

THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

Choose your child's school with CONFIDENCE



religious? magnet?

home?



Which School?

public?

private?

charter?







Step Four: Chapter 15 Sharpen Your Pencil: Grade Your School Options

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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LIGHT'NING LIST

What To Know from Chapter 15

- > Your next step is to build a list of high potential Target Schools.
- ➤ Target Schools are ones you seriously consider; ideally you will narrow this list to no more than five schools that appear to be of the best quality and fit for your child and family.
- ➤ Investigating schools can be an emotional process. At various times, you may feel excited, frustrated, impressed, disappointed, angry and elated, sometimes all about the very same school!
- ➤ Your initial Target School list may include schools that you instinctively know you want to consider, including your "Default Destination" and others. Your Default Destination is the school to which you would send your child if you did not bother to make a proactive choice.
- ➤ Once your list is honed to the five highest potential Target Schools, you'll investigate those in detail.
- ➤ You will grade your top five schools on quality and fit, identifying the quality and fit strengths and weaknesses of each using the *Great School Quality Checklist* (page 200) and your *Personalized Great Fit Checklist* (page 59).
- ➤ At the end of this process, you will be prepared to choose one top choice school based on your own fit needs and the best available research about school quality. You will be able to rank the remaining schools on your Target List.
- **You also will learn an enormous amount** about the schools you investigate and be prepared to work with the school your child attends and to parent your child outside of school.

Chapter 15

Sharpen Your Pencil: Grade Your School Options

The Active Hunt Begins: Surviving the Twists and Turns

You know what you want and need in a school. You're getting familiar with the true indicators of school quality. You are itching to look at schools available to your child – indeed we hope you are revved to go! But you also have a life busy with children, a household to run, work, volunteer activities and other commitments. You will need to focus your efforts so that your school hunt doesn't become a full-time job. Once you have taken time to identify your child's and family's fit Must Haves, learn about quality, and translate those into what you need in a school, you've come a long way.

Now it's time to:

- ➤ Build a list of high-potential Target Schools and
- ➤ Gather the information you'll need about each school to make a smart choice.

Many Starting Places on the Path to a Great School that Fits

Parents start in different places when it comes time to decide what schools to consider. You might:

- ➤ Know a few promising schools from which you'd really like to choose
- ➤ Have one strong Default Destination, a school you've always wanted your child to attend and want even more after learning about quality and fit

- ➤ Have a weak Default Destination, a school you could tolerate but that feels like "settling"; you need to explore this and other schools more rigorously
- ➤ Have a child already in elementary school, and want to make a change only if another school seems markedly better, or
- ➤ Have no clear path and want to consider a broad range of options.

Whoever you are, whatever your assumptions, we say this: you will be a better parent to your child and a better partner with your child's school if you seriously consider more than one school, one school type or very similar schools only.

Definition



Default Destination: The school your child would attend if you did not make a proactive school choice. This might be your child's current school, assigned public school, favorite private school, your alma mater, or favored school of your neighbors, friends or family.

This Way to a Smart Choice

So what path should you take to consider schools available to your child? All parents start with a "gut list" of schools they instinctively want to consider. This starting place often is defined by the potentially misleading indicators of quality and fit: overall test scores, knowledge of a great teacher here and there, other parents' personal opinions, and social pressure. But from there, the choice is yours. If you do it right, you will engage in an ongoing process of considering high potential schools of varying types and designs and deleting schools that really won't meet your quality and fit needs. You will screen schools using the highest priority questions and dig more deeply into those that make the initial cuts. You will seek to learn about promising schools you may not have considered previously.

At the end of this process, you will have three nuggets of parenting gold:

- ➤ A list of top Target Schools about which you know a lot
- Information you need to choose one favorite school (and rank order the rest), and
- Information you need to work well with the school your child attends and to parent your child outside of school.

Keep Your Eye on the Targets

Your Target Schools are the ones with the best chance of providing great quality and fit for your child and family. Your Target "short list" will change as you learn more about what schools are available and the quality and fit of each school you



consider. Once you have pared down your list to a manageable number (ideally no more than five), you will investigate each school in detail to learn about its strengths and weaknesses. While this might seem a straightforward step, it can be fraught with emotional and practical challenges. The fearsome dragons of insecurity, uncertainty, embarrassment and scarce time rear their mighty heads. The rest of this chapter and the next will help you prepare and conquer each challenge with confidence, one by one.

