



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

Choose your child's school with **CONFIDENCE**

INCLUDES
Easy to Use
Tool Kit



religious?
magnet?
home?



Which School?



public?
private?
charter?



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PUBLIC IMPACT



Step One: Chapter 1

Get Started

This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:

Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School with CONFIDENCE

**Get all the chapters in electronic form, for free, at *PickyParent.com*, or
purchase the paperback at *Amazon.com*.**

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Chapter 1

A Pep Talk for Parents, Picky or Not

The Olsons have three very different children. Rising kindergartener Heidi seems very advanced in her learning, while her twin brother Elan seems more in-the-middle but has exceptional social skills for his age. Their older son Colter is emerging from the confidence paralysis of dyslexia. Is there any hope of sending all three children to one school next year – with confidence?



Sam is an “on target” first grade student who is struggling to read. After politely asking for changes at school, with no results, his parents hire a tutor. Sam’s reading improves immediately. “Is something wrong with this picture? What should I do next?” his mother wonders.



Lucy is a very academically gifted child who is bored in school. Her parents feel embarrassed to ask for “special favors” from her school to keep her challenged. And they fear that she’ll begin to feel socially isolated. Is there any hope that Lucy’s needs can be met in elementary school?



Karen has a mild learning disability that her current school is ill-equipped to handle. But her parents are hesitant to consume her time outside of school with tutoring or switch her to a school away from her two siblings. What should they do?



Annie spends most of her school time standing around and watching other students do their work. She has become disengaged from school work and socially detached, as well. Her parents know something's wrong, but just can't put a finger on the problem.



Ming and Li Zhang, native Chinese speakers who moved to the U.S. as children, want their rising kindergartener Margaret to learn about her heritage. Their lives bring them into contact with few other Chinese speakers, especially now that Ming's parents have moved back to China. Both busy professionals, Ming and Li have little time to create these connections for their child. They wonder how school, where their daughter will spend so many hours, might help.



Mary and Erasmus grew up poor and bright, and they worked hard to build a successful business together. They want their only child Nikki to have the college opportunity they both missed. Not rich, they will need to curtail their spending to afford college. What should they do? Can they save money for college and meet Nikki's school needs now?



Your life is brimming with activity. You have children. Need we say more? You do not have time to fret about things of little consequence. You might not worry when the laundry piles up once in a while. Your children probably shouldn't eat off your pristine-only-when-you-moved-in kitchen floor. But you, and parents like you, care how your child spends time. You make an effort to craft experiences that allow your child to become the terrific person he or she is meant to be.

*It's O.K. to
be picky when
making
important
choices for
your child.*

Whether you choose a school proactively or not, the effect on your child will be considerable. During the long school year, your elementary age child will spend more time in school and related activities than in any other task besides sleep. School matters. The school you choose for your child and how you interact with that school matter, too.

How frustrating, then, that parents have had so little guidance to make this critical decision. We're here to help! Based on the best available research and personalized with the experiences of real children and families, this is the definitive guide to finding a *Great School* that fits your child and family.

Now, you might have read or heard other advice about choosing a school. This book is different. Why? What we share about school quality is based *only* on the

very best available research, not our personal opinions or our own parenting style. When we offer our opinion, we tell you.

We used both research and interviews with parents making school choices to cover a very broad range of child and family needs. And we've built this book to help you put your finger on what kind of school will be best for *your own* child and family.

How do we do that? We offer you:

- ***A step-by-step process*** for seeking a high quality school that fits your child and family. This logical method ensures that you turn over all the right rocks on the path to finding the right school. For example, we don't just help you identify your child's school-related needs. We also tell you what to look for in a school to meet those needs, and we help you decide what questions to ask in your school hunt. Our *Confident Choice Tools* help you focus on the right information at the right time, quickly and decisively.
- ***A little mantra*** to help you remember two features that count most when looking at schools: academic quality and how well each school *fits* your child's and family's needs. The mantra? ***Great School, Great Fit.*** With this in mind, you'll come to expect that your child's school will strive for the seven Great School Quality Factors and meet the four Fit Factor needs important to you. You'll find the memorable mantra and Factors useful even if you don't follow all the steps we recommend here.

You will feel confident for these reasons and more. Most importantly, you will understand your child's school better and become more engaged in your child's education, both in and out of school.

