



The Parent Point

A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR WASHINGTON'S PRIVATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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Shopping for a school: How can we make the "right" choice?

The post holiday shopping frenzy is on – and it's not at the malls or downtown stores. It's playing at an admissions office near you!

Every school office staffer, from preschool through college – in public or private school, has tales to tell about this discerning parent generation intent on finding the "best" school for their child. No stone unturned. No question unasked. No problem agonizing far more over a kindergarten acceptance than they may ever have over their own graduate school enrollment.

Be at peace! School heads with years of experience know your concerns and offer a few seasoned tips to weather the admissions season – whether your child will be opening that first box of crayons or logging on at her new campus.

There's more than one #1 school.

We all love lists. Top ten. Best places. Award winners. Washington State is blessed with hundreds of quality private and public school options from which families can choose. All have great, positive characteristics. All have a few warts. Ranking one above another emphasizes some of those traits and excludes others. Your best bet? How long has the school been in operation? Is enrollment strong? Private schools have the ultimate of accountability. If parents don't like it, they walk. The doors close. The school goes away. You know your child. What are you really looking for?

There isn't any magic potion.

A school can only be as great as you make it. Be wary of anyone who guarantees success or promises achievement levels. School is hard work. It isn't magic and it isn't rocket science. It takes teachers, parents and motivated students – along with a supportive community – to make headway in the fog of ignorance.

The best schools will commit themselves to working with you so that your child will have all the tools to reach his or her greatest potential. What more could you want?

It isn't about ME.

You've put in your time. This will be your child's school, not yours. It shouldn't be a cocktail party decision to "one-up" friends or impress acquaintances. Virtually every study concludes what you already know: Safety, solid curricula, and values consistent with the family are what parents seek most in a school choice. Athletic trophies, merit scholars, test scores and large endowment funds make for great brochures but all are results of the first three. Ask yourself: Does this choice feel right when I walk in the door? Will it feel right for my child? Is this a place where he will be welcomed; where she'll belong and thrive? You can't force it. You will know it in the first few minutes of a visit or open house. And make sure middle-schoolers and above have that same opportunity to visit during a typical day if possible. They are old enough to form some of the same impressions.

Trust word of mouth – to a point.

What's the general buzz? The best PR money *can't* buy is what parents say at the soccer field and at the grocery store. Every school has that voice or two who see the glass as half empty, yet they still send their kids there. There must be a compelling reason. Find out why. What is the majority opinion about the school's strengths, especially from families whose children have graduated and moved on? And what do the graduates say? Some perceptions are deserved. Some are not. It's pretty easy to sort them out.

Consider the neighborhood choice.

A cold car on a dark, wet February morning is not the time to realize that you don't really like the drive across town. There are times when the match is so right that the trip is worth the sacrifice but friends, after school activities, parent events, and the like can quickly compound the problem. Sort those out sooner than later. You'll be happier for it.

Is the grass really greener?

If running from a problem prompts your decision to look for a school, you'll never be at peace. Though rare, there are times when a change of scenery does a child and a school some good. It's usually best to work out the problem when - and where - it is identified. Even in a small school with fewer placement options, there is no success as sweet as setting differences aside and finding a solution that makes everyone a winner. The greatest gift a school can have (and vice versa) is a parent who wants to work as a partner when the social or educational road gets a little bumpy. And don't forget: No good private school offers an escape away from the world, but tools to deal with it. At best, a student is in a school environment only six to seven hours a day. Hopefully, that experience reflects the best of what you wish for your child and builds on what they enjoy at home. The rest is up to you.

The good news: You're not the only one going through this; not the first and certainly not the last. Every parent wants the best for their child. Relax. She will be fine. A few years from now the only things they will carry with them are the skills they learned, the friends they made and the experiences and love that shaped them. The real measure of success won't be a GPA or transcript or what "prestigious" institution signed off on the diploma. It will be summed up by what kind of person they are. School is about preparation for the next phase of life. Happily, Washington's private schools do that well. If we, as parents, can "get a life," our kids will too.

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