Definition



Target Schools: Your short list of schools (up to five) with the best chance of providing great quality and fit for your child and family. Once you've pared your list down to a manageable number, these are the schools that you will investigate in detail.

You'll be a
better parent to
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least consider a
variety of
schools:
different types,
designs and
features.

Riding the Emotional Rollercoaster

As you investigate individual schools, you may begin to feel a bond with the people you meet. This isn't like shopping for a car, when you typically won't see the salespeople you haggle with again, even the one who wins your purse. With at least one school – and you don't know *which* one yet – your initial exploration

is the beginning of a long-term relationship. The principal and teachers you meet are the people who will one day soon take care of your child for six hours or more each day! If you are looking into a school that you yourself attended, you may already have relationships with school leaders and staff and feel especially squirmy about putting them in the hot seat. If you are trying to learn more about the school your child already attends, even more so.

You will feel a wide range of emotions during the active school hunting process and then again when you must make your final choice. At various times, you may feel excited, frustrated, impressed, disappointed and angry, sometimes all about the very same school! Proactively choosing a school is a bit like searching for a spouse. You want to keep your standards high and ask all of the right questions to make your choice. But meanwhile, some of the schools you consider will be assessing you, as well. You may feel like a cad when you reject some schools in the end, especially ones that invested time in you – responding to your tough questions, assessing your child and the like.

And you *will* be asking some tough questions, perhaps feeling embarrassed when there's no ready answer. You also may feel shy about how organized you are. As widespread choice is just coming of age, schools aren't yet used to seeing many parents who know just what they need and want in a school. Some school staff will be impatient or dismissive, brushing aside your questions. In the "Get the Real Scoop" section below, we offer some ideas about how to deal with these stresses.

But, trust us, most of you also will have moments of elation when you find that you've stumbled onto just the right place for your child and family, sometimes where you least expect. Many of you will find a school where you are impressed with the focus on real quality and find that the school fits your child's and family's needs quite well, to boot. You might even find a Great School with a Great Fit where you enjoy being part of the adult community from the moment you step in the door (all the more exciting if this is one of your Must Haves). You may feel even better when you realize that you have two or more good quality school options that fit your needs.

Of course, even your best option may not be perfect. Keep in mind that most families can make up for some school shortfalls outside of school and that a small, but vocal and committed, group of parents can help bring about tremendous changes in a school. Furthermore, you will learn a great deal about the school that you choose simply by having points of comparison with the schools you don't choose.

Know that if you find yourself on an emotional rollercoaster, you are not alone. Stay the course, continue your hunt, and find the right school for your child. You won't regret it for a moment when the hunt is done.

Build Your List of Target Schools

Your goal now is to craft a short list of Target Schools – those most likely to meet your quality and fit needs – that you can *really* get to know in detail. At first, you'll be looking into schools from afar: listing the schools you already think you'd like to consider, finding out what else is available in your community, and screening for basic quality and fit. Then you'll really start to dig in and focus on a limited number of higher-potential schools.

Start with Your "Gut" List of Schools

Start your Target School list with schools you know in your "gut" that you want to consider. First on your list is your Default Destination, if you have one – the school where you would send your child if you didn't bother to make a proactive choice or the school your child already attends. Then add others you know you want to consider, such as your assigned public school, friends' and neighbors' schools, the school you attended, and schools you've heard about that instinctively sound right. Don't feel obligated at this point to make a complete laundry list. Just include those schools that instinctively seem attractive for one reason or another. Use our *School List Tool* on page 272 to keep track of your Target Schools and important contact information (phone numbers, websites and the like).

Include yourself. Include that popular school that you now know won't work – you can eliminate it quickly after confirming that it just won't fit (or is of lack-luster quality). Some schools might surprise you, others won't. But this is your chance to give the nod to friends, family and neighbors when they ask if you *at least considered* their pet palace of pedagogy.