This Book is For You

Every year, at least twenty million parents make choices about their children's schools (some proactively, some not). Each family has its own circumstances, its own values, its own reasons for choosing. But whoever you are, this book is built to help. You will find the material here useful if you are:

- Making your first school choice for a rising kindergartener
- Moving to a new city or school district
- Moving to a different part of town
- Facing new options because of new choice policies in your public school district
- Facing new choices because of changes in your family's circumstances
- Concerned about your child's current schooling situation

- Content but curious about whether your child's school is really meeting all of your child's and family's important needs
- A parent with a child graduating to the next level and to a new school within the elementary years
- A parent of a newborn or toddler who wants to learn about what's ahead
- Hoping to understand your child's needs better
- An educator who wants to know what savvy parents seek in schools.

More Choices Than Ever

When most of us were growing up, our parents didn't have much choice about where to send us to school. Almost all of us went to our assigned public schools. The remaining few attended a narrow spectrum of private schools. There was little sense of picking a school to fit our needs as children. And to many of our parents, "quality" meant having a star teacher or two, a firm principal, and a nice facility. Some of us thrived as students, some of us got utterly lost in the shuffle, and many of us just bumped along for the ride.

Today, things are different. Most parents have far more options for their children, created by the birth of magnet schools, charter schools, choice within and between public districts, and growth in numbers of home schooling families. Private schools continue to educate large numbers of children, as well.

Consider these facts for a moment:

- The percentage of children attending a school *other than* the assigned public school has increased steadily over the past decade.
- By 1999, one of every four children in grades 1 – 12 attended a school other than the assigned public school – about 12 million children.
- Half of American families – including roughly 23 million children – say schools influenced their decision about where to live.
- 43 states and the District of Columbia now allow some choice across or within school districts.
- In 1975, only 14 school districts had magnet schools. By 1995, 230 did.
- In 1991, there were no charter schools. Today there are about 2,700 charter schools educating 700,000 children.
- By 1999, about 850,000 children were homeschooled, a number that has grown so quickly the government only recently began to track it.
- A growing number of districts allow parents to choose from among all their schools.
- A new federal law *requires* school districts to offer choices to families if their schools fail to improve adequately.

Because they have so many options, many parents who choose their children's assigned public schools are scrutinizing them as never before. These parents too are making proactive choices.



Get Smart About School Types

Many parents make broad, sweeping assumptions about whether one *type* of school will offer better quality for their children. In fact, when parental education and income are factored out, research has not consistently shown that any one type of school educates children better than other types. (You might also be interested in school designs, such as Montessori, Core Knowledge and the like. See Chapter 10 for more about that.)

Still, it's good to know about the different types of school that may be in your community:

- ***District public schools*** typically are funded mainly through a combination of local, state and federal funding, “owned” by the public, and controlled by the local board of education.
- ***Magnet schools*** are also public schools, but typically have a special curriculum or teaching method. They draw from a cross-section of a city or town rather than specific neighborhoods.
- ***Special programs within schools***. More and more schools run special programs for a subset of students, such as foreign language and International Baccalaureate programs.
- ***Charter schools*** are also public and in most states are funded with a combination of local, state and federal money, but they are “owned” and controlled by independent groups of citizens. They can lose their public funding if they do not meet performance goals.
- ***Private independent schools*** are funded mainly through a combination of tuition and fees charged to parents and fundraising campaigns, owned by non-profit organizations (although not always), and controlled by boards of alumni, parents, staff and interested citizens.
- ***Private religious schools*** typically are funded through a combination of tuition and fees, fundraising campaigns and money from a larger religious body. They are owned by nonprofit entities and controlled by boards mostly made up of people whose religious affiliations match the schools’.
- ***Home schooling*** means teaching your child at home, either alone or in conjunction with other home-schooling parents. You own, you control, and – in most areas – you pay for materials and equipment.

For your child, the opportunities for better school quality and a better school fit have never been greater. Indeed, some families have treasure troves of schools from which to choose. Jewels can be found in some very surprising places. But there's lead amongst the treasure. Low quality – more often *mediocre* – schools that really *won't* fit your child and family abound. Schools that for decades have touted themselves as “superior” and “elite” have become mediocre as the world has moved past them. And in some communities, families still don't have as many compelling choices as they should.

But a new era in education is dawning for parents. Choice is taking root and spreading nationwide. If trends continue, it won't be long before every family has a range of compelling possibilities from which to choose.

