning between classrooms in each grade and from grade to grade?
- ___What is the schedule for the day? The week?
- ___Does the school offer P.E.? Visual arts? Music? Language? How often?
- ___How much emphasis is on learning reading and math vs. arts, athletics, music, etc.
- ___How does the school stimulate top students? How do they help students having difficulties in math, reading, or writing?
- ___Are computers used as part of instruction? How are they used?
- ___How are tests and quizzes given? How does a school evaluate a child's achievement and progress? Do they give grades?
- ___How often are parent-teacher conferences?

Outside the classroom

- ___What athletics and extracurricular activities are offered? Do you have to be super athletic to participate in sports, or can anyone? How good is the arts and drama program?
- ___What is the quality of athletic facilities available? Will this serve your child's needs?
- ___Is there an after school enrichment program? What is it like? What does it cost?
- ___Is there childcare before or after school? What does it cost?
- ___Is transportation available? Is there a cost?
- ___Do the children get involved with community service? Are they required to perform community service?
- ___What role does religion play in the school?
- ___What kinds of students does the school serve best? Does what the school offers complement your child's strengths and fill his needs?
- ___What is the school's philosophy on homework? When does it start and how long are children expected to do homework each night?
- ___Do families here tend to use tutors?
- ___How often do you have parent-teacher conferences?

Questions you might ask as you tour:

- **Private School:** What is the mission or educational philosophy of this school?
- **TAG program:** How does your school approach gifted education? How is it different from the curriculum offered in general classrooms?
- **Magnet school:** How is the school's magnet theme incorporated into the school environment?
- **Charter school:** Can you tell me more about your charter? How is this school different from a typical public school? Can I get a copy of your latest performance report?
- **Private, TAG, Magnet School:** How do you evaluate children for admissions? If there is a test, which one is it and how to do I arrange for my child to take it? Are there follow-up interviews?
- **Public schools** – How do your student's test scores compare to those of other schools? Have scores been rising or falling in the past few years?
- **Private schools** – How do your student perform on standardized tests? [You probably can't get comparisons between local private schools on these.]
- **For private school:** What is your endowment? How do you raise money? Do you give scholarships? If so, who is eligible?
- **For public school:** Do you raise money for special programs or equipment?
- In the current economy, what kind of cutbacks have you had to make?
- Are there any events coming up that we could attend that would help us get a feeling for the school and community (i.e. a play, holiday show, spring fair)? If yes, you should definitely go to get a better feel for the school.