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# Choosing the right school

A comprehensive guide to selecting  
the right school for your child



*This comprehensive guide to non-government schools in New South Wales will help parents and carers identify what type of school will suit your family/child. Sydney alone offers about 700 private schools, which means there is lots of choice but where does a parent start?*

Selecting a school can be difficult and time consuming. That said, do not become anxious and make a rushed decision – your child's schooling is vital to their future.

Armed with this checklist of 101 helpful criteria, along with a simple evaluation method explained below, every parent can determine the best school for their child.

## First: study your child

Grab a notebook and pen. It's time to do your homework! Before you go out, ask questions and obtain information on various schools, you first need to study your own child.

When you consider the personality traits, strengths and weaknesses of your child, you will clearly see that there are specific things that a school must provide for your child to learn most effectively and happily.

The best school for your child's best friend may not be the best school for your child; you are seeking the school that best fits the individual needs and interests of your child.

Ask your child what they like and don't like about school. Maybe your child wants to go to university; in this case you will be looking at how many university placements the school has achieved.

Maybe your child would be happier in a trade or an apprenticeship, so you won't need to ask if the school offers an International Baccalaureate.

Do not judge your child during this process of evaluation. Outcomes for non-university-going students are just as important as outcomes for university-going students, and whatever your child's strengths and weaknesses, your child has a right to a happy and personally effective education.

You should now have recorded your child's particular interests and strengths. Are they sporty? Musical? Into drama or dance? Computer studies? Highly academic? Now note their weaknesses.

These characteristics and the needs of your child will be matched against the information gained at the schools to provide your overall evaluation.

## Following the decision-making recipe!

Now you know what is important to you and your child, you can move on to what you need to ask of the schools. The following checklist of 101 questions provides the important issues to ask the schools on your survey list.

Go further than this and make a decision between schools based on the answers to questions in the checklist.

You will see that the highest-scored result between schools will indicate the preferred school for your child.

## Take a look at the 12 categories of question topics for the checklist.

- School management and leadership
- Teachers and teaching
- The curriculum and extra-curricular activities
- Facilities and resources
- Costs
- Information and communication technology
- Transport
- Two-way communication
- Values, disciplinary credo and religion
- Academic performance
- The students
- The X factor

When choosing a school, some of the topic headings listed in the table on page 1 will be more important to you than others.

Now rate these 12 topic headings.

Rate them between 20 and 5, where 20 is vitally important to you and 5 is not at all important to you. The next step is to look at the question checklist below. Please note that when looking through this checklist you will see that not all questions will be relevant to you and your child. For example, question 20 on the International Baccalaureate will be irrelevant if you wish your child to complete the standard HSC.

Pick your top 20 questions from the checklist

Make sure the questions in your highest-ranked topic area are well covered.

Now it's time to get the answers. You will be able to answer some of your top 20 questions yourself, some you might already know the answers to, some can be answered by going

to the school's website, and some can be answered by a look at Which School? Magazine's school directory (<http://whichschoolmag.com.au/>).

Also ask the school to send you brochures and other enrolment information packs.

Some of your top 20 questions will be best answered by a visit to the school. At the schools, use your notebook dedicated to school research and write down your observations and answers. When you visit the schools with this checklist in hand, try to ask the same questions at each school. When you make an appointment, it is a good idea to make it during school hours to see how things are run. Talk to the principal. Speak to other students and their parents at every opportunity. Take your child with you and observe their reactions and ask them what they think when you are at the school. At Open Days, don't be intimidated by the prestige of a school. Yes, you need a school for your child, but the school also needs your child. Once you have received the answers to your top 20 questions for a school, evaluate the answers given.

Give a satisfaction score for the topic heading area from 1 to 10...

where "10" means you think the answers given to you under that topic heading suit your needs and "1" means you are dissatisfied with the answers given in that area.

Now, the maths: a total of 12 sums per school.

Multiply each of the 12 topic heading ratings by their satisfaction score.

For example, you may have given "Costs" an 18 in importance and once you found the answers to the questions, you gave that area a satisfaction score of 9. That gives "Costs" a total of 162.

Do this for every topic heading. Now add all 12 total scores for an overall "school satisfaction total"!

Repeat the process for each school you are considering and you will have a short list of schools to select from because they will be the schools where the most important questions to you will have received the most positive answers.

# 101 questions and the decision-making recipe

## School Management and leadership

1. Do you like the principal? What's their style?
2. Do you get a sense that the school focuses on the future? What vision is the school planning for its own future?
3. Does the school seem to be well managed?
4. Are the school rules simple, clearly stated, positive and well enforced?
5. How and why are student leaders chosen? What are their responsibilities? Are they given mentor support?
6. What are the official school leaders like? Are they respected by the school community? Do they have good people management skills?