Why Making a Proactive Choice Helps Your Child

Even if you can choose, why bother? After all, life is hectic enough. How much precious time do you really need to spend on this? Regardless of which school you ultimately choose, and even if you decide to stay put with your older child, choosing a school thoughtfully is worth the effort for your child and your family.

Recent studies show that when parents proactively choose schools:

- They are more satisfied with their children's schools.
- They are more involved in their children's education.
- Their children perform better in school.

Why? The research doesn't tell us for sure, but we'd bet it has to with all of the following:

- Students whose families take time to choose end up in *better schools*, on average.
- Those students' needs – including their capabilities, interests, and ways of learning – and their families' needs and resources *better fit* the schools they have chosen.
- Parents who take time to understand their child's and family's needs are *better able to work with* teachers and principals.
- Parents who have made a proactive choice *better understand the shortcomings* of their chosen schools, and they fill these gaps for their children at home and with non-school activities.
- Parents who have invested time to choose certain schools push for positive changes within those schools.

Parents who proactively choose schools are more satisfied with their children's schools and more involved in their children's education. Their children perform better in school, too.

Even if you end up sticking with your child's current school, or choosing the one you thought you'd pick, or not having as many choices as you'd like, you will still reap the benefits of a proactive choice. You will have ideas about how you can make up for the school's shortcomings. Many of you also will gain the confidence to encourage change within your children's schools, both to meet the particular needs of your children and to better meet the needs of all students and their families. In the last chapter of the book, we'll tell you how.

How to Find a Great School that Fits *Your* Child and *Your* Family

When your child's success and happiness are involved, you can make a great choice with just a little guidance. Parents may not always know the solutions, but they often are laser accurate about the problems. A driver doesn't need to be an engineer to know the car engine's not working well. But she may need a shot of smarts and confidence when the mechanic says "can't find a problem here, Ma'am!" You, too, can get both smart and confident about whether a school is working well for your child and family. But how?

This book gives you a step-by-step approach you can use to find the best school that meets your needs. More on that soon. Even more important, this book helps you identify *what to look for in a school* – what we call *quality* and *fit*.

Let's take a moment to define "quality" and "fit," since those two ideas will run through every page of this book.

Quality. Put simply, some schools are just better than others. Quality is what sets a Great School apart from a mediocre or bad school.

What makes a school great? Is it great teachers? Well, yes, but not just that. Teachers are human like the rest of us, and there are only going to be a limited number who can be great every day, year in and year out. Great schools have figured that out. Spiffy grounds and buildings? Well, they might make parents feel better, but flashy facilities won't help your child excel academically. So what is important?

Let's start with this question: what does a Great School accomplish with students that average or bad schools don't? *Great schools are ones in which students of all abilities and types achieve dramatically better academic results than similar students in other schools.* Having a lot of college professors' children does not make a school great, any more than having children of less-educated parents makes a school bad. But the tests scores of two such schools might differ quite a bit. We really have to know how much those children learn com-

*Guess what:
I.Q. is not fixed
for a lifetime.
Your child's
I.Q. may rise
20 points or
more during
the elementary
years with
proper
challenge and
instruction.*

pared to similar children who attend school elsewhere to know whether the school is making the difference.

Luckily, decades of research have uncovered what makes a school great. In study after study, the same characteristics keep coming up. Researchers know what they are. Teachers and school leaders know what they are.

Now it's time for parents to know what they are, and to use that information to find Great Schools for their children. In Chapters 11 – 14, you'll learn about the seven Great School Quality Factors that set top schools apart. You'll follow the story of one family, the Olsons, as they

seek one school for their three very different children. You'll read how Great School Elementary comes to the rescue while schools Good Try and Yesteryear fall short. By the end, you'll know how to tell whether a school is Great or not. For now, the box "Great School Quality Factors" gives you a preview.



Great School Quality Factors

1. Clear Mission Guiding School Activities
2. High Expectations for All Students
3. Monitoring Progress and Adjusting Teaching
4. Focus on Effective Learning Tasks
5. Home-School Connection
6. Safe and Orderly Environment
7. Strong Instructional Leadership

Fit. Parents know that there are no peas-in-a-pod when it comes to children. One child jumps right in and joins the group without fail. Another child stands back and surveys the scene every time. One child seems to know answers before you've asked questions. Another child has to learn the same facts over and over before remembering. One child learns best working alone, while another must chat with a friend or teacher while she works. One child bursts at the seams in a regimented classroom, while another breaks down crying in the confusion of a cluttered setting. One child is whip smart, but doesn't perform well in school. Another child tests "average" in ability, but is a hardworking academic dynamo.

