



GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

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RESOURCES FOR CHOOSING A SCHOOL IN MINNESOTA

Characteristics for Evaluating Schools

Whether parents live in a school district that offers school choice, are changing residences, or have a child entering kindergarten, choosing a school is a complex decision that includes the characteristics of the child, family, and schools.

School quality depends on many characteristics, not all easily measurable, and not all equally important for each individual child or family. Parents may want to consider the following characteristics when evaluating a school.

* **Child characteristics.** Parents will want to think about their child's personality, learning style, and any special needs. Does the child need the structure that a traditional school setting would provide, or does he or she prefer to explore and take more personal responsibility for learning? Could she benefit from some type of alternative schooling approach? Does the child respond differently to being in small and large groups? If, for example, a child learns best in small cooperative work groups, then parents may want to consider finding a school that uses this instructional strategy. If a child has a special interest in music or a foreign language, then some preference might be given to a school that offers or excels in those areas in its regular curriculum or through after-school programming or clubs. In this case, parents will want to look at the school curriculum and after-school programming options the school offers (Most of this information is listed on a school's website).

* **Family Characteristics.** A family's choice of schools will depend on the family's values, in addition to practical considerations such as transportation and tuition costs for private education. Choosing the neighborhood school regardless of other factors may be the best option for many families with close ties to their neighbors and neighborhood community, while choosing a religious school may be the best choice for others.

* **School Location.** In the U.S. most school districts offer free transportation to and from school. Bus routes and schedules are set up differently each year (depending on the number of children the school serves and their home location) and generally remain the same throughout the academic year. Depending on the route, children might spend anytime between 10 minutes to 1.5 hours on the bus (each way). So, if you are concerned about the amount of time your child will spend on the bus, you might want to consider a school that is close to where you live.

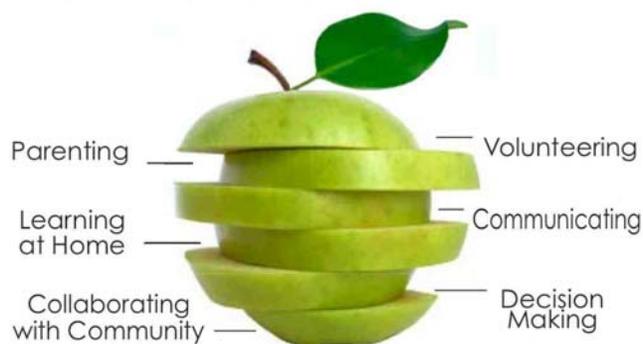
In Minnesota, children can attend a school outside the school district in which they reside through a program called [Open Enrollment](#). Families that look for specific programs (such as language immersions) that are not offered in the school district where they reside, often

enroll their children in schools located in different districts. However, free transportation is not available outside your school district and families that enroll their children through Open Enrollment will have to provide their own transportation.

In Minneapolis, low income families that meet certain low income requirements set by the state of Minnesota are eligible to participate in [The Choice is Yours Program](#), a program which will offer children that go to school outside their district free transportation (and other services). For children that take part in the Choice is Yours Program, the time spent on a bus every day might become an issue (the Choice is Yours Program buses cover a wide area and a given bus might provide service to a number of kids).

* **School Characteristics**

The Six Slices of Parental Involvement



[download powerpoint presentation](#)

* **School Philosophy.** Parents can read the school's statement of philosophy or mission statement and ask about beliefs that guide the school's program and teaching approaches.

* **Instructional Approaches.** Multi-age grouping, looping, and traditional classrooms offer different advantages, and parents will want to know how the school is organized for instruction. Parents will also want to inquire about average class size at the various grade levels. A school with a traditional structure that provides

clear standards and expectations may be a good choice for some children, while a school that allows extra freedom and places more responsibility for learning on the child may work well for other children.

* **School Facilities/Personnel Resources.** Although modern, well-designed facilities do not guarantee higher student achievement, some basic features that parents can look for include a well-equipped library, a collection of age-appropriate books and periodicals in addition to textbooks in each classroom, a separate lunchroom and auditorium or large classroom for meetings and presentations, and adequate physical education facilities. With regard to services, parents can check to see whether the school has a full-time library/media specialist, on-site nurse, secretary, and social worker. Parents can also ask about the background and qualifications of the teachers and what specialties are represented (e.g., **English as a Second Language**, special education, music, art).