Definition



Pet Palace of Pedagogy: The school that your friends, neighbors or family members think all children should attend – including yours – regardless of real quality or how well it will fit your child and family.

Find Out What Else is Available in Your Community

Now it's time to broaden your horizons. Find out what other schools are available in your community, including ones that you wouldn't have considered before you became the education expert that you are now. This is your chance to peek outside your workaday world into schools that might provide surprisingly good quality and fit. Use what you've learned so far to think more broadly than you might have otherwise.

Consider schools of different types and in different locations. If you've been thinking "only public," check out high potential private and religious schools. Their admissions policies and financial aid programs may make them a more realistic option than you thought. If you've always thought private is the only way to go, take a peek at high potential public schools. If you've been locked into thinking about neighborhood schools, look farther afield. Seek out information about special programs within larger schools that may fit your child's top needs. Even consider schools across district and state lines if you live near a border. Some public districts allow children from outside of the district to attend schools with open spaces for a fee. Private schools typically do not have residency requirements, so your child can even come across state lines to attend. The less potential you see in familiar or near-by schools, the more you'll want to look elsewhere to build your Target list.

There are several sources of information you might use. The *best* sources are different in every city and town. You will want to consider at least these to find out what schools are available to your child:

- ➤ Your local public school district's central office
- > Friends and neighbors
- > Parents you meet at your children's activities
- ➤ Your church, synagogue or other religious institution
- ➤ Your preschool or day care director
- The yellow pages of your local phone book
- ➤ Your local chamber of commerce or other "cheerleading" organization for your city or town
- ➤ Ads in local parenting newspapers and magazines (look at pediatrician's office, local library)
- ➤ The National Association of Independent Schools
- ➤ Articles or school guides in local newspapers or online
- ➤ Books about schools in your city (usually the very largest cities only)
- School choice advisors available to you (either private or through your public district)

Special Programs within a Larger School

If you consider a special program within a larger school, you should assess quality and fit just as you would for a whole school. A special program may be significantly better or worse in quality and fit than the larger school. First, ask specific quality and fit questions about the program itself.

Then, ask about the effect that the larger school has on the special program. Do the larger school's policies and practices pervade the special program? If so, you'll want to learn more about the items that affect quality and your Must Have fit needs.



See our Resources for Parents section (page 354) or visit **PickyParent.com** for more ideas about how to find information about schools in your area.

Make sure you consider the various *types* of schools that may be available to your child:

- ➤ Public schools
 - ✓ Your assigned public school
 - ✓ Other schools that your child is eligible to attend (if your district has a "choice plan" that gives you options)
 - ✓ Other public schools that look highly promising, even if your child is not assigned there (you may be able to petition for a transfer)
 - ✓ Magnet schools
 - ✓ Charter schools
- ➤ Private schools
 - ✓ Independent schools in your local area, both large and small
 - ✔ Religious schools in your local area
 - ✔ Boarding schools outside of your local area (typically for older children only)
- > Special programs housed within larger schools, public or private
- ➤ Home schooling

You do not need to put every school on your Target list, of course. Simply keep your sources and lists of available schools (clipped articles, etc.) handy for the next steps.

Get the Real Scoop on Schools: Read, Look, Listen

When you are ready, here are the steps you'll take to get the real scoop on schools. At first, you will ask your high priority "litmus test" questions, using those highlighted in our tables and perhaps some of your own. After you have whittled your Target School list to a manageable number (we suggest five at most), you will find out more about how each school stacks up on quality and fit. Focus on quality and your fit Must Haves, but if information about your Nice to Haves pops up, keep it for later. Follow these steps, which are summarized in *Snap To It*:

➤ Write down questions you want to ask at all schools on master copies of your Great School Quality and Personalized Great Fit Checklists. If writing out longer questions will help you feel more prepared, use the Interview Forms starting on page 273. Use the three What to Look for in a School tables (starting on page 380) to help. Highlight questions that are a top priority for

screening schools. You may already have completed this step as you read about quality and fit in earlier chapters. Take a peek at the three Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School tables (starting on page 416) if you want to whittle your list of quality and fit needs down to those you cannot make up for outside of school.