7. How much are students encouraged to become involved in leading the school? How many of the total number of students are involved in some form of leadership? What sort of leadership? Peer tutors? School policy-making teams? Editors/ contributors to student publications? Sports captains? House captains? Performing arts coaches?
8. How does the school groom the leaders of today and tomorrow?
9. Can parents take on leadership roles in the school? Are they encouraged to become involved in developing school policies?

## Teachers and teaching

10. Does the staff comprise of committed and effective teachers? What is the turnover rate? How experienced and knowledgeable are these teachers?
11. Do the children seem to respect the teachers and vice versa?
12. Do all types of students learn well at this school? Does the school cater for children's individual needs and differences? How?
13. Are the school's teaching methods aligned to your child's talents, strengths and interests? Do the teachers use different types of learning strategies (eg. auditory, visual and tactile/kinesthetic) in order to allow the children to maximise their learning through their strongest learning-style?

14. Do the teachers value group work and foster a sense of inclusiveness? How does the school teach the children to think independently? What does the school do to promote student self-esteem? How does it teach them to develop their social skills?
15. What is the school's homework expectation? Does this seem too much or too little for your child? Does it have enough breadth and depth? Is it relevant? Will the teachers set extra homework and provide additional assistance if your child needs some supplementary work to catch up to their peers?
16. How do the teachers help students who have issues regarding school, work, sport or home?
17. Does your child have special learning needs? Do you need a school with a remedial education program? Does the school provide integration aides and other allied specialists (eg speech pathologists, language and literacy experts etc.)?

## The curriculum and cocurricular activities

18. What subjects does the school offer? What languages are offered? Does the school's curriculum cater to your child's needs?
19. How balanced and comprehensive is the curriculum? Does it balance the "Three As" – Academics, the Arts and Athletics?

20. Does the school offer the International Baccalaureate (IB)?
21. Does the school offer TAFE course subjects and apprenticeships?
22. Is the subject curriculum flexible by incorporating advanced concepts outside the students' year levels, if it would benefit your child?
23. Does the curriculum allow students to combine academic concepts, theories and principles with applied learning that they can use in the real world?
24. What extra-curricular activities does the school offer and at what year level?
25. Are there clubs, camps, excursions or sports days offered by the school that may or may not suit your child?
26. Does the school offer exchange programs or international campuses? Partnership programs? Or a sister/brother school?
42. What is the increase in cost as your child goes up in year levels?
43. What do the yearly fees include? Are there any "extras" or "value-adds" that come with the fees?
44. What don't the fees include that you will have to pay later? Hidden costs can sometimes include computer costs for laptop hire, music tuition, excursions and compulsory "building loans", among other things.
45. What would the textbook cost be on average per year? Does the school offer a point of sale to buy used textbooks?
46. How much are the uniforms? Does the school offer a second-hand uniform shop?
47. If you need a boarding house, what are the fees for boarding?

## Information and Communication Technology

## Facilities and resources

27. Is the school clean and well maintained?
28. Are the grounds safe?
29. Are there sufficient play areas?
30. Do you want your child to go to the one primary and secondary a school? If so, and you are looking for the right primary school, does the school either continue to secondary, or is there an appropriate secondary school nearby?
31. Is it just a day school or do students also board?
32. Does the school offer sporting facilities in line with your child's interests and ambitions?
33. What artistic facilities does the school offer?
34. What technology facilities?
35. What drama facilities?
36. What science facilities?
37. What musical facilities?
38. Does the school have a well-stocked and well-run, helpful library with reference materials relevant to the curriculum? Is it open after school hours? Does the library have adequate computer access?
39. Does the school offer before-and/or after-school care? Are the facilities appropriate? At what cost? What is the supervision like? What activities do they engage in?
40. What food is served at the canteen? Is the canteen health-conscious? Are the prices reasonable?
48. What is the school's computer policy? Does the school hire, lend or ask parents to buy their own laptops/iPads? From what year level are the laptops required? If the child is not required to have a computer at home, what sort of computer access is available at school?
49. Are the school computers equipped with internet access? If so do they also have "nanny" software (blocking inappropriate internet content)?
50. Is the technology used by the students kept current and relevant?
51. How much does the school use technology in the classroom and in what way (eg. use of interactive whiteboards and laptops as teaching aids)?

## Transport

52. How far away is the school? Close enough to your home? Within walking or cycling distance? How far are you willing to travel as parent? Is the school close to where you work if you plan to drive your children route?
53. Is the school accessible by frequent public transport?
54. Does the school offer a bus service? If not, does the school have "walking bus" program whereby students join a school-run group that walks together safely to school from the community bus stop?
55. If driving, does the school have a drop-off/pick-up area? Does the school facilitate a car-pooling program?
56. Does the school have a secure bike storage area for students wishing to ride to school?
57. Are there cycling paths or safe cycling roads on your route to the school?