Parents tend to be keen observers of their own children. As we talk to parents about their kids and school, we hear:

- My child's enthusiasm just disappears at school (or in similar settings).
- My child goes into a shell in a group.
- My child isn't moving along as fast as she could in basic subjects.
- My child is quiet at school, but talks my ear off when we're alone.
- Few adults seem to appreciate my child's special qualities and gifts.
- My child is struggling academically, and nothing seems to help.
- I'm worried (or already know) my child will get in trouble for not sitting still.
- My child's performance is uneven, and nobody seems to know why.

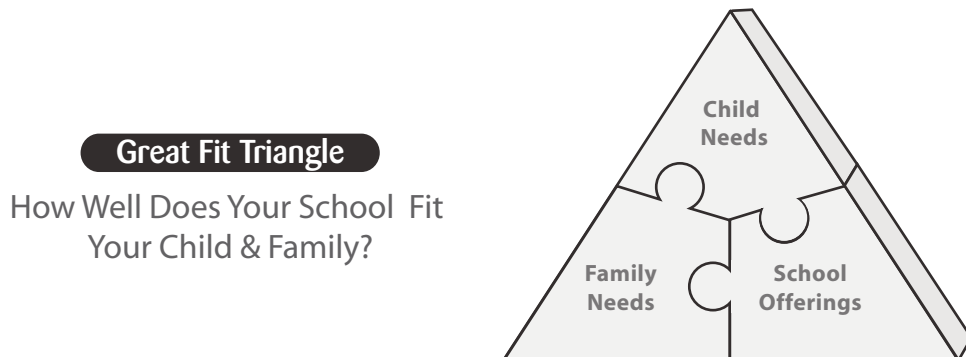
Families also come in lots of shapes and sizes. Yours has its own values, its own priorities. You also have constraints when it comes to money, time, and other practical matters. So it's not a surprise that when we talk to parents about their *families'* needs, we hear a whole range of concerns:

- Our family has strong values. Will our child's school reflect them?
- We want our child to attend a top college.
- We don't like what we hear about how children behave in school these days.
- We hope school will expose our children to a wide variety of people.
- It would be nice to find a school that all of our children could attend.
- We're not sure we can afford private school.
- We need a school that's convenient to our home and workplace.

Since children and families are so varied, your needs and the importance of your needs *for school* can differ dramatically even among the closest of friends, neighbors and family members. "Fit" is about how closely a school meets your needs, particularly the most important ones that you cannot meet outside of school.

Just as chocolate cake excites most of us more than oatmeal (health nuts excepted), it is most often fit that inspires our *passion* for a school, even though it is quality that most determines the academic success of our children. If quality is your "good nutrition," all the fruits, vegetables, whole grains and protein *everyone* needs, then fit is about choosing your personal favorites from each healthy food group *and* picking your dessert.

You can think about the match between child needs, family needs and school offerings as a triangle. The completeness of your child's education will be determined by how well your child, family and school fit together. We call this the "Great Fit Triangle":



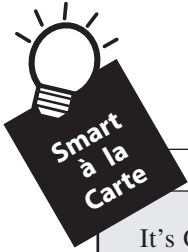
But your child and family have so many needs and values. How can you possibly decide which ones matter most for school?

Quality is like "good nutrition": all the fruits, vegetables, whole grains and protein everyone needs. Fit is like choosing personal favorites from each healthy food group and picking your dessert.

This book helps you identify your *highest priority needs and values* by sorting them into four Fit Factors. You'll think about:

- *what* your child should be learning in school (like what content and at what level);
- *how* your child learns best (like what kind of teaching style really connects);
- what *social issues* matter (like your and your child's friends); and
- what *practical issues* (like location and cost) make a difference.

Using the four Fit Factors, you'll go from a confusing flurry of considerations to a concise list of what matters most – and what to look for in a school to get that.



When to Start?

It's OK to think generally about school choices at any time, but begin your serious planning in late summer or early autumn the year before your child will start school or switch schools – August is ideal in most locations. Start much earlier and there is a decent chance that your child, your family or one of your Target Schools will change enough to alter your plans. Start later, and you may miss out on schools with early application or registration deadlines. We hear that in some instances you must schedule interviews the spring in advance of the fall you will apply for your child, but this is rare. Individual schools vary, and so you must find out the schedule and steps for each school you seriously consider!

