



Choosing a New School for Your Child: 4 Tips

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During National School Choice Week (January 25-February 1, 2015), millions of Americans will celebrate the promise and benefits of educational opportunity.

For some parents, the Week will mark the start to a season of choosing – of visiting schools, researching their options, attending school fairs, and trying to find the perfect learning environment for their children. For others, National School Choice Week provides an introduction to the concept of school choice – which, even after two decades of success, is still relatively recent.

As president of National School Choice Week, I'm often asked what types of schools parents should choose for their children – or how best to know a "good school" from a "bad school."

The honest truth is that choosing a school for your child is an incredibly personal process, one that doesn't lend itself to easy talking points. A good school is a school that's right for your child. It doesn't matter whether you select a traditional public school, a magnet school, a charter school, a private or faith-based school, an online academy – or if you choose to homeschool your children – my best advice is to make a decision that is right for your child and your family.

When it comes to the selection process and where to begin choosing schools, I am happy to offer four pieces of (relatively simple – but hopefully helpful) advice, culled from my time working with schools, administrators and, most importantly, parents and students!

1. Start right now. It might sound like a good idea to wait until summer break, or at least until the Spring, to decide whether to send your child to a different school for the 2015-16 school year. But don't wait to start looking at your options – start the process right after the first of the year. Seats in great schools will already be filling up in early 2015, for the following school year! So, use National School Choice Week as an opportunity to start, or continue, your search. Start by asking yourself – and your children: what matters most – to you – in a school? Is it academics, school safety, an educational theme or focus, a specific style of instruction, the school's values, the qualifications of teachers, the size of classes, or other factors? Make a list.

2. Research your options. The reality is: you do have choices, even if they may seem limited. Find out what types of school choice options are available to you. Some states offer "open enrollment" in public schools, which empowers parents to send their children to schools in different districts. Other states and localities have charter and magnet schools. In some states, you can receive scholarships (either publicly funded or privately funded) to send your children to private and faith-based schools. And now, more than half of US states have full-time, online schools! Remember: each state has different policies, and school



choice laws often vary by city, district, or locality, too. During National School Choice Week, avail yourselves of school fairs, open houses, and special events so that you can learn more about these opportunities, and make sure to visit the websites of state-based school choice or education policy organizations for more information, too.

3. Make a list of potential schools and visit them with your children. After you've researched the different types of educational opportunities that are available to your family, start making a list of schools that might meet your criteria. Then, visit each of the schools that are on your target list. While you're there, ask lots of questions. Your visit and your interviews with teachers and administrators should give you a sense of the school's culture. Is the culture of the school one of high expectations? Do the adults in the building seem to enjoy being there? Do the students in the classrooms seem engaged, well-behaved? Is there enthusiasm and excitement? Is there an expectation that every student in that school will be prepared for college and a career? You want to choose a school with high expectations, a cohesive culture, consistent discipline, and a talented, motivated staff.

4. Talk to other parents – and to your children. Before making your decision, ask parents of other students who attend your target schools about their experiences. You'll want to ask specifically how the school handles parent involvement. If the school encourages parents to ask questions and be involved, that's a good thing. If parents are treated like a nuisance, consider staying away. Parental involvement is key to student success. And don't forget to ask your children about their impressions and their concerns. Sometimes, the answers to these questions can be the most helpful!

The more research you do, the better choices you can make. With time and legwork, you can provide your child with access to a great educational environment.

I like to tell people that they should spend more time looking at schools for their children than they do when they shop around for a new car. If a car doesn't work out, after two years, you can trade it in; if your child's school doesn't work out, it's hard to recapture two years of lost learning. School choice is important!

Remember: you know your child best, and you are truly in the best position – better than anyone else – to decide what type of school your child should attend.

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