



10 key questions to ask when choosing an elementary school

1. Does the school meet my basic needs?

While it can be tempting to try for a school that's on the top of everyone's list, first make sure the school meets your practical needs. For instance, if you have to be at work at 8:30 and school starting time is 9:00 — with no early-morning care — that may be a deal breaker. By the same token, if there's no bussing, but the school is 10 miles away, it may not be a good fit for your family. Finally, if it's difficult or impossible for you to send your child to school with a lunch, ask if the school provides one and how much it costs

2. What's the student-teacher ratio?

When assessing a school, it's important for parents to consider how much individual attention their child will receive. This means finding out how big the classes are and whether the class has a teacher's aid or other parent volunteers. For grades K through third, a student teacher ratio over 15:1 is large. (Keep in mind that while research has confirmed the benefits of small classes in grades three and lower, there's no empirical proof that large class sizes in upper grades compromise how well children learn.)

Take student-teacher ratios with a grain of salt. Why? Because many schools count staff (such as librarians) as teachers, thereby driving down the student teacher ratios, while the classes can still be extremely crowded and teachers overloaded. For instance, if you hear that the student-teacher ratio is 15:1, then see that there's one teacher in a class of thirty five students, it's worth asking about the disparity.

Also, ask about what kind of tutoring services or learning specialists the school offers. Do they offer "pull-out" tutoring in small groups, in which a student gets special instruction during school hours. Do the teachers or other staff offer after-school or lunch-time tutoring?



3. How are behaviour problems handled?

While it can be uncomfortable to ask some of these questions — and may not make you the most popular parent on the tour — it's important to get these answers to understand the school's disciplinary climate.

Every school should have an articulated disciplinary policy. Is it strict or lax? Do they have a more punitive approach, such as giving children demerits and eventual suspension? Or do they subscribe to "positive discipline," with, for example, first a warning and then a consequence, like missing recess? Disciplinary policies vary widely. What's important is that you are comfortable with the school's approach.

What are the school's disciplinary stats? (Legally, schools must track and report basic disciplinary stats such as suspensions and incidents of violence to the state.) Be sure, too, to ask about their bullying policy. Has the staff received any anti-bullying training?

4. What distinguishes your school from others?

Many schools — public and private — have special focuses, such as the arts, a language-immersion program, technology, or science. Get a clear sense of their commitment to this focus and if it meshes with your child's interests, strengths, and personality. If the school has no pedagogical philosophy or curriculum theme, ask what the school is most proud of. Is it their parental involvement, their spacious garden, their art program with weekly visits from a museum docent? Does the school have a well-stocked library or a computer lab? Learning about some of the bells and whistles will give you a good sense of the schools' identity and values.

5. How much homework is there?

While most kindergartners don't get much homework, find out how much homework is given in the upper grades. One rule of thumb is to give kids about 10 minutes a night per grade, as well as nightly reading. Ask whether homework is given over weekends, breaks, and holidays — or whether it varies widely from teacher to teacher. (This variation can be a red flag that the teaching staff is not all on the same page in terms of their teaching philosophy.) If your child is attending the after-school program, ask if the program helps kids with their homework.



6. How do you support children with different learning styles and needs?

Depending on your child, you may be looking for different answers to this question. If your child is working above grade level, you will want a school where the teachers adapt assignments for accelerated learners or have special more challenging programs. If you have a child with a learning disability, you'll want the school to have learning specialists and special programs with expertise in your child's area of challenge. Does the school integrate kids with learning differences into the general classrooms? Or do they have separate classes for kids with special needs? Whatever your child's needs, look for a school with the resources and expertise devoted to kids like her. Otherwise your child may have a difficult time getting the education she needs.

7. What after-school activities are available?

If your child needs after-school care, then find out what specific classes, sports, or activities are offered. Do they offer courses in art, music, drama, science, chess club, or free play? What kind of sports do they offer and do they provide any transportation to practices and games? What are the requirements for playing on a team? Again, find out if there's any time to do homework and if there's any homework support.

8. What's the physical environment?

If you have a child who needs plenty of room to run around and play during recess and P.E., it's worth considering how much open space is available inside or outside. Also look for features like a school garden or auditorium. What do the classrooms look like? Do kids sit in a more formal layout with the teacher in the front and kids sitting behind individual desks? Or do kids sit at large tables in groups?

Finally, consider safety when looking at the school's physical layout. Are entrances and exits monitored so that kids can leave and strangers can't get in? Is there a strict sign-in and sign-out policy?



9. How are teachers supported and held to a high standard?

It can be a challenge to understand the professional culture of a school. But it's worth asking if teachers collaborate and have a unifying vision and goal for their students. Do teachers of the same grade collaborate on a curriculum, so you can expect them to cover the same material and give the same amount of homework? Do teachers have regular meetings to discuss projects, teaching techniques, and specific students? "Professional teaching community" is the lingo for a process in which teacher meet regularly to talk about their teaching challenges. (Research suggests PTCs improve teaching effectiveness and morale.)

10. What are the school's expectations for its students?

Look up the school's test scores on the Great Schools website before you go on a tour. If the school doesn't have high test scores, ask why. You may not buy the school's justifications, but the answers can be illuminating. For example, an elementary school that's a magnet for English language learners may perform on standardized tests at a lower level, because the kids are being tested as if they know English fluently.

A school with a high percentage of learning disabled kids may also end up generating lower scores. Two factors can help unuddle such test score conundrums: first, check to see if the scores are going up or down. Second, look to see how the kids who match your child's demographic profile are doing. Looking up the school's test score at the level of subgroup is very useful — though this information isn't available for all states.