* **School Policies.** Parents will want to find out about school policies related to scheduling (traditional vs. year-round) and programming day (e.g., block, flexible, or traditional scheduling, hours of building operation). Parents will want to examine the school discipline

policy to see if the rules seem fair and consequences seem appropriate. Parents will also want to find out about homework and grading policies.

* **School Reputation.**Parents can ask friends, neighbors, parents, and community leaders about the reputation of the school(s) of interest. After listening to each person's opinion, parents can decide whether the positive or negative views would apply to their family and children. Parents may want to find out about special areas of concern, such as whether community diversity is reflected in the faculty, and whether students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are well integrated into the school culture and activities.

<http://www.projectappleseed.org/pledge.html>* **School Safety.**Parents will want to know how they will be notified in case of an emergency; whether the school has an emergency plan (and they should ask to see it); the policy with regard to guns, knives, and other hazardous items; the school's policy toward bullying; and whether there are formal programs in place to combat bullying. If a parent is especially concerned about school safety, a call to the police department may be appropriate. The NationalSchoolSafetyCenter provides additional information on safety at <http://www.nssc1.org/>.

* **Curriculum.** Does the school have a strong focus on literacy and other key areas? Does it offer a special focus such as immersion in a second language? Parents can find out how well the school addresses core subjects and skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics by looking at the curriculum, visiting classes, and reading the school's report card (please see information below). Does the school's curricular focus match parents' expectations and educational goals for their child?

* **Extracurricular Activities.** What extracurricular activities does the school sponsor? (Some schools have student councils and a variety of clubs for special interests like music, drama, chess, etc.) Extracurricular activities are considered to be very important in a child's education in the U.S. (starting from a young age all the way up to college). It is believed that extracurricular activities help students gain experience in a variety of areas that will enhance their future. Through participation in sports, students learn cooperation, teamwork and time management. By serving as an officer in an organization, students learn responsibility, problem solving and communication. Extracurricular activities can also help students discover hidden talents, meet people they might otherwise not encounter, and learn about things outside their own environment. As a parent, you will find yourself having to choose one or more extracurricular activity for your child. Most likely, you will feel compelled to do so to make sure your child is on par with other children.

* **Family and Community Involvement Issues.**Finally, schools that are working toward excellence are developing many ways to involve parents. Parents can ask for a packet from the school about any programs and policies related to parent involvement. Once a school has been chosen, it is important that parents maintain a real commitment to that school, including supporting the staff and contributing time and talents as they are able. Children who see their parents involved in this way have a greater likelihood of school success. Strong

bonds with local businesses and community groups (for mentoring, guest speakers, service learning, and financial support) and opportunities for community use of school facilities after school and in the evening can contribute to the quality of the school and the support that it enjoys in the community.

How Can Parents Find Information on Individual Schools?

School Report Cards. The 2001 federal No Child Left Behind legislation requires an annual school report card (see <http://www.nclb.gov/next/faqs/accountability.html>) for all schools. School report cards describe characteristics of the school, including the number of children, various test scores, ratios of teachers to students, ethnic ratios, poverty levels, and more. Report cards can usually be obtained by contacting the department of education in the state or the school district office where the school is located. If more than one district is under consideration, several districts in the same geographic area can supply this information for comparative purposes. It may also be a good idea to examine school report cards for the last several years and talk to the principal if test scores have declined or if one subject/section of the test leads to dramatically higher results than others. The National Center for Education Statistics provides an analysis of state report cards and links to each state's report cards at <http://nces.ed.gov/forum/performance.asp>.

Visiting Potential Schools. Parents may want to keep in mind that no written set of assessments or test scores can take the place of visiting a school and forming one's own opinion about the overall environment and quality of the school and classrooms. Is the environment welcoming and orderly, yet creative and child friendly? How do the adults interact with the children (are they friendly, harsh, respectful, etc.)? Does discipline seem to be maintained? Do the classrooms have desks, or do the children work collaboratively at tables located in various parts of the room? The furnishings in classrooms can cue parents about the teaching philosophy at the school. Classroom arrangement can suggest a structured approach or an approach that encourages independent learning. When parents are thinking about a school, they will want to think about what learning environment is best for their child and how the school accommodates different styles as well as students with special needs. Another important step is to talk with staff (including the Principal) and parents in the school. What do they see as strengths and concerns at the school and in the community? What are their goals for the year?