- ➤ Make one copy of the Great School Quality and Personalized Great Fit Checklists for each school you consider (even if you have not yet narrowed your Target School list down to a small number). If you are using Interview Forms, make a copy for each individual you expect to interview.
- > Start a file for each school you consider. You can use this to hold your checklists, information and notes on the school, and ultimately registration and admissions paperwork.
- **Record questions unique to particular schools** on each school's checklists or *Interview Forms*. You may want to complete this step only for your top five Target Schools.
- **Begin to investigate** schools, using the screening questions. Start by reviewing written materials and websites for basic information; use "live" questioning to delve deeper.
- ➤ Record what you learn about each school, as you learn it, in the "Notes" columns on the two checklists or on your Interview Forms.
- > Quickly eliminate schools that clearly are a bad fit or provide inferior quality.
- ➤ *Add schools* you discover that may be a Great Fit or provide superior quality.
- Narrow your list to the top five schools as quickly as possible so that you may focus your time on these.
- ➤ Dig to get all the information you need about your top schools.
- > Grade your top Target Schools on each Great School Quality Factor and Fit Factor using the checklists when you have enough information about each (see examples starting on page 266).
- > Reconsider schools you may have eliminated earlier in the process if your Target School list gets too short.

How Do I Ask That?

Before you start calling or visiting schools, think about what questions will get you the information you need. In the early stages while you are still honing your list of Target Schools, you may want to ask pointed questions so that you can quickly eliminate poor fit and quality schools. For example, "My child is extremely active ("kinesthetic") and learns best when he can move around and do



Rezoning Blues

If your child's assigned public school is on your Target School list and you live in a place where public school rezoning occurs frequently, you may want to consider the potential impact on your child and family. Rezoning is more likely in highgrowth cities and "swing" neighborhoods between schools often used to balance enrollment.

While in general we advocate going for the best quality, best fit school available for each precious year of your child's life, avoiding disruption and change midstream can be a factor for some children and families. Rezoning is not the only cause of instability, though. Brand new schools, those under weak, new or about-to-change leadership, and those lacking a clear mission also are highly susceptible to ups and downs. If many of the items on the following list apply, make sure you have some stable options on your Target School list. You might give the nudge to more stable schools when it comes to decision time. Potentially more stable options include public ones less sensitive to rezoning (magnet schools, charter schools, special programs within larger schools), private schools and home schooling. In all of these cases, the type of school is less important than the strength and consistency of the individual school's leadership and mission.

Factors that may make a stable school more important:

- ➤ Your child has great difficulty with changes. Many children will "grow out of it," but some remain sensitive to the hyper-stimulation of new situations.
- ➤ Your child is challenged in any way: academically, socially, emotionally or behaviorally.
- ➤ Your family life is full of twists and turns. You are a single parent and work outside of school hours, both parents work and have unpredictable schedules, parents are divorced and sharing custody (so child is going back and forth), or there have been other major disruptions in family life.

If your child is rezoned, it is not the end of the world. Many families petition successfully for their children to remain in the former school after zoning changes. This is easier if you have clear fit needs and can explain how they are well met by the school (which you can do in a snap using your *Personalized Great Fit Checklist* as a guide). Keep in mind that most adults must endure change, and you can help your child become competent at the change game by learning to make new friends and adapt to new school cultures, policies and daily routines. Many families successfully shepherd their children through changes by helping them prepare for their new school environments (see Chapter 18).

hands-on projects: what does your school offer for a child like this?" Or "Does your school monitor children's progress during the year? How and how often?" Use the highlighted questions in our fit and quality *What to Look for in a School* tables to help weed out (and in) schools quickly.

As you investigate high-potential schools more thoroughly, you may want to start conversations with more open-ended questions that do not reveal the answer you want to hear. For example: "Does your school address children's different learning styles? How?" Or "How do your teachers know if children are making progress?" Some people will give you more accurate answers this way. You can get more and more specific until you have all the information you need and feel comfortable that you are getting an accurate picture of the school.

