



Bulletin

Parents Learning About Children's Education

The Massachusetts Statewide Parent Information & Resource Center (PIRC)

Available online in English, Spanish, and Portuguese at www.pplace.org



Choosing a School for Your Child



Parents, selecting your child's school is one of the most important decisions you make about your child's education. No one cares more about your child's welfare than you do. No one else will be more careful to see that your child is well educated and well treated in school.

Many Massachusetts school districts give parents an opportunity to choose among schools in the district. In addition, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB)¹ allows families whose

children are in a Title I public school that needs improvement, or is unsafe, to choose another public school. (See **Parent Tip 1**.) Students with disabilities and students who are English-language learners have the same right to these opportunities as all other students have. School districts may, however, match the abilities and needs of students with schools.

This *Bulletin* offers question to guide you through the process of choosing

a school. You may think of new questions as you go along. Before you begin, you might want to write down five things that are most important to you in choosing a school. You might also ask your child to join you in making a list. If you need to, change the lists as you go along.

¹ NCLB is the nation's major federal law related to education in grades pre-kindergarten through high school.

Four Steps for Selecting a School

Start your search by thinking about what you want the school to do for your child, and about practical things that are important to you and your family.



Step 1. Consider your child & your family

- Does your child need a lot or just a little structure? Would a small school be a better fit, or a large school?
- How does your child learn best? By hearing? Seeing? Doing? Reading?
- Does your child have physical, emotional, language, or learning needs that require special attention?
- Is college preparation a priority or would a technical or specialized program be a better fit?
- Do you need transportation provided? (If you chose to transfer your child under the NCLB option to transfer to a better performing school, the school district must pay for transportation to the new school.)
- Do you need a school near your work? Near child care? Near public transportation?
- Is a before- or after-school program important?
- Does your child have special transportation needs?
- Does your child need a program to learn the English language?
- Does your child want to be in a school with his or her friends?

PARENT TIP 1

School Choice Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*

Children attending a Title I public school (generally a school that serves a high percentage of low-income students) that the state has "identified for improvement" can choose another public school, including a public charter school, in their district. The school you choose must be meeting state goals. The school district must contact you if the school your child is attending must provide choice.

Learn more about school choice!

Contact Parents' PLACE for a free issue of *Pointers* on this topic or if you have any questions.

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Step 2. Gather Information About Schools

When looking into schools, you may need to make phone calls, collect written material, and go to parent fairs or school open houses.

You can also check public school report cards for each school and for the district. **(See Parent Tip 2.)** These online sites also have reliable school information: www.greatschools.net and www.schoolmatters.org. They let you do side-by-side comparisons of schools in a given area.

Curriculum

Successful schools begin with a belief that all students can and will succeed academically. This belief is reflected in the courses of study offered.

- Does the school have a strong program of core academic subjects such as English, history, mathematics, science, arts, and foreign languages?
- Reading and math are the most important basic skills. How effective is the school's reading program? Math program?
- Does the school offer art, music, and other programs important to your child?
- Does the school offer challenging courses such as Advanced Placement and high school honors courses?
- Does the school provide enrichment opportunities for all students, including students who speak diverse languages and those with special needs?
- Is there an effective program in place to teach students who are English-language learners?
- If your child has special learning needs, does the school ensure access to the general curriculum and provide the supports needed?

Approach to Learning

Students come with different strengths and weaknesses. Some students learn by reading about something, while others need hands-on experiences.

- Do teachers use a variety of teaching methods? Do they know the subject matter?
- Does the school have a particular approach to teaching and learning (e.g., group projects, individual performance, frequent testing)? If yes, do you think your child will enjoy and learn from this approach?
- Does the school provide extra help when students need it?
- Is the school staff able to communicate in the language that you and your child understand?
- Are students' special learning and language needs taken into account?

Academic Performance

When you visit the principal of possible schools, ask if the school has made adequate progress (AYP, or "adequate yearly progress") for the past several years. Ask what is being done to make sure that students like your child are doing well.

- How do the school's test scores in reading (English language arts) and math compare to those of other schools? **(See Parent Tip 2.)**
- Are children with limited English skills performing well on tests?
- Are children with special learning needs performing well on tests?
- How many students leave the school before completing the last grade?

Safety

NCLB expresses a special interest in assuring that schools are safe.

- Is the school safe?
- What does the school do to ensure safety? Is a police officer on duty during school hours and for extracurricular activities?
- Is there a plan for emergencies? How are parents in all languages notified?
- Does your child need to have a nurse at school?



PARENT TIP 2

Check the School's Report Card

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires that each public school have a School Report Card each year. The report card shows students' scores on MCAS tests, broken out by student subgroups; graduation rates; if the school has been identified for school improvement; and the qualifications of teachers, among other information. Districts must also issue similar reports cards on the district as a whole.

Learn more about Student Report Cards and how to read them!

