

Choosing a School for your child: What to Consider and What Questions to ask

Karen Starkiss

I am always hesitant to comment when parents ask me to recommend a school for their child. Decisions about where your child goes to school are very personal what suits one child may not suit another. There are, however, certain points to consider and questions to ask that I would recommend to all parents. I hope that this document will be helpful for all parents although I have specifically considered parents of children with additional needs in the following advice.

Choosing a school: -first considerations

- ✓ Consider your family values and preferences
- ✓ Do you prefer public or private education?
- ✓ Do you want your child to have a religious education?
- ✓ Is there a particular philosophy you want for your child such as Steiner or Montessori?
- ✓ If you have other children, is it important that all your children go to the same school?
- ✓ If the school you choose isn't the local one: how accessible is transport?
- ✓ Distance: Will it be easy for your child to get together with friends outside of school?
- ✓ Where are your child's friends going to school? Is this an important factor?
- ✓ Do you need before-school and after-school care for your child?

Next Considerations:

- ✓ Is the school small or large? What size is likely to suit your child best?
- ✓ What facilities does the school have to support your child's learning – playground space, music programs, clubs and sporting teams? Your child will have a strength, it is important to promote that. What are the times and costs associated with these?
- ✓ What are the options for transport to and from school? Do they work for your family?
- ✓ Secondary schools: What study paths are available at different schools – VCE/Higher School Certificate, International Baccalaureate (IB), Vocational and Educational Training (VET) and so on

School Visits:

This is essential and please visit as many as possible. Sometimes parents are put off visiting a school because of something detrimental that someone has said, because of a negative reputation in the past, because of their experience if they went to school in the same area etc.

But schools change, managers of schools change and what doesn't suit one child may well suit another. Sometimes parents have contacted me to thank me for this advice because the school they were convinced that they wouldn't choose was the one that impressed them most.

Even a short visit will help you identify a school's strengths and challenges. It's also the only way to get a feel for a school's climate and to see for yourself important factors like engagement of the students, quality of communication and respect between students, teachers, administrators, and parents, and the overall sense that the school offers a safe and inspiring learning environment.

Where possible, you must visit the school when the students are there and, if possible, talk to the students not just the teachers. In addition, if your child has additional needs address your questions not just to the head of year or wellbeing coordinator. For example, if it's a secondary school ask the geography teacher or the science teacher, 'my child is dyslexic/dysgraphic, dyscalculic etc. how will you support them in class?' If the answer is something like, "That's not really my responsibility, you would have to talk to the wellbeing coordinator/if they funding they will have a class assistant..." For me, that would be a cause for concern.

Many parents want to take their child with them. If this is the case; it is helpful to see whether the school staff address your child as well as you.

If the school only offers an open night, when students are not there, ask if you could come to the school during a school day. You should spend time thinking about the questions you want to ask and note them down before the visit



Questions you might ask: (not necessarily in order of importance as this might vary according to your child)

- ✓ What is the child to teacher ratio?
- ✓ Does the school offer a 'transition into school' program?
- ✓ How do you settle unhappy or anxious children?
- ✓ How well does the school support children with additional needs, do they have a policy?
What opportunities are there for the staff to improve their knowledge of students with additional needs?
- ✓ If your child has a diagnosis: How will you ensure that all staff teaching and supporting my child know about his/her needs and the recommendations for support?
- ✓ What additional support is currently available for children with additional needs?

- ✓ My child struggles with (for example) literacy but is talented in maths; does the school offer extension or accelerated learning programs? If so, what are the selection criteria?
- ✓ How is technology used to support teaching and learning at this school? Does the school allow students to use specific technologies like iPads or laptops?
- ✓ Does your child have to study a second language? If not, what is offered instead?
- ✓ If my child is finding some aspects of school difficult, how will I know? You don't want to wait for the end of year report to find out
- ✓ What is this school's approach to student discipline and safety? Do you have an anti-bullying policy? How do you deal with bullying or bad behaviour?
- ✓ How much homework do students have? What is the school's philosophy/approach to homework?
- ✓ How does the school communicate with parents? How is information sent home concerning your child? Is there a weekly newsletter? Do teachers regularly email parents with updates? Is there a special login on the school's websites where parents can see information about daily or weekly events?
- ✓ What opportunities are there for parent and family involvement with the school?
- ✓ How does the school guide and prepare students for major academic decisions that will define their options in high school and beyond? Does the school offer a variety of career planning options for students who are not college bound?
- ✓ Does the school have a tutoring program so students can get extra help if they need it?
- ✓ You could ask individual teachers if they are happy at the school? And what they like best about the school? It's probably not a question they will be expecting so the speed of response, as well as the response, might be helpful! The school can look amazing on Open Day but if teachers aren't motivated, engaged and happy then it will almost certainly impact on your child



Questions to ask the students?

- ✓ Are you happy, do you like it here?
- ✓ What do you like best/least about the school?
- ✓ How is bullying/bad behaviour dealt with?
- ✓ Are you allowed to use technologies regularly in class?

What to look for on a school visit

- ✓ Do teachers seem enthusiastic and knowledgeable, asking questions that stimulate students and keep them engaged?

- ✓ Do the children look happy and interested?
- ✓ How do students behave as they move from class to class or play outside? Are they respectful to you e.g. hold the door open, say hello etc.
- ✓ Watch how the students treat one another. Are they kind and respectful?
- ✓ Does the building appear well cared for? Is the playground equipment in good condition? How well are the facilities maintained? Do the grounds look safe and inviting and are bathrooms clean?
- ✓ Do classrooms look cheerful? Is student work displayed, and does it seem appropriate for the grade level?
- ✓ Look at the displays round the school: are they colourful and exciting? Do they include students' work? Do they look like they are changed regularly? Are there displays throughout the school, not just in the main areas?
- ✓ If you get a chance look in the students' exercise books: are they marked regularly, what is the standard of presentation like?



Too much information? I've offer suggestions and tried to cover all bases but there will be questions that are important for you that might be specific to your child or your circumstances

One word of advice; based on personal experience as a teacher and school principal:

Sometimes parents have visited schools and felt that a particular one is best for their child's needs however, their child wants to go to a school, which the parents don't favour, to be with their friends. You are the one who knows what is best for your child and, once they go to their new primary or secondary school, they invariably, very quickly make new friends from other feeder schools. Send them to the school that you feel will be most supportive.

Another word of advice based on personal experience as a parent of children with additional needs: Even if you think you know the school please go and visit it. We moved quite a distance and chose a school that was close to us and had a very good reputation, looked excellent 'on paper.' We didn't visit and it was absolutely the wrong school to meet our children's needs.

Good luck

Karen Starkiss www.dyslexiasupportservices.com.au karen@dyslexiasupportservices.com.au