The Step-by-Step Process to Make the Right Choice

Quality and fit will be your compass. But even with a compass, most of us still need a map. So we've developed a step-by-step guide to help you organize your school choice process.

- 1 Let's walk through this map, which appears on page 14. From your starting point at the top, the map forks off in two directions, one toward fit and the other toward quality.
- 2 Take fit first. On the map, Solve the Great Fit Puzzle has two branches. Going down the left branch, you'll start with Discover Your Child's Needs. Of all your child's characteristics, what matters most when choosing a school? In Chapters 2-5, we'll help you figure that out.

The right branch of Solve the Great Fit Puzzle leads you to Uncover Your Family's Needs. Your family has values, preferences and constraints you'll

want to take into account when picking a school. Chapters 6-9 will help you zero in on the ones that really matter for your school choice.

After considering your child's and family's needs, you'll come to Know What You Need from a School. We'll show you in Chapter 10 exactly *what a school should do* to match the needs you've identified. We'll help you summarize your decisions in a handy one-page *Personalized Great Fit Checklist* to take along on your school hunt.

- 3 That's fit. What about quality? The next step, back up toward the top of the map, is to Learn About Truly Great Schools. Chapters 11-14 let you in on the research that tells us what makes Great Schools great. You'll also learn specifically how to gauge the quality of the schools you consider. We will provide you with a *Great School Quality Checklist* you can carry around as you visit schools.
 - 4 The next step is what we call Get the Scoop on Schools. In Chapter 15, you'll come up with a list of top schools available to your child. We'll help you ask the right questions to get the information you need. Using your fit and quality checklists, you'll investigate your options, learning as much as you can about whether each one meets your priorities.
 - 5 Then, it's time to Make Your Choice and Make It Happen. Chapter 16 brings you to the moment of truth, using all the information you've gathered. You weigh the pros and cons of the schools you're considering and figure out which one is the best school that fits.
- From there, you're on to Chapter 17, where we help you up the odds of getting your child into your top pick school.
- 6 And in the final chapter, you Make the Most of It. Here we offer a mini-guide to working effectively with your child's principal and teachers, developing your child outside of school and changing your child's school for the better.

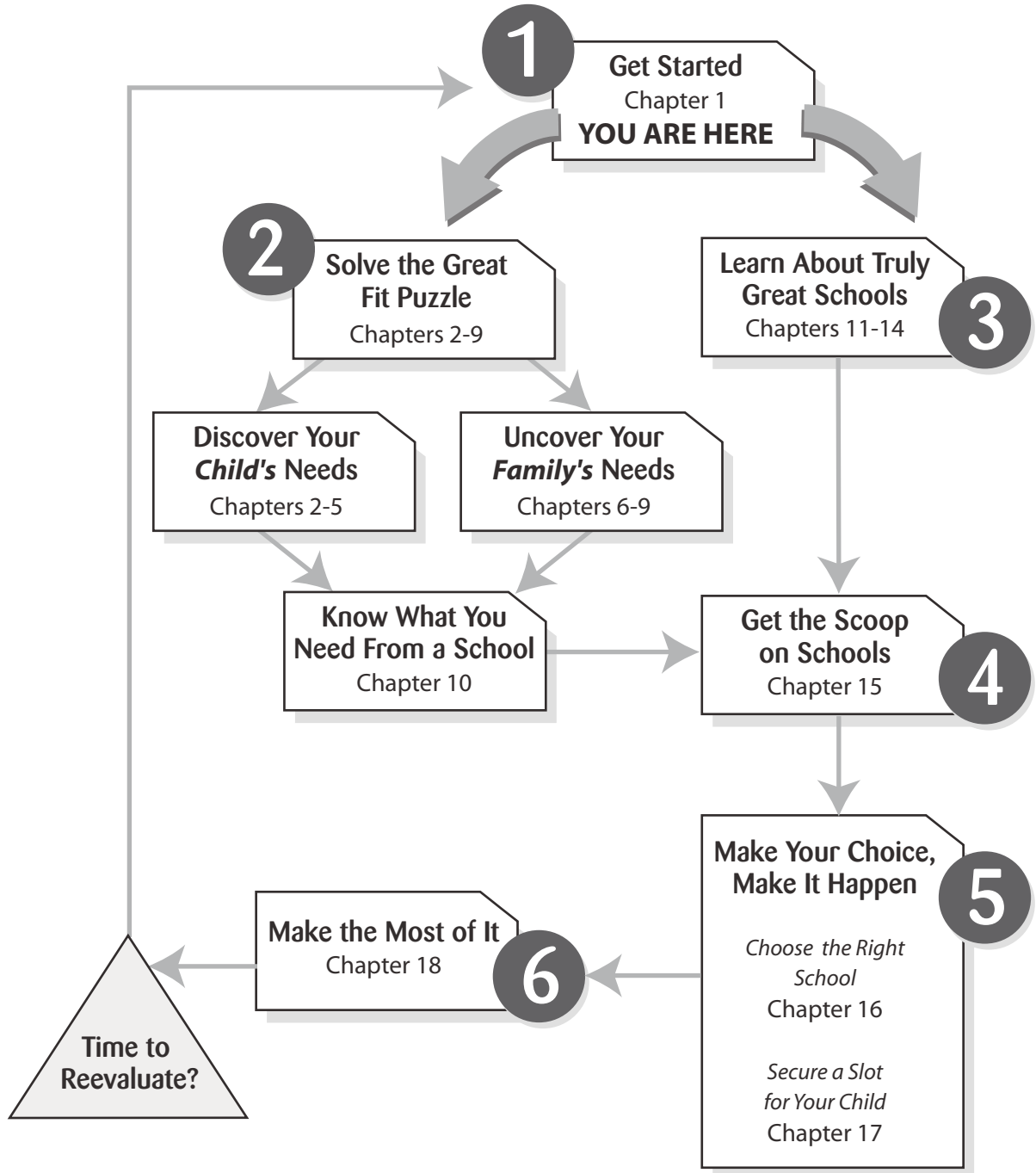
At the end of the book, we also offer you:

- A glossary of the "education speak" terms you might encounter in your school hunt.
- A list of other resources you may find helpful in your school search and in helping your children get the education they deserve.
- An appendix containing the critical *Confident Choice Tools* you will use to identify your needs, choose the best fit and quality school, and round out your child's education outside of school.
- A list of our sources.
- A thorough index so you can use this book as a ready reference guide anytime an education issue arises for your child.

Even if you do not have time to take every step here, seeking your child's top fit need and real quality in a school will improve your child's life and school performance.

How to Find a Great School That Fits:

a Step-by-Step Approach



Recurring Picky Parent Guide Features

Throughout the book, you will find the following recurring features:



- ***Light'ning List*** – at the start of each chapter, we lighten the load and enlighten you in a flash with a chapter summary for the busiest of parents.



- ***Snap To It*** – suggested action steps at the end of each chapter to help you make progress on your school decision – when you are ready.



- ***Smart à la Carte*** – We think you really are so smart. And you'll be even smarter after reading these boxes we've cooked up for you on hot topics of special concern to many parents. Read those that interest you most.



- ***Definitions*** – simple, clear meanings of terms you'll encounter in your school hunt, throughout the book where you need them and in the book-end glossary.



- ***Viewpoint*** – a series of boxes providing brief overviews of prominent, modern child development theories affecting school choice, in Chapters 2 through 5.

- ***Stories and examples*** – tales about parents who've made both uplifting and unfortunate school choices – and the big consequences for their children and families. We've included a mix of real-life stories and examples we crafted to illustrate important points. Among these, you'll find conclusions to the stories begun in this chapter.

- ***Confident Choice Tools*** – tools supporting the Snap To It activities walk you through a step-by-step approach to choosing a school. You will use these worksheets and tables to zero in on your priorities, record your ideas and stay on top of the process.

How to Use this Book

Strategy A: In-Depth

Some of you will devote much time to reading and thinking about your child's school options. If this is you, do this:

- ***Read*** this book from start to finish. Enjoy yourself. Chat with your spouse or friends about it.
- ***Start observing and thinking*** about your own child and family right away. Take mental notes, or use our “Quick Thinks” on pages 37 and 109 to record your ideas.
- ***Complete the Snap To It activity sections*** (look for the handy symbol as you flip through). Use the *Confident Choice Tools* provided here to stay organized.

