

Discovering Educational Options

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The words “private school” tend to conjure images of elite communities that cater to a narrow clientele and an academic curriculum that is stuck in the era of white gloves and lecture format learning. In reality, private schools are not as “private” and exclusive as they may seem; they are independent educational institutions that encompass diverse communities where learning happens through cutting edge curricula, including everything from state-of-the-art multimedia labs to small, hands-on, classroom learning. Independent schools are dynamic, forward thinking, exciting places to learn and live.

Each independent school has its own personality, much like individual people. Each one is uniquely different in its student body composition, size, location, and day/boarding ratios. However, there are some characteristics that remain fairly constant in independent schools. Every independent school is committed to serving the individual needs of each student through small classes that average in size between 10 to 12 students. Each student has an “advisor”, a member of the faculty that acts as his or her mentor and advocate through the student’s years at the school. The curriculum at independent schools is often project-oriented with students “learning-by-doing”. Biology classes scramble through swamps in waders to collect water samples that will be analyzed back in the classroom using state-of-the-art electronic telescopes, and freshman English classes might attend a local Shakespeare Festival while studying Romeo and Juliet. Academic experiences like these help learning become real for students, and independent schools are fortunate to be able to bring these experiences and others like them to their students everyday.

Independent schools also have a tremendous emphasis on creating diverse communities and supporting that diversity within the school, whether it be racial, cultural, religious, or ethnic. Various support groups are frequently student-initiated and led. The small communities allow for an abundance of leadership opportunities for students in all aspects of schooling including academics, arts and athletics. There is no shortage of extra-curricular activities that range from soccer to singing and ice hockey to improvisation. At the apex of the independent high school experience is the college placement process that begins in the junior year. Students are guided by college counselors who are well versed in the variety of colleges and universities, the application and entrance exam process, as well as matching the individual needs of students to the right college. College counselors advocate for and guide each student through the often intimidating, overwhelming, and competitive college process.

When considering an independent school, the most important aspect of finding the right fit for a student is his or her academic needs. Each independent school caters to a specific cohort of learners. Some schools provide a highly competitive academic environment that can challenge the most capable students. Other schools offer a more academically supportive environment, helping all of their students reach their academic potential. And then there is everything in between. A more recent phenomenon in the independent school world is the increasing presence

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of “study skill centers”. These centers provide additional tutorial support for students who have gaps in their learning, organizational issues, minor learning differences, and/or need subject specific help. A wide range of learners at a broad range of schools benefit from these kinds of programs.

During a school search process, a family should also consider a student’s special interests. Perhaps a particular student has had little exposure to extra-curricular activities and is looking for an environment where there is easy access to explore a variety of interests. Or, perhaps a student is highly skilled in a specific sport and wishes to pursue the highest levels of competition. Whatever the student’s wishes or talents, there is a school that can accommodate them. As more and more families recognize the value of extra-curricular activities, enabling students to participate in activities is becoming more complicated. Independent schools help make that life challenge easier. Independent schools are all-encompassing with all offerings taking place within the program day; families are no longer required to juggle multiple activity schedules, ensuring that their student can participate in his/her activity of choice.

Another aspect to consider in a school search is the culture of the school. This measure tends to be less tangible than the academic profile or extra-curricular offerings of a school, but is part of the school’s make-up whether it be a small or large school, a day, boarding or combination school, or a coed or single-sex school. These characteristics are going to have a big impact on the culture of a school. However, the only way to get a true feeling of a school culture is to visit the school. The culture of a school is its “personality”, and families should not be afraid to follow their “gut” when considering an independent school. False rumors and mis-accusations about specific independent schools or in general are too easily cast about within communities. It is of vital importance to hear those opinions, but parents and students should be sure to create their own through first-hand research and experience.

Considering an independent school can often be an intimidating experience for all parties concerned. Summer schools offer a way for students to get their feet wet without having to dive in. A number of independent schools offer outstanding summer programs that give a glimpse into the curriculum and culture of the school, particularly the boarding aspect. Participation in a summer school program also enhances a student’s application to an independent school in the fall.

Some independent schools operate on a common application cycle, with student visits in the fall, applications due mid-winter, and applicants notified of the admission decision on March 10th. Other schools will continue to enroll students throughout the spring and summer on a rolling admission basis. Thus, it is neither too soon nor too late to get started on the school search process.

Affordability is often a concern for families. Almost every independent school offers financial aid to students with a wide range of economic backgrounds. Financial aid is applied for at the same time as the regular school admission. Many families believe that they will not qualify for any financial assistance and are pleasantly surprised when they do. Applying is the only way to discover the possibility.

Each independent school is unique, as is each student. Independent schools are exciting places to learn and live for many students, but not all. Public schools offer superb learning environments and an equally important experience. Some students may even be better served in the public school environment. Perhaps the best learning prescription is a combination of a public and independent school experience throughout a student's schooling career. It is important to know that no matter what the student's abilities and interests, there are options worth exploring in the independent school world.

Written by Holly McGlennon Treat, M.Ed.- Educational Advisor

Holly has had thirteen years of experience in independent school admission. In 1995, Holly attended the Harvard Graduate School of Education where she earned her Masters Degree in Educational Administration and Social Policy. During her time at Harvard, she worked as a research assistant to Howard Gardener's Project Zero and volunteered as the College Placement Counselor at the City on a Hill Charter School. She is currently an Educational Advisor in Salisbury, Connecticut. For further information, please feel free to contact her at hmtreat@yahoo.com. She will also be presenting at the Hartford Club in Hartford in May.