

# Tips for Making a Great School Choice

(Adapted from the Minneapolis School Finder)



## STEP 1: IDENTIFY OPTIONS

### Learn about the different types of schools

#### District School

A free public school managed by a local school district. They generally have the same enrollment process and are open to all students, but may have restricted geographic zones. Some districts offer magnet schools, which offer a different learning theme or teaching method, and usually draw families from a larger attendance area.

#### Charter School

A free public school governed by a nonprofit board of directors, and overseen by a nonprofit charter school “authorizer” approved by the Minnesota Department of Education, or “MDE.” They are open to all students, and each school has its own application and enrollment process.

#### Independent School

A private school governed by a nonprofit board of directors. They charge tuition (but often offer financial assistance to low-income families), and students need to apply to each school and be accepted to attend.

### What features are most important to you?

Make a list of all the features that are important to you and your child. Is having a certain afterschool program important to you? Are there languages you want your child to learn?

You may not find a school that meets everything on your list, but finding a school that includes the majority of them will help you find schools that match your needs.

Review school information and consider identifying three to five schools that meet your requirements. These are your preferred schools.

### Consider the following...

- **Review school profiles, call schools and visit their websites**

- **Academic performance and demographics**

The Minnesota academic standards are designed to assess whether a school is preparing its students for future learning, and ultimately college and career success. Available information like academic performance on the state assessment and the demographics of a school can help you determine how well a school is meeting the needs of its students and community, and how it compares to other schools.

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- **Culture and climate**

Learn about the school's mission. What are their beliefs, values and assumptions about your child? How do they offer the best environment for learning? Every school is different.

- **Classroom instruction and programs**

What will your child learn, and how will the school accommodate their educational and social needs? How well is the school addressing the specific interests, aspirations and culture of your child in its curriculum and programs? What are the types of academic programs and extracurricular activities offered?

- **School hours and transportation**

Hours, including before school and afterschool programs, and transportation vary school to school. Contact schools to understand if their structure meets the needs of your family.

## **STEP 2: VISIT A FEW SCHOOLS**

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### **Contact the schools on your preferred list and schedule a tour**

When touring, be sure to ask lots of questions. Review everything you learned and determine which schools are the best match for your family.

### **Sample questions to ask when touring a school**

#### **1. How can your school accommodate my child's learning style and interests?**

Great schools can challenge your child, but also meet their needs and engage your student in their own learning. All children have different learning styles, abilities and interests. What's necessary for you and your child to have in the school, and what can you supplement at home or in the community? How relevant is the curriculum to the interests of your child?

#### **2. How are you connecting academics to real-life skills?**

Schools vary in their ability to teach students how to read well, understand math and be critical thinkers. What data does the school look at to know how they're doing?

#### **3. What environment does your school create to connect with my child's culture, race and ethnicity?**

Each school is unique in how they appreciate and interact with students from different backgrounds. Depending on your priorities, you could ask how the school creates opportunities for your child to learn about diversity, or how they've incorporated specific cultures into the school curriculum.

#### **4. How long have your teachers been teaching in your school? What are their backgrounds?**

Teacher effectiveness is the strongest in-school factor for student success. Do teachers know the school, students and families? Are they educating students? The training and on-going support of a teacher affects classroom culture and instruction.

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## 5. What are your disciplinary policies? What are your rates of suspension and expulsion?

How does the school handle misbehavior? Who manages behavior? How do they document it and communicate behavior concerns with parents? Do they ever call in police officers? If so, under what circumstances?

## 6. What programs are available for my child?

From counseling services to sports, each school is different. What before and after school programs and extracurricular activities are available to students?

## 7. How are parents involved?

How frequently do teachers communicate with parents? Do they conduct home visits? Do they communicate with parents about their child's academic and social development and before a student falls behind? And how are parents included, from conferences to volunteer activities? How can parents be part of the school's decision making? Does the school offer any family resources?

## STEP 3: APPLY AND ENROLL

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### Familiarize yourself with the processes for schools that interest you

Consider applying to two or three schools, since some schools may not have space for all students who apply. Then, enroll in one school. Be sure to give yourself enough time to complete any necessary paperwork as the application process may be unique for each school.

District schools typically participate in a common enrollment process. Charter and independent schools run their own application and enrollment processes (this means you will need to fill out an application for each school you are interested in and the school will inform you when it's time to complete the enrollment paperwork).