



Finding the **PERFECT FIT**

Choosing the Right School for Your Child

By Daniel Beauregard

Enrolling in a new school is one of the most important moments of a child's life. Whether you're considering a public, private or parochial school, whether your child is entering first grade or finishing high school, it's crucial to place him or her in just the right institution—one that will provide a nurturing and challenging experience and will sculpt him or her into an informed and independent thinker.

The Atlanta area offers a wealth of options, from college-preparatory academies and cultural-immersion schools to experiential-learning centers and charter schools. That means parents need to know what type of school they're looking for and the options available to them.

"The process is far easier when families know what they are looking for in a school," says Brian Uitvlugt, vice president and director of admissions at Eaton Academy in Roswell.

MAKING A LIST

Fortunately, moving to a new city provides an excellent opportunity for families to find the school that precisely meets their child's needs.

Before visiting any schools in the area, make a list of the qualities you most want in a new school. Does it feature a strong focus on athletics or a quality arts program? Does the campus seem clean? Do the teachers seem confident, the students cheerful and engaged? ►

In addition, create a list of your child's academic, social and emotional strengths and needs. Then compare and contrast the offerings of different schools and how they match up with your list.

"Factors such as student-to-teacher ratio, extracurricular offerings, availability of before-and-after care, quality of the curriculum and the variety of programs offered will vary significantly from school to school," Uitvlugt says.

Of course, the best way to ensure that a school meets your child's needs is to include your child in the selection process.

"If the entire family gets involved, then the process becomes an opportunity for positive growth and can lead to success," says Wendy Williams, an educational consultant.

Ask your children about the subjects they are passionate about or find difficult, their hobbies, sports and outdoor activities they enjoy and, if they're older, career goals and post-secondary plans.

Families living in an area with a quality public school system may wish to explore that option.



Remember that your child is interviewing the school to determine if it will meet his or her needs.

The first step is to find out which school serves their neighborhood by checking the local district's website, says Courtney Burnett, spokeswoman for City Schools of Decatur, a charter school system. Parents can also visit the Georgia Department of Education's website (see sidebar) to compare schools in the district they're looking at and other districts in the state. However, the site only compares public schools.

If you want to explore independent schools that may be a good fit, the websites for the Atlanta Area Association of Independent Schools and the Georgia Independent School Association are good places to start.

PAYING A VISIT

After doing your homework, visit each prospective school on your list. Spend time with the staff and students, and make sure to speak with parents of children attending the school.

"Often, schools have special potential-parent tours," says Burnett. "These tours are a great tool to see the school, meet the administration and see classrooms in action."



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Familiarize yourself with a school's mission and values and try to get a feel for how the students and adults interact as a whole. "I highly recommend that families attend sporting events, plays or musicals to learn about a school's community and athletic or artistic talents," Williams says.

Ask questions and encourage your child to do the same. It's important that your child understand that they are interviewing the school to determine if it will meet his or her needs.

Parents can also request an opportunity to allow the child to spend some time in each prospective school and shadow another student. "It is very important for the parents and the student to get their own feel of the school's 'vibe,'" Uitvlugt says.

After each visit, sit down with your child and create a list of each school's strengths and weaknesses. Along with academic and extracurricular offerings, be sure to factor in travel time to and from the school, classroom and school size and, if you're reviewing an independent school, the costs associated with attending the school. Review your finances to determine what financial commitment your family can reasonably make and whether you may need to seek scholarship support.



SEEKING OUTSIDE HELP

There are so many factors to weigh when choosing a school that you may consider hiring an educational consultant, either to help review your options or simply to give you another perspective.

Wendy Williams says it's her goal to make the process of choosing a school easier. She takes the time to visit local schools in person so she can better understand an institution's academic rigor and social personality.

Educational consultant groups offer services ranging from school assessments to student needs assessments and test preparation. The Independent Educational Consultants Association's website offers an exhaustive list of educational consultants both nationally and statewide, as well as resources for parents.

In the end, says Burnett, choosing a school is a personal decision, and parents must do what they think is best for their child and their family. By taking the time to make sure you know what kind of school you're looking for, and knowing the right questions to ask of teachers, staffers and parents, you'll be well on the way to making the right choice for everyone involved. **N**

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Georgia Department of Education
www.doe.k12.ga.us

Atlanta Area Association of Independent Schools
www.aaais.org

Georgia Independent School Association
www.gisaschools.org

Independent Educational Consultants Association
www.iecaonline.com

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