



# Finding the “Best Fit” School for Your Child

A Parent and Guardian Workbook

A practical guide to effectively navigate the independent school admission process.



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## INTRODUCTION

Finding the right school for your child can be a rewarding yet demanding process. In the DC metro area there are more than 50 independent schools that offer a broad range of curriculum, programs, missions, and philosophies. Quickly, all the options and deadlines can become overwhelming for parents and guardians to manage. The goal of this guide is to help parents and guardians know the key steps, give useful tips to narrow down the list of prospective schools, and provide a workbook to record experiences and thoughts about each school.

Most families apply to three to five schools during the formal admission season which is generally from September to mid-January the year prior to the enrollment year. If you would like to assess more schools, please do. Just extend the process to the additional schools. Also, be sure to double check the admission related deadlines for each school as they may be different.

Special Notes:

- Following this guide will not guarantee your child’s admission to a school, but hopefully it will provide a path to complete the application process in a thoughtful manner.
- Children are different, and some children may require additional steps or considerations. If you have a child with special needs, please continue the information gathering with outside resources. Also, there are professional educational consultants who specialize in this area and who can serve as partners in this process.

Good luck in this journey.

## Admission Timeline



While each school is different, many schools in the DC area follow this admission schedule:

### September to January

- Attend Open Houses
- Take Private Tours
- Complete Parent Interviews
- Schedule Student Visits
- Complete Student Testing
- Submit Recommendations
- Request Transcripts

### January

- Complete Applications Due
- Financial Aid Applications Due

### March

- Decisions of Admission Notices
- Decide and Enroll in School (Enrollment Contracts Due with Deposits)



## Knowing What Your Child and Family Need in a School

Make and rank the list of the top assets the school needs to have to be a viable option. The following options are the most common priorities for families. If there are others, please include them into your decision making matrix. Answer these questions and prioritize them (listed alphabetically):

### Areas of Interests

Are there particular enrichment opportunities you would like the school to offer (e.g. study trips, sports, arts, mathematics, language arts, music, etc.)?

What \_\_\_\_\_ Priority Level \_\_\_\_\_

### Budget

What is your family able to afford each year to educate your child? Be mindful to include the costs for tuition, fees, and summer care. Most schools have financial aid available and will work with families to bridge the gap between what a family can afford and the cost of tuition. This estimate will simply help you get an idea if you will need to apply for financial aid and if so, about how much.

What \_\_\_\_\_ Priority Level \_\_\_\_\_

### Educational Philosophy

Is there a particular educational philosophy that your family is interested in having your child experience? (e.g. religious, traditional, progressive, experiential, project-based learning, single-sex, co-ed, and kindergarten-grade 8 model).

What \_\_\_\_\_ Priority Level \_\_\_\_\_

### Location

Most families look for schools within 5 miles of their home or work (even for schools that offer bus transportation). Outside of picking up and dropping off your child daily, you should plan on being at the school at least 2 to 3 times per month for field trips, conferences, and special events.

Where \_\_\_\_\_ Priority Level \_\_\_\_\_

### Special Learning Needs

Are there specialists or special facilities that your child needs the school to have for your child to be successful?

What \_\_\_\_\_ Priority Level \_\_\_\_\_

### Other

Are there other needs your family has? List them here.

What \_\_\_\_\_ Priority Level \_\_\_\_\_



## *Listing the Schools Around Your Home or Work*

Start by going online and doing a map search of the area independent schools. Pick the schools that are nearest to your home or work and that appear to align with your list of needs. Don’t be afraid to explore lesser known schools if they appear to be a good fit for your child and family. If the school aligns with what you are looking for, write down the following information:

### *School Option One:*

Curriculum/Philosophy:

Tuition:

Admission Contact Information:

### *School Option Two:*

Curriculum/Philosophy:

Tuition:

Admission Contact Information:

### *School Option Three:*

Curriculum/Philosophy:

Tuition:

Admission Contact Information:

### *School Option Four:*

Curriculum/Philosophy:

Tuition:

Admission Contact Information:

### *School Option Five:*

Curriculum/Philosophy:

Tuition:

Admission Contact Information:

## *Making Independent Schools Affordable*



There are a number of outside organizations that provide additional financial aid to students attending independent schools in the national capital region:

A Better Chance

Archdiocese of Washington

Black Student Fund

Capital Partners for Education

Emerging Scholars

The FitzGerald Program

Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program

Latino Student Fund

Project Match

Visit the Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington’s website for more information ([aisgw.com](http://aisgw.com)).



