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Making an informed school choice.

We live in an age of choice. In our parents' generation, there was only one phone company, only one way to receive your television signal, only one movie playing at the local theatre and, for most people, only one choice about where your child should go to school. Twenty-first century life presents us with a wide range of alternatives for just about everything. While this smorgasbord of choices is wonderful, it is also quite daunting! The implication in every decision we make is that for every "best" choice there are a myriad of bad ones. And, there is no place where our decision-making is more critical than the choice of where our children should go to school. Parents are constantly bombarded by the opinions of educational "experts" extolling the benefits of one approach over another and are told time and time again that it is often more important to select "where" you learn as opposed to measure "what" you learn. Although much of what is said in this regard is overblown hyperbole, there is no question that it has a notable impact upon parents. Every year we get hundreds of calls from parents asking for a recommendation for the "best" school for their children.

What is the answer? What is the best school for an individual child? No professional educational counselor can give you that answer. Reputation, Fraser Institute rankings, or Ministry exam reports all give you some idea about school performance, but often tell you more about school admissions and student demographics. The best way to determine the best "fit" for a student is through careful research, thought and most of all an intimate knowledge of the child her or himself. In this regard, there is no better expert on school choice than the individual parent.

So how do parents go about making themselves into an expert on school choice? It isn't rocket science! It is simply a process of asking the right questions, and knowing what to listen and look for in the answers you get back.

WHERE SHOULD WE START?

The first principle of school selection is a simple one. You must always remember that you are a buyer, not a seller. Schools, public or private, are selling you a service. You are not there to sell them on your child. There is a discouraging trend among some independent schools, and parents who buy into it, to give the impression that it is a privilege to be accepted.

So how should you approach them? To begin with, be pleasantly skeptical. The school or school system is going to present you with a marketing package that extols the virtues of what they provide for

students. When you are reading it, think about the same glossy publications that are produced by car dealers. Do you believe everything that they tell you? Treat a “school fair” like an auto show. Collect the information and then begin your serious research. Often the same people who agonize over buying a car or house, will make the far more important decision of where to send their child to school, based upon brand recognition and a marketing pitch.

The second basic principle to remember is that you know your own child better than anyone else. No admissions test, or half hour interview, is going to give the school the insight that you possess by living together day in and day out. It is important to remember that there is never a “one size fits all” school. If there is, then it probably fits badly! Take the time to sit with your child and find out what he or she wants in a school (activities, facilities, friends, etc.). That doesn’t mean that you necessarily let them dictate the choice, but at least you know what their priorities are. Secondly, take the time to brainstorm with your partner or a friend or your child’s current teacher to identify what strengths and needs that your child requires from her/his new school. From these discussions, set your priorities and rate the various factors that you will be looking for in a school.

Have a profile of the “ideal” school for your child? Great! Now it is time to find it!

WHERE SHOULD WE LOOK?

1. Do some homework.

The best time to begin the work of exploring your options is in the fall of the year before your plan to enroll your child and the best place to begin, is right at home. In preparation, check within your own circle of connections. Talk to your friends or parents of your child’s friends. They can often give you first hand, or reliable second hand, information about one or two schools. There can be a risk in using this source. To begin with, hopefully parents have chosen a school because it suits the needs of their particular child, and those needs might not be the same as those of your daughter or son. Secondly, often independent school parents are reluctant to admit that they are spending considerable sums of money on a school that isn’t “perfect”. Having said that, it is one more piece of the puzzle that you are trying to put together.

Your second move is to search the net. You might start with a master list of schools (school district listings, CESI accredited schools, member schools in organizations such as the Canadian Association of Independent Schools, the Quebec Association of Independent Schools, etc., or publications such as *Our Kids* magazine). Explore the web sites of the schools in your area and analyze them under each of your criteria. This should help you to create a preliminary short list.

2. Hit the road

There are a number of opportunities to find out about independent schools in the fall of each year. Most school websites will announce Open Houses – which you should identify and attend – and often advertise broader school “fairs” in which a large number of schools in the area “strut their stuff”! Knowledge is power, and so you should attend as many of these offerings as you can. At the very least, you can call or email schools that interest you and ask them to send you a prospectus or application package.

Once you have gathered some data, you begin to look for a fit to the strengths and needs of your child. You can use the information that you have amassed to complete and review your priority table. Then, together with your child, create a short-list of possible alternatives.

Finally, it is time for some serious visiting.

3. Structuring your first visit

When should we go? The ideal time to visit any school is when their students are in class and your child is not. Empty schools tell you nothing. Try to visit near the beginning of the day, or around lunch or recess to observe the dynamic of how students deal with each other and with teachers outside of classroom settings.

What should we look for? Try to determine the predominant teaching and learning style. Is it a traditional teacher-centred approach? Is there evidence of group interaction and active learning? While you are there look for routines, discipline and performance expectations, and safety and security indicators. If it is a secondary school, try to determine what percentage of the student population is out of class at any given time. Are students in the office, languishing in the halls, or working in the library or computer labs?

How are the classrooms set up? Are the desks in rows or in groups? Are there alternative learning environments such as science labs, seminar rooms, and drama, art and music spaces? Is there evidence of innovative teaching methods and effective integration of technology?

How are the classrooms decorated? Are they engaging learning environments? Is there student work posted in the classrooms? Is there evidence of a classroom library or other student resources?

Whom should we see while we are there? In actual fact, you may not get much choice. You may be assigned to a member of the admissions staff, or assistant head, or someone else responsible for greeting and touring potential new students. If possible, ask to be shown around by a student. Often, schools will have a group of trained “tour guides” (prefects, student council members, etc.) to take you around. While they might not know the answers to all of your questions, they will give you an honest insight into day to day life at the school. In addition, your child will be far more likely to ask questions of another student than they would of an adult. Faculty and staff guides often direct their remarks to parents and the issues that are most important to students are rarely addressed. While on tour, be certain that you have the chance to see classes in session, and ask to speak to an entry year teacher or new student (if possible).

What should we expect? Typically, you will receive an upbeat, positive “sales” pitch about the school, its history, its track record, and its programmes. In addition, don’t be surprised if there is more attention paid to you than your child. Many schools identify parents as the decision makers and therefore aim to win them over. Superior schools identify the student as the target audience. An effective tour guide or interviewer should have a good idea as to whether or not the school and the student are a potential “fit” by the time you leave. In addition, expect to receive comprehensive information with regard to the application process, timelines, fees, etc. Don’t try to read it there. Take it home and read through it carefully. A quick phone call back can clear up any confusion.

Finally, you should be given some idea about what comes next and you should receive some follow-up from the school. Remember, they are trying to “sell” you on the school, not the other way around!

IS YOUR SCHOOL ACCREDITED?

The Canadian Educational Standards Institute (CESI) is the only internationally recognized school accreditation agency in Canada. Parents can be assured that a CESI school is rigorously reviewed on an on-going basis to ensure that it meets the highest standards of academic programming and operational integrity. Please see the school page for a list of CESI members (www.cesi.edu/schools.htm).