If you feel embarrassed about pressing for answers to your specific questions (most people do), work harder upfront to collect as much information as you can from printed materials, school websites and your friends who are already in-the-know about the school. Then you can focus your "live" time on the questions you still have rather than on learning basic facts about the school.

Where Do I Look for Information about Schools?

You can get additional information about your Target Schools from a variety of sources, including those listed below. See our Resources for Parents section starting on page 354 or visit **PickyParent.com** for more help.

- ➤ Your state department of education. All states issue "report cards" on public schools or at least have lists and contact information available. To date, much of this information has gone unused by most parents. But it can be a good way to compare past performance in the basic subjects. You can compare individual schools, as well as towns and cities if you are considering a move. Try your state's website first to get information quickly. Use our Chapter 11 guidance for comparing test scores.
- ➤ Your local public school district's central office (look in the phone book). Your district should have information about school assignments, magnet schools, choices available among other public schools and the educational approach taken by various schools from which you may choose. Look for a website, which may have useful school performance numbers (using our Chapter 11 guidance to interpret scores). Charter schools may not be included in information you get from your school district.

➤ Individual schools

✓ Staff: The principal, teachers and other staff should be available by appointment to help you. Receptionists may be able to answer practical

- questions about school hours, transportation, costs, child care, etc., but reserve questions about the classroom for other staff.
- ✓ Written materials: Ask for anything that explains the school's mission, curriculum, teaching method, student population and other features of interest to you.
- ✓ Tours and open houses: Use these as opportunities to find out all you can about the school. Ask questions. Make sure you ask about quality and fit Must Haves, so you can eliminate schools that are a clear "no." Write down what you hear and see. Many schools will throw heaps of irrelevant information your way, often highlighting offerings having little to do with quality and addressing fit only for a few. Warm cookies, flashy performances and scripted student recitations have wooed many a well-meaning parent to the wrong school. Filter out the flash, unless it truly addresses your child's or family's needs. Focus on real quality and your own child and family fit concerns. (But do enjoy the cookies.)
- ✔ Observation: Reserve this for schools on your final list, as meaningful observations are time-consuming. Consider observing the grade your child would attend next year, as well as an older grade. Ideally, you would observe more than one teacher in each grade. When you observe, look for children who act like you expect yours would in the classroom. For example, if your child is very shy and quiet, observe whether teachers encourage the quiet ones to participate and give them time to respond. If your child will be the one with a hundred questions and comments, observe whether teachers act appreciative of enthusiastic children while also teaching them to focus their comments on main ideas.
- ✓ Web site: search for a school's site on the internet or simply ask if the school has one. These often contain practical information as well as philosophy and educational approach. Pay attention to what they do not say, as well as what they do say.
- ➤ Parents. One of your most valuable sources will be parents who have either child or family needs very similar to yours. In general, talking with parents of children like yours is as accurate a read on the experience your child would have as and much more time efficient than limited classroom observations. As you talk with parents, make sure that you follow up with a quick question about their child and family needs. This will help you put their opinions into perspective. Asking parents of highly gifted children about their experience may not tell you whether a school would drive home the basics in reading, writing and math for your more typical child. Asking parents of a highly visual child who loves to sit, look and listen in her traditional school will not tell you how your bustling, kinesthetic child would fare. In short: understand the perspectives of your sources before taking opinion as fact.

Screen Potential Schools

You can use a few quick short cuts to screen schools on your initial list and to add other high-potential schools. You will screen for fit and quality.

Screen for Fit: To screen for fit, consider the overall design of each school as well as the specific offerings that affect fit with your Must Have needs. First, add to your Target list any schools with designs that are a high-probability fit for your child's or family's Must Haves. Remove from your Target list any schools using designs that are very unlikely to fit your child's or family's Must Haves. If you are not sure, and your list is not too long, feel free to keep a school on your Target list until you gather more information. Use our School Designs Defined table on page 172 to help you pick and choose among designs. Use your Personalized Great Fit Checklist to gather information and record what you learn about each school.