### Seeing the School in Action

Nothing is more important than seeing the campus in-person. You should mark the dates and times of the school’s open house which best work for you and/or schedule a private tour with school’s admission team. Plan on visiting the schools you like, optimally, three times: open house, private tour, and a general school event (not hosted by the Office of Admission).

We recommend that you do the first visit without your child. Once you are confident that the school is a good fit for your family, then invite your child into the decision making process.

Lastly, most schools request that you RSVP to attend an open house. Don’t forget to do that!

School	Open House Date & Time	Private Tour Date & Time	School Event Date & Time	Visit #1 Score	Visit #2 Score	Visit #3 Score	Scores Total	Final Ranking
1.								
2.								
3.								
4.								
5.								

On the next several pages there are tools to help you evaluate each school. Complete the scoring sections as you go. Use a pencil! You may change your opinion, and that way you can make the updates as needed.

Notes:



## *Developing the List of Questions*

Before you visit a school, look at the school’s website and review any materials the Office of Admission has sent you. Develop a list of questions that will help you clarify anything you have read and that you would like more information about; confirm what you have read is in place; and to cover any special interests you may have. Here are some starter questions that could uncover key information that may not be in the school’s marketing materials:

- *What three words best describe your typical student?*
- *How are you different from your competitors?*
- *Where and what type of schools do the school’s graduates matriculate to?*
- *What are the top criteria you look for when accepting a student?*
- *What is the student body retention rate and what are the most common reasons why students leave before graduation?*
- *What is the parent engagement like at the school?*
- *What are the key criteria you look for when hiring a faculty member?*
- *What is the annual faculty retention rate and what are the most common reasons why a faculty member leaves?*
- *Have there been or will there be any major strategic changes or updates in programming or curriculum since your materials have been published?*
- *Do all the students have equal opportunity to participate in the enrichment programs (sports, performing arts, academic teams, etc.)? Are there tryouts or additional fees that might limit your child’s participation?*

Your specific questions:



## *Evaluating the School Visit*

At the open house and on the private tour, the Office of Admission should show you the facilities including several classrooms, playgrounds, gymnasiums, band rooms, art studios, science labs, and student social spots. The school should also provide you with the opportunity to see teachers instructing and give you a comprehensive overview of the curriculum and programming that drive the instruction.

After each school visit, take a moment to ask yourself these key questions:

- *How was the commute? Can you imagine doing it every day (or at least two to three times a month if the school provides transportation)?*
- *Was the facility safe and secure? Did it meet your expectations (size, layout, cleanliness, etc.)?*
- *Were the classrooms bright, inviting, and conducive to a positive learning environment?*
- *Was everyone (the faculty, staff, administration, students, and parents) friendly and engaging?*
- *Did the students seem to be actively learning?*
- *Did the faculty seem enthusiastic about their discipline?*
- *What was the interaction between the students and faculty like? Did it match your expectations or wishes (formal, casual, loving, nurturing, etc.)?*
- *Do you now know both the philosophy of the school and how the faculty implements that philosophy day-to-day in the classroom, on the playgrounds, on the athletic fields, and within the other areas of the school?*
- *Did it look as though the faculty had the resources to effectively teach the material?*
- *Did the admissions team, faculty, and/or staff answer your questions?*
- *Is there anything you did not see on the tour?*
- *Was there anything that caused you concern or were disappointed by?*
- *Can you picture your child being successful at this school?*
- *Can you imagine your child (and yourself) making friends at this school?*



### Assessing Visit #1

Now that you have thought about these questions, complete the form below to keep a log of your experience after each school visit. Rate each school from 1 to 5 in each category and total the numbers (1 being poor and 5 being excellent). When making these rankings, keep in mind your family’s priorities. A school might be great but just not great for your child and/or family. Be sure to measure the school against *your* priorities and goals.

After several school visits you may want to adjust your ratings. Try completing this form immediately after each visit. By the fifth school visit, the information/experiences may start running together in your mind and memory. Update the first chart with your final totals.