Strategy B: Complete but Focused

Others of you may want the “big ideas,” but need a faster route through. If this is you, do this:

- ***Read*** Chapters 2 (your child), 6 (your family), 10 (matching a school to your needs), 11 (school quality), and 16 (making the choice).
- ***Read the Light'ning List*** at the beginning of each chapter you skip.
- ***Complete the Snap To It activity sections*** (look for the handy symbol as you flip through). Use the *Confident Choice Tools* provided here to stay organized.
- ***Delve deeper*** only into other chapters that apply most to your child and family. Use the Light'ning Lists at the beginning of each chapter to guide you.

Strategy C: Quick Action

Still others of you would rather skip the “big ideas” and get right to the steps. If this is you, do this:

- ***Read Light'ning List*** at the beginning of each chapter to get the main ideas.
- ***Complete the Snap To It activity sections*** at the end of each chapter (look for the handy symbol as you flip through). Use the *Confident Choice Tools* provided here to stay organized.
- ***Read the other book sections and use the reference tables*** in the Appendix as needed to help with activities where you want the big picture (book sections) or where you need more detail (tables).

We also encourage you to visit the book's companion website, *PickyParent.com*, where you'll find more information, up-to-date links to great resources and the opportunity to share ideas and experiences with other parents.

A Clear View: We Are a Team

This book is your steady platform: we will help you stand firm on the shoulders of great educators, great thinkers about children and schools, and great parents to provide the very best for *your* child. We will lift your head above the clouds of a busy life and other obstacles to make clear, confident decisions about how your child will be educated – in school and out.

So, go ahead. Be picky, and show it. Do it with confidence. We'll help you turn your pickiness in to positive parent power – not just pointless whining – to improve your child's school performance and life. At some point, all parents fear the slow drip of time that passes until the bucket is full and your chance to influence your child's development has passed. You don't have to go there. This book is about helping you reach your highest hopes for your child. We say: every child, including yours, is born with great gifts. Help your child discover, build and enjoy those gifts.

You will need to do mind-work, soul-searching and legwork. But you'll know that your efforts are high-impact, that you are achieving all a parent can, and that your child will feel your love and concern. You will *feel great* about being picky when it counts most. Ready? Let's go.



PARENTING/EDUCATION

"Phenomenal"! "Indispensable"!
"First Rate"!

See more praise inside front cover...

You can now take charge of your child's educational destiny!

If you are one of the tens of millions of parents picking a first school or considering a change for your child, **Picky Parent Guide** is the **definitive action manual and reference guide** you need. Built off decades of the best research, **Picky Parent Guide** delivers simple wisdom that works. Easy to grasp and inspiring to use, the Confident Choice Tools make choosing and working with your child's school a snap! You can relax knowing that you are doing everything a parent can to enhance your child's success in school and life.

A great value! Here's what you get inside this book:

- ✓ Dozens of customized, practical ways to improve your child's school performance
- ✓ Complete step-by-step Confident Choice Tool Kit to help you choose the right school, without wasting hundreds of hours and potentially thousands of dollars
- ✓ Point-by-point discussion to help you match your child and family needs with schools
- ✓ Complete research-based introduction to the seven universal Great School Quality Factors that any parent can learn to recognize. Unbiased with respect to school type
- ✓ Filled with surprising, often touching stories of school choice success
- ✓ School types, teaching methods and educational lingo explained and demystified
- ✓ Customized questions, targeting your needs, to ask when visiting schools
- ✓ Stress-saving tips on getting in to your favorite schools
- ✓ Plainspoken advice on how to interact with school staff to get what your child needs
- ✓ Dozens of ways to get for your child what you can't get at your current school

... and much more!

"All parents should have this book by the time their kids are 3 years old, if not sooner." -**Johnathan Williams**, Co-Founder and Co-Director, *The Accelerated School*, Los Angeles, *The Time Magazine Elementary School of the Year 2001*

"These tools eased our worries and helped us choose just the right school for our child and family."

-**Gray Dunaway**, Mortgage Broker and Mother of Two

"I love this book!...**Picky Parent Guide** will enable parents to make the best decisions possible for their children."

-**Gaynor McCown**, Executive Director, *The Teaching Commission*

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should go it alone.
Take the experts
with you!

Nationally
recognized school
choice experts
Bryan C. Hassel,
Ph.D. and **Emily
Ayscue Hassel**
have advised
leaders from the
school house to
the White House.
Parents of two,
here they help
you get what your
child deserves
from school.

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