Second, add schools that appear, at a glance, to be potential Great Fits because their *specific offerings* fit your needs. Remember that some schools do not use a well-known design, and that's O.K. As you scan your community to find out what schools are available to your child, ask about schools that might fit your specific Must Have needs. Remove schools if it becomes apparent that they do not offer what you need in a school to meet child and family Must Have needs. Use the limited number of top-priority, highlighted questions in our *Child and Family: What to Look for in a School* tables to screen schools without spending too much time.

In short, make these changes to your Target School list:

- > Add schools with
 - ✓ High-potential, Great Fit designs
 - ✔ Offerings that fit your child and family Must Haves
- > Remove schools with
 - ✓ Low-potential, poor fit designs (but feel free to keep them for a while longer if you're not sure)
 - ✓ Offerings that fail to fit your child and family Must Haves

Screen for Quality: you'll want to add to your Target list any schools that appear – at a glance – to provide stellar quality, and likewise eliminate those at the bottom of the barrel. To screen for quality, consider readily available testing results (interpreting carefully with help of our Chapter 11), each school's reputation for educating children like yours, and the highlighted questions in our Quality: What to Look for in a School table (page 409). Use your Great School Quality Checklist (page 200) to gather information and record what you learn about each school.

At a distance, quality is hard to judge accurately. However, you do not need to make fine distinctions among schools yet. If there are schools in your community that you suspect may be truly superior in real quality, add them to the list. If there are schools on your list now that you quickly discover to be of disappointing quality – especially for children or families similar to your own – drop them. You will be too busy investigating high-potential schools to spend time on mediocre prospects. If you are not sure, and your Target list is not too long, feel free to keep questionable schools on your list until you learn more. Later you can add more questions from the *Quality: What to Look for in a School* to better assess each school.

Beware of imposters. Lacking a way to identify *real* quality, parents have been unfortunately susceptible to common imposters such as lovely landscaping, a bountiful breadth of subjects, and a popular reputation. A school's reputation is remarkably unreliable. School reputations often are built on three things unrelated to quality: the capabilities of the students, the school's competence marketing itself, and potentially misleading test scores.

Many schools boast excellence when it is the pre-existing capabilities of the students, not the schools themselves, that are of high caliber. Schools populated only with bright, motivated children may have impressive overall test scores – but not necessarily when you compare to similar students elsewhere. Unfortunately, it can be oh so tempting for these schools to coast along without providing real quality. At some point, you will need to find out how well such a school follows the seven Great School Quality Factors for a child like yours.

Likewise, while a school's competence in marketing itself is an important characteristic from a school management perspective, it tells you nothing about the education quality your child will experience. And a brief reminder warning about test scores: they can help you choose, but they can just as easily mislead you. Schools with great *overall* test scores may be a disaster for children like yours.

You must look at how well a school does with children similar to yours to make even a snap judgment. (Refer back to the discussion of test scores in Chapter 11 and the *Child Needs: What to Look for in a School* table on page 380 to help you here.)

Smart Smala (arte

Panicky Parent Pressure Valve

Don't panic! If you find yourself strapped for time or confidence, remember:

- 1. Meeting even one of your child's critical learning needs better, through school or home life, can significantly improve your child's life and school performance. If you're in a time pinch, focus on your child's top Must Have only.
- 2. A school strong in Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3 will meet the learning needs of most children over the long haul. Make these two your top search priorities in a pinch.

In short:

- ➤ Eliminate from your Target School list
 - Schools that clearly are not getting results, especially with children like your child
 - ✓ Schools that clearly are not following the seven Great School Quality Factors, especially with children like your child
- ➤ Add to your Target School List
 - ✓ Schools that clearly are getting impressive results, especially with children like your child
 - ✓ Schools that clearly are following the seven Great School Quality Factors, especially with children like your child
 - ✓ Schools with a strong reputation for educating children like yours

If you find that you still have too many schools on your Target School list, fear not. You can easily eliminate schools as you gather a bit more information. If you find later that none of your preferred schools truly satisfies your Must Have needs or is of acceptable quality, you may want to loop back and gather more information about some that you eliminate now. Try to whittle your Target list down to five or fewer schools before you dig in too far on each.