School	Academic Offerings	Enrichment Offerings	Study Trips/ Field Trips	Community	Facilities	Outplacement Services	Commute	Other	Total
1.									
2.									
3.									
4.									
5.									

Favorite (Highest Rank):

Second Favorite:

Third Favorite:





## Assessing Visit #2

After the first visit, if there are schools that you are sure will not work for your child and/or family, take them off your list. Now you can focus on those schools that remain on your list, and schedule a second visit. Continue to keep a log of your experience after the second visit. Keep the same scale, and rate each school from 1 to 5 in each category and total the numbers (1 being poor and 5 being excellent). See if the rankings changed with the second visit. Lastly, did you have received the same information on both visits? Is the school giving consistent information? If not, why may that be? Lastly, update the first chart with your final totals.

School	Academic Offerings	Enrichment Offerings	Study Trips/ Field Trips	Community	Facilities	Outplacement Services	Commute	Other	Total
1.									
2.									
3.									
4.									
5.									

Favorite (Highest Rank):

Second Favorite:

Third Favorite:



### Assessing Visit #3

For your top school preferences, you should visit them for a third time. At this point, you should feel assured that the school will fit your child’s educational needs, and now you are looking to see if the school fits your family socially and aligns with your values. Optimally, this visit should be to a non-admission event (e.g. sports game, assembly, and play) as you will want to see the “real” interactions between the students, parents, and faculty. During your visit, take note of the following aspects:

#### General Interactions

- Do the students seem to appear cliquish or are students talking to each other equitably?
- Can you see your son or daughter engaging with one or more of the student groups?
- How are the parents engaging with each other? Can you picture regularly engaging with the parents?

#### Play or Assembly Considerations

- Do the students seem well rehearsed and prepared?
- Is it a type of production that you would like your son or daughter to participate in?
- Do many of the students have an opportunity to solo or are the key performances limited to just a few students?
- How are the students in the audience? Are they listening and being respectful?

#### Sporting or Competitive Event Considerations

- How prepared and organized are the student athletes and coaches?
- Are the students on the field and off the field demonstrating good sportsmanship?
- Are the parents demonstrating good sportsmanship?
- How intense are the coaches?
- Do many of the players have a chance to participate or does the school focus on playing just a select group of players?
- How competitive is the sporting event? Is it in line with your goals for the sports program?

This time, use the scale to indicate how strongly the school’s social interactions and character align with your family’s values. After each event, give the school a 0, 10, 20, 30, or 40 points. Use 0 to indicate that the event did not at all match your family social and character values and use a 40 to indicate that it exceeded your social and character values. Allow 10, 20, and 30 to appropriately represent something in between. Write the final scores down after each event and then on the first chart.

School Option One Score:

School Option Three Score:

School Option Five Score:

School Option Two Score:

School Option Four Score:

Add these additional points to the other visits and total by school. Which school came out on top? Where did the other schools come out?



## Conclusion

Update the first chart with your final totals. How do the numbers come out? Do you now have a list of the “best fitting” schools? For those schools which are good fits for both your child and family, it is now time to start the school’s application. Most schools have a particular application process and a list of procedures to complete; these should be listed on school’s website. Generally though, families and students are asked for the following things:

- *Teacher Recommendation(s)*
- *Student Testing*
- *Current School Transcript*
- *Student Visit/Shadow Day*
- *Parent Interview*
- *General Application*

Be mindful that while one or two schools may be perfect for your family, the school(s) may have limited openings for any given grade in any given year. We always recommend families apply to several schools.

If the schools you initially identified do not seem to be matching your needs, it may be time to start over. You can repeat the process and expand your search radius to include more schools or you may want to use the services of professional educational consultant.

Finally, sending your child to an independent school is one of the best and most important investments you will make as a parent or guardian. While there may have been moments of doubt and anxiety during the research and admission processes, feel confident that the time and effort you have put towards them is well worth it. Not only does finding the right fit benefit your child in the short-term and long-term but it will also benefit your entire family as lifelong friendships and connections develop through the relationships formed at your child’s school.

Visit [www.w-e-s.org/admissionsblog](http://www.w-e-s.org/admissionsblog) for posts about the admission process or contact WES’s Office of Admission via email at [admissions@w-e-s.org](mailto:admissions@w-e-s.org) or call 301-652-7878 to learn more.