While visiting, parents can look for student work on the walls and in display areas, including writing samples and other evidence of literacy projects and artwork. Displays that feature work samples allow parents to see beyond test scores to what the children are learning and how they are learning it. Has the school been recognized with any excellence awards or awards for dramatic recent improvements in achievement? Parents can ask during a visit about turnover of staff and the rate of student transfers, as well as student and teacher absentee rates.

SchoolDigger. This website (<http://www.schooldigger.com/go/MN/search.aspx>) allows parents to view school rankings and compare performance on standardized tests. Schools can be compared as a whole, or by grade level.

Recommendations from the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)

The following is Advice from NAESP about choosing a School:

- 1) Check out the school district's annual report to compare the expenditure per pupil in each district you are considering. In many communities, this dollar amount will be closely linked to school quality. This information is often available on the state's department of education Web site. The NationalCenter for Education Statistics offers a searchable resource called the Public School District Finance Peer Search. This resource allows users to find out the per-pupil expenditure for school districts of interest, how those figures compare to school districts that have similar demographic characteristics, and how the district's per-pupil expenditure compares to state and national averages. This resource is located at http://nces.ed.gov/edfin/search/search_intro.asp.
- 2) Check to see what services are available at the school. Look for guidance counselors, an on-site nurse, a librarian, and a secretary, and check to see if they work at more than one school. If any of these key personnel do work at more than one school, be cautious!
- 3) Check the structure of the school year. Do you want your child in a year-round school or do you prefer a more traditional school calendar?
- 4) If you are looking at a high school, check to see what percentage of the students goes on to college.
- 5) Check the local library for books and videos on moving to a new school. Look for books for children as well as adults.
- 6) What is the school's discipline policy? (The school should provide a printed copy of this policy.)
- 7) How are students graded? (Ask for a sample report card and explanation of the grading system.)
- 8) How often are textbooks and classroom materials reviewed and updated? (There should be fixed schedules.)
- 9) Is there a school homework policy? (Some schools prefer to leave homework decisions to individual teachers.)
- 10) What is the school's safety policy? (Ask about rules for playground activities and strangers on school property.)

11) What extracurricular activities does the school sponsor? (Some schools have student councils and a variety of clubs for special interests like music, drama, and chess.)

12) How many students are assigned to a classroom teacher? (The smaller the class size the better, especially in the primary grades.)

13) Is the library/media center well equipped and organized? (Can children regularly check out books and use the center's resources?)

https://www.networkforgood.org/donate/MakeDonation.aspx?hosection=donate&agency_id=431859663&agency_name=PARENTS+ADVOCATING+CHALLENGING+EDUCATION&agency_service_code=B99&agency_address1=520+Melville&agency_address2=&agency_city=St.+Louis&agency_state=MO&a

14) How do the teachers teach? (In many schools, teachers work with students in small groups or work in teams to teach larger groups.)

15) How does the school communicate with parents? (Is there a regular newsletter? Are parents' calls welcome?)

16) Is there an active parent organization? (Ask for a schedule of events and plan to attend the first meeting.)

17) Is there a before- and after-school care program? (This question can be critical for working parents.)

18) Try hard to tour prospective schools. Here's what to look for:

- A warm welcome by the principal and staff members.
- A clean, well-maintained campus.
- Children who are actively involved in learning. Instead of sitting silently, they should be responding to teachers, discussing class work, and using such technology as calculators, computers, and audiovisual equipment.
- Teachers who maintain good classroom discipline.
- Classrooms and hallways filled with students' work.

Additional Resources

- [School and District Directories](#) - Directories of districts, schools by district, schools by county, and charter schools.
- [School & District Statistics](#) - Statistics on Minnesota public school districts, schools, teachers, and public/nonpublic enrollment.
- [School District Locations](#) - Maps of Minnesota school districts.
- [School Report Card](#) - Data for individual schools and districts. Includes school report cards, test results, enrollment, teaching staff, funding, addresses, and contacts.

If you are trying to find schools in different school districts, go to *google.com* and search for "Minnesota Public Schools".