Call Parents' PLACE for a free copy of our *Pointers* on that topic, or to speak with our staff about the School Report Card for your child's school. To find more about your child's school and to compare schools, go to www.pplace.org for a link entitled "Find out about your child's school and/or compare local schools."

- How does the school prevent and handle violence, bullying, and harassment?
- How does the school prevent and handle problems with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco?

Facilities and Services

- Is there an auditorium and a well-stocked library? Are materials available in other languages?
- Are the school and facilities accessible to children with disabilities?
- Do students have access to computers and to the Internet in the classroom and library?
- Does the school offer a well-balanced lunch and/or breakfast?
- Is counseling available?



Step 3. Visit & Observe Schools

Contact the schools you are interested in and make an appointment for a visit. If possible, visit the school during regular school hours and visit a few classes. Take notes. Use them to ask questions of the principal after your visit. If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), review it with the school's staff. Is the school able to provide all the needed services and supports? During your visit, here are some areas to consider:

Culture

Choosing a school is a head and heart decision. When visiting, pay attention to how you feel – does it feel right to you? Do you feel welcome? Is there a sense of mission and purpose?

- Is the school secretary helpful and friendly?
- Is the school orderly and neat?
- How is student work displayed?
- How are the students with diverse learning needs (e.g., students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency) treated?

Principal

The principal is the leader of the school and sets the tone for how the school operates. A great principal will send the message of high expectations for all students and that parents are valuable, essential partners with educators.

- What is the principal's philosophy about education? Is it a back-to-basics approach? Are new approaches and innovation OK?
- According to the principal, what are the school's strengths? Its weaknesses? Where it can improve?
- What is the principal's attitude toward students with diverse learning needs?
- How does the principal respond to parental concerns? Encourage family participation?

- What does the school do to keep good teachers and improve teacher performance?
- Does the principal get to know the students?
- Is the principal usually at the school and available to talk to parents?
- What is the principal's reputation in the community?



Teachers

Good teachers are key to making sure a child gets a good education. Find out if the teachers in the school are highly qualified to teach in the core subject areas. Under NCLB, teachers working in a Title I program must have at least a bachelor's degree and have passed a state test to show that they know the subjects they are teaching.

- Are the teachers in core subject areas (math, reading, science, etc.) highly qualified?
- Do teachers have the skills and knowledge to teach students with special learning needs?
- Do teachers have Web sites with class notes and other information for students and parents?
- Do teachers have high expectations for all students to achieve to high academic standards? How do they communicate them to students?
- Are teachers willing to provide extra help to students?
- What is the school's policy regarding teacher response to parent inquiries?



Students

Observe classrooms to see if the students seem interested in what is being taught. Students should appear to be taking an active part in the learning process, either working together in groups or alone.

- What is the attendance rate for students?
- What do students say about the principal?
- What do students say about the teachers?
- Do the students have school spirit?
- What do students say about homework?
- What else do students say about the school?

Parent and Community Involvement

Engaged parents are concerned about the well-being of the whole school as well as their own children. Parents and community partners add vitality and power to the message that education is important and that all students can learn.

- How does the school encourage parents to be involved?
- What are the ways parents can get involved? (All Title I schools must have a policy, written with parents, on parent involvement. Review it.)
- How are parents involved in developing school policies?
- Is there an active parent-teacher organization?
- Are meetings and events held at times parents can attend?
- How often does the school communicate with parents?
- Are community leaders involved with the school?
- Does the school partner with local businesses and organizations?

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Step 4. Apply to the School(s) You Choose

Once you select the school(s) that you think will be best for your child, apply to the schools of your choice. Consider applying to more than one school, in case your child is not admitted to their first choice. Be sure to ask each school for complete registration requirements, including immunizations records and proofs of residency. Some schools have a special admissions process.

For each school you are considering, find out as soon as possible about the deadlines for applying.

Remember it is your right, as well as your responsibility, to seek the very best education for your son or daughter.

STEPS FOR CHOOSING AT A GLANCE

4 Steps to Keep in Mind:

Step 1. Consider your child and your family.

Step 2. Gather information about schools.

Step 3. Visit and observe schools.

Step 4. Apply to the school(s) you choose.



Begin the process of choosing a school as early as possible. Find out as soon as possible about the deadlines for applying to the schools you are considering.

This Bulletin is excerpted and adapted from:


Choosing a School for Your Child. (March 2005). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Washington, D.C., 20202. This booklet offers step-by-step advice on how to choose among the schools available to your child. It identifies important factors you may want to consider before making

a decision. To obtain **free** copies in English or Spanish, call Parents' PLACE toll free at (877) 471-0980. You may download it free at: <http://www.ed.gov/parents/schools/find/choose>.

No Child Left Behind: Making the Most of Options for IDEA-eligible Students. (2005). National Center for Learning

Disabilities. This 8-page paper discusses NCLB options for supplemental educational services and school choice as they relate to students with disabilities. It is available online for free download at www.schwablearning.org. To learn more about the National Center for Learning Disabilities, visit: <http://www.LD.org>.


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