Will you need to make snap judgments sometimes to decide whether a school is a high-potential hit or a low-potential laggard? Yes. Can you do this with confidence? Yes. When you're not sure about a school, simply keep it on your list to gather more information later. Keep your reference sources of other available schools handy just in case your Target list gets too short.

Continue to Banish the Bad, Gather the Good

Once you have narrowed your search to your top five or fewer schools, you will need to gather more detailed information from several sources until you feel confident that you have a lock on each school's strengths and weaknesses. Use additional questions from the *Quality, Child and Family: What to Look for in a School* tables. You may continue to add and delete schools from your list, as needed, dropping those that just won't work and adding new high-fliers you discover. Most importantly, you will find out what you need to know about the schools you most want your child to attend.

Banish the Bad. You know quality and your fit Must Haves. Focus on these first and foremost. Based on these alone, you most likely will be able to eliminate many schools from your list in a snap. Filter out schools that clearly are a bad fit – that come nowhere near meeting your child and family "Must Haves." Eliminate schools that are clearly of bad quality – that are clearly either very weak in one Great School Quality Factor or weak across the board on quality.

This step may take nerves of steel for some of you. You may feel pressure from family, friends, neighbors or colleagues to send your child to a particular school. But if it is quite clear that the anointed school does not meet your child's or family's *Must Haves*, or if you – savvier about school quality now than most parents – detect serious problems in the school, you should eliminate it now. You need to spend your limited time investigating and choosing from among the schools that meet your needs. Certainly, though, if you have unlimited time or few other schools from which to choose, it may be worth a closer look, if only to have confidence telling curious friends why that school is *not* the right place for your child or family!

Gather the Good. Even in the middle of your school hunt, you can broaden your list with newly discovered high-potential schools. Your research into your initial Target Schools will lead some of you to discover other high-potential schools. When you meet parents who have similar child or family needs, ask what other schools they considered (and wish they had considered). In response to your probing questions, school staff who have your best interests in mind will sometimes tip you off to other potential Great Fit (or quality) schools.

Indeed, your increased understanding of your child's and family's needs and school quality may lead you down paths you hadn't considered at all. Granted, a deeper look into things may reveal that a school's fit or quality is not what you expected, but do consider schools that might not have been on your initial list. You might find "just the thing" where you least expect.

Dig Deeper, Dig Wider

In some cases, you will find that information is difficult to obtain, different sources give you different answers, or you just need to know more to choose between similar schools. Stick with it! You can get what you need to know – even if the answer is "it varies from teacher to teacher." You will learn from seeking the information you really need. And if you are considering a move to gain access to your preferred public school, you *certainly* will want to look under every stone before uprooting your family.

What if a School Will Not Give You Information?

You may find that you cannot get the information you need from a school. The most likely reason is that the school simply has not addressed the issues about which you are asking. If you have asked the principal, parents and teachers what the school does to help children like yours learn, and they just do not answer the question, chances are that the answer is "not much." If you've asked many people what the mission of the school is, and none of them knows, chances are that the school is flying by the seat-of-the-pants (which means the school is less likely to be consistent and stable).

When you meet parents who have similar child or family needs, ask what other schools they considered – and wish they had considered.

Another possibility is that you are asking about a known weakness of the school, and school staff members are embarrassed about it. If they are embarrassed, it likely indicates that problems are not addressed head-on by school leadership and there is no plan for improving the school (a bad sign if you are hoping for change!).

Making Sense of Inconsistent Information

As you take all of this in and record what you have learned, look for inconsistencies. Are teachers giving you a very different picture of the school from the one painted by the principal? Are parents of children similar to yours giving you very different perspectives depending on the teachers their children have had or grades they have attended? Does the school brochure's description of the teaching method not match what you saw in observations? Does the new school plan list lofty goals, but fail to back them up with clear and specific actions *that will achieve the goals* in the classroom?

The more consistency you see in a school, the more likely it is that the school has a stable culture on which you can depend. Less consistency often indicates one or more quality problems – an ill-defined mission, a poorly selected or managed teaching staff, or inconsistent focus of time, money and effort within the school. Sometimes, resistance by staff to change can keep real quality out of reach of a well-intentioned school. Even when a school seems to *fit* your needs quite well, you should know that less consistent *quality* will mean your child experiences more ups and downs in school. This still may be preferable to a *somewhat* higher-quality school that does not address your fit Must Haves at all.

