

Five steps to finding the perfect match

By Maureen Murray

Searching for the right school is not a sprint; it's a marathon, requiring committed preparation. Luckily, parents are not alone. Follow this guide, step by step. And if the road gets rocky, keep your eye on the finish line—your child's future.

1. On your mark... Parental prep time

While finding the right house is all about location, location, location, when it comes to private schools, the motto is fit, fit, fit. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. What makes a school perfect for your neighbour's child doesn't necessarily make it the right choice for yours. Your family's circumstances, the individual strengths and needs of your child, your education philosophy and vision will all contribute to your choice of schools.

Private and independent schools are numerous and diverse. There are schools with excellent academic and athletic programs. Some schools follow a distinct education philosophy, such as Montessori, or serve a particular religious community. There are arts-based schools, all-boys schools, boarding schools...and the list goes on.

So before you start flipping through attractive brochures or browsing websites, take the time to consider, as a family, what it is you are looking for in a school and why.

Top considerations

- Your child's personality, learning style and academic ability.
- Special learning strengths and/or needs your child may have.
- Your family's values, goals and priorities.
- Your budget for education spending.
- How far you are willing to let your child travel each day and commuting distance to and from school.
- What type of academic setting you are looking for; a back-to-basics curriculum or a more alternative approach and how strong you'd like the academic focus to be.
- Your absolute must-haves, such as small class sizes or specific athletic facilities.
- Specific approaches—like Montessori or Waldorf—that appeal to you.
- Coed or same sex, boarding and/or day school preferences.
- School size: Are you searching for a small or large school?
- Program duration: Are you looking for a school with an elementary and a high school program, where your child can stay for many years?
- The importance of extracurricular activities.

Carefully consider and write down your basic must-haves in one column of a page. In a second column, add your wish list—the points that are not essential, but would be a bonus to find. Schools with an outstanding music program, a technological



Meadow Green Academy
photograph by Andrew Stawicki

focus or strong outdoor education component are all out there. It's up to you to determine and rank your priorities.

Keep your list and refer back to it throughout the search process. Remember, the bells and whistles may be nice to have, but don't lose sight of your priorities. Keep these in mind and they will guide you to the right fit.

2. Get ready...

Private (school) investigator

This can't be said enough: Do your homework. Having a good base of information and knowledge about the private school landscape will help you make a choice that is right for you and your child. Remember to involve your child in the school search process as much as you can.

Tips

- Start your search early. A year in advance is not too soon.
- Do first-hand research. Don't rely on the experiences of others.
- Make good use of the Internet; most schools have websites where the information you are looking for is quickly accessible.
- Contact a number of schools directly and ask them to mail out an information package.
- Attend open houses and private school fairs—they're usually scheduled several times a year.
- For a list of school open house dates and for quick links to more than 200 school websites, visit ourkids.net.

Now that you've gathered some information, it's time to make good use of it to help you find the best fit for your child.

Meet your match

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3. Get set...

See to believe

Most schools readily welcome visiting parents, so pick up the telephone and arrange a tour. A first-hand look is essential to get a personal sense of whether it's a place you can see sending your child. But don't rely on your first impression—plan more than one visit. Return with your child if you like what you see. Remember to ask a lot of questions; admissions officers anticipate and welcome them. And it's a good idea to bring a written checklist along with you.

School visit checklist

Don't forget to ask about:

- The school's philosophy and vision, and how it is achieved on a day-to-day basis.
- The school's method of communicating with families.
- Teacher qualifications and the type of professional development offered to them.
- The school's curriculum. Does it follow, meet or exceed the provincial Ministry of Education guidelines?
- Where the school's students go after graduation.
- In the case of a high school, the percentage of students who advance to the university of their choice.
- Admission requirements, such as entrance tests. (If there is a test, what type is administered, and how much emphasis does the school place on test results?)
- The type of student that the school is looking for.
- The ways that the school measures individual achievement and progress.
- The school's typical response to a child who is not meeting academic expectations or who has gaps in his or her knowledge.
- The school's homework policy: Is there homework help and support available?
- Student-to-teacher ratio and maximum class size.
- Tuition fees and what they include. Are there additional fees and other expenses such as uniforms, books, technology fees and extracurricular activities?

For a printable version of this checklist, visit www.ourkids.net/pdfs/school/QuestionsAsk.pdf

Request list

- An outline of the school's curriculum; ask to look at textbooks and other teaching materials.
- Names and numbers of parents whose children are currently at the school or alumni, whom you can contact as references.
- An opportunity to speak with the principal and teachers; don't limit yourself to just meeting the admissions officer.
- A chance for your child to interact with students.
- A chance to observe a class or other school activities.
- Information about bursaries or other financial support that may be available.



Selwyn House School
photograph by Christinne Muschi



Toronto French School
photograph by Stan Behal

4. GO!

The application situation

You now have your first-hand knowledge. Narrow down your choices, using your priority list as a guide. It's time to apply to schools of your choice. It's best not to limit yourself to submitting an application to just one "perfect" school. Chances are there are a number of schools that could be an appropriate fit for your child.

Points to remember

- Submit applications early; some schools complete their enrolment by early spring.
- Some schools have set entrance years.
- Depending on your child's age and the school, an entrance exam may be required.
- Do not stress your child out about writing an entrance exam.
- Don't pin all your own or your child's hopes on one particular school.
- Be honest and clear about your child's needs. If he or she has special learning requirements, be sure the school is willing and able to accommodate them.
- Be clear about what you are looking for. If the school assigns two hours of homework each night, this practice is not likely to change once your child is there.
- Extracurricular activities are an important component of many schools. Consider how those offered by a particular school fits with your child's interests.
- Be realistic about your children's academic abilities; don't push them into a school where they won't be able to cope.

What schools are looking for

- An appropriate fit for your child and your family.
- A sense of whether your child wants to attend their school or is being pressured by parents.
- A clear sense of your child's strengths and challenges.
- Your child's likelihood of becoming a participating, integrated member of the school community.
- A family's full understanding of the school's philosophy, vision and expectations at the outset.

Timing is everything

When should you schedule interviews with schools of your choice? When are applications normally submitted? Our Admissions Calendar gives you a month-by-month, play-by-play summary to guide you along the way. Just visit our website, at http://www.ourkids.net/pdfs/school/admissions_cal.pdf for a quick reference, or print out your own copy and take notes in the space provided. Remember, some schools accept applications more than a year in advance, so you don't want to procrastinate!



The Priory School
photograph by Christinne Muschi



Sunnybrook School
photograph by Stan Behal



5. Final stretch: The waiting game

The finish line is in sight. You've submitted your applications and are waiting to be notified about acceptance. Still, there are a few points that every parent should keep in mind:

Words of wisdom

- There is likely more than one school at which your child would succeed and prosper. Don't be overly disappointed if your child does not gain admission to one particular school.
- Don't be crushed by less-than-stellar entrance exam results. Most schools will consider more than just test scores.
- Share pertinent information with the school. The goal is to ensure your child's needs are well accommodated.

Once you have accepted a school, have confidence in your choice. Make the most of the fact that your family is now part of a unique school environment. You have succeeded in making one of the most important decisions in your child's life and an investment in his or her future. That alone is worth more than a gold medal victory!



Montessori Learning Centre of Pickering
photograph by Mike Pochwat



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