## Two-way communication

58. When it comes to making decisions, how do the teachers interact with the parents and the students to get them involved?
59. Do you think the school will willingly listen to your concerns as well as initiate contact if there is a problem? Is two-way communication as important to them as it is to you? Will the school seek your feedback?
60. In what way do parents generally get in contact with the teachers and vice versa?
61. How will your child's progress and assessment be reported to you?
62. How much are parents allowed to be involved or expected to be involved in the school, its programs, activities and leadership decisions? Is there a Parent Teacher Association (PTA)? How many parents are active? What are some of their current concerns?
63. Does the school rely on only the teacher for delivering lesson plans and homework or is there also a website or some such communication that enables students and perhaps their parents too to access lesson plans, progress reports and homework tasks?

## Values, disciplinary credo and religion

64. Are the school's religious and philosophical outlooks and practices in line with your family's beliefs?
65. As well as religion, what is the school's philosophy and mission? Is it appealing? What are its moral values? Traditional or progressive?
66. Does the school follow a specific educational model (such as Steiner schools do)? What aspect of education does it value most: academic, vocational, physical or social, or all of them?
67. How respected is the school? What reputation does it have?
68. Does it look like a morally and physically safe place to send your child?
69. How does the school teach the children morals and ethics?
70. What is the school's general disciplinary policy?
71. What is the policy when it comes to homework not being done?
72. How strict is the uniform dress code?
73. How does the school handle bullying and physical violence? Or weapons found on school grounds? How does the school resolve conflict in the playground and classroom?
74. What is the school's drug policy? How does the school deal with cigarette

## Costs

41. What are the yearly costs of the schooling? Is financial assistance or scholarships (full, half or even quarter) available and could your child qualify?

smoking? Alcohol? (When asking such questions about disciplinary policy, you may wish to ask for evidence to support the policy position.)

75. What care would a sick or injured child receive? Does the school have a counsellor? What pastoral care? A qualified nurse?
76. What role does the school play in the local community? Is it involved in community projects (such as fundraising, community service, community planning and volunteering of time)?
77. How much religious instruction is in the curriculum? To what extent does the school's religious beliefs permeate the handling of subject matter? Is the teaching of science subjects impacted by the school's religious beliefs and if so, do you agree with this?

## Academic performance

78. How is student performance and progress measured and evaluated? Will this method suit your child?
79. How is the school's overall performance monitored and evaluated? How is this communicated? Does the school boost its academic results by depending on attracting the most academically desirable students?
80. Are the students pigeon-holed into "academic" or "vocational" learning streams and if so, is this what you want? Does the school place students in subject classes fitting their ability?
81. What proportion of the school's students go on to university? What proportion goes on to TAFE? In their further education, what sectors do they tend to study? If they don't go on to more study, what job sectors do they tend to end up in?
82. What HSC results does this school score? If they are good, what does the school attribute this to?
83. Is the school intellectually competitive? Will your child be sufficiently challenged?
84. What is the school's policy regarding teaching gifted children?

85. What is the school's policy regarding teaching children with special learning needs?

## The students

86. What are the admission and selection criteria of the school?
87. How many students are in the school? What are the advantages of the school size?
88. What are the class sizes? Is there a maximum number of students allowed in each class?
89. Are there composite classes?
90. Is the school co-ed or single-sex? If co-ed, what is the gender balance of the school, year levels and classes?
91. How multicultural is the school? Which countries do students mostly hail from? Does the school celebrate diversity or does it encourage conformity?
92. What, if any, is the external reputation of the students?
93. What can you find out about the students' levels of happiness at the school? Do the students seem to display school spirit? When visiting the school, how do the children relate to each other?
94. What are the teacher-student relationships generally like? Is there genuine warmth and respect between students and teachers?
95. Are there "buddy programs" for new kids to help them fit in more easily? Any other type of peer support programs?
96. How are positive, healthy relationships and friendships among students encouraged?
97. What are the expectations and realities of attendance at the school?

## The X factor

98. Does the school have a special something that makes you feel it's right for your child? Can you put a finger on it?
99. Does the school offer any special facilities or subjects that make it stand out? What does the school offer that other schools don't?

100. Does the school offer language or cultural travel opportunities? Does the school have home away-from-home and life-skill programs?

101. Do you get a gut-feel that this is the school that will develop citizenship, responsibility, independent and smart thinking, leadership and friends in its students?

## It's up to you!

*Remember the "best" school for you is generally the one that provides your child with a sound education and an environment in which to become a creative, reflective and critical thinker, make friends, feel safe and thrive.*

*The best school is the one that is the right fit for your child and that will be a different school for another child.*

It is only when you are armed with knowledge that you can go forth and make an informed and confident choice. You will find that the evaluation process described above will remove a lot of the emotion and stress in making such a paramount decision. You do not have to rely on the decision-making recipe entirely. Perhaps after you have produced your short list of two or three schools, confer again with your child. Of course, how much say your child should have depends on their age and maturity level.

Remember also to heed your intuition! Gut-feel is a vital part of parenting so use it when choosing a school.

Best of luck with making this important decision and supporting your child's education!

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*Material adapted from Which School Magazine with permission.*  
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