Inconsistency is different from an openness to change. Great Schools constantly review their activities and make thoughtful improvements to better meet their mission. In Great Schools, you'll see leaders and teachers alike striving to make changes in the classroom, as well as in a written plan. Staff who can't or won't change are asked to leave. In a school with weak instructional leadership, a change in mission or school goals won't consistently change what happens for your child in the classroom.

Nice to Haves Can Matter

If you are lucky, your Nice to Haves will become important. If you find that you have two or more schools similar in overall quality and fit, gather more information about how these schools will meet your Nice to Haves. Use the same process to determine what schools should offer as you used for your Must Haves. In the end, a good fit on many Nice to Haves can push one school ahead on your most wanted list, even if the school is *slightly* less appealing in quality and fit *Must* Haves.



- ➤ **Use our School List Tool** on page 272 to keep track of schools you are seriously considering.
- **Find out what schools are available** to your child.
 - ✓ Start your list with schools that you know you want to consider, including your Default Destination and others such as your assigned public school, favorite private school or a favorite among neighbors and friends.
 - ✓ *Find out what other schools are available to your child* in your community, considering all school types and schools you have heard about previously.

Estimated Time: 10 minutes - 2 hours

- ➤ Get the real scoop on schools:
 - ✓ If you have not done so already, complete preparation of your Personalized Great Fit Checklist (page 59) and Great School Quality Checklist (page 200).
 - *Use the* What to Look for in a School *tables* starting on page 380 to identify top priority questions and additional helpful questions.
 - *Use the* Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School *tables* starting on page 416 to focus your hunt on needs you cannot address outside of school.
 - Use our Interview Forms on page 273 if you want to write out more questions.
 - Make a copy of an Interview Form for each interview.

Estimated Time: 5 minutes – 1 hour, depending on previous preparation.

- ✓ Start a file for each school you consider to keep all paperwork in one place. Estimated Time: 1 minute
- Screen for quality and fit to shrink your Target School list to a manageable size, ideally five schools at most:
 - Ask top priority "litmus test" questions pointedly.

Estimated Time: 30 minutes – 3 hours

- ✓ Dig deeper and wider into your top Target Schools. Focus on quality and your fit Must Haves. Ask additional questions you have for each school. Use all available sources of information to get a complete and accurate view of each school. Estimated Time: 1 hour − 5 hours or more
- ✓ Add high potential schools you discover. Estimated Time: as needed
- ✓ Delete lower quality, poorer fit schools. Estimated Time: as needed
- ✓ Record information about Nice to Haves as it arises.
- ➤ Complete a Great School Quality Checklist and Personalized Great Fit Checklist for each school you consider, jotting down notes and then grading each of your final Target Schools on both quality and fit. Estimated Time: 20 minutes 1 hour per school

Need more? Want more? Got more to share? Visit PickyParent.com.

Elm Street Elementary

School Name:

Personalized Great Fit Checklist

In the first blank column, list in pencil the precise names of your top child & family needs based on your Child and Family Needs Summaries (pages 38 and 110) and on your reading of Chapters 2–9 and related tables. For example, write: "Basic Learning Capability, Typical." See a complete example on page 176.

Check whether each of your needs is a Must Have or Nice to Have.
 In next big column, make note of the characteristics a school must have to meet your need based on your reading of Chapter 10 and related tables.

➤ Include specific questions to ask school principal, teachers, parents, and others (or use our *Interview Forms* on page 273).

➤ Make an extra copy and fill in notes for each school you consider.
➤ After you gather the information you need grade each school on how

➤ After you gather the information you need, grade each school on how well it fits each Must Have and Nice to Have item:

A perfect fitB very good fit

C halfway fit **D** poor fit

oor fit **F** very poor or no fit

CHILD & FAMILY NEEDS: MUST NICE TO WHAT TO LOOK FOR and Must Haves & top Nice to Haves HAVE HAVE	NICE TO HAVE		WHAT TO LOOK FOR and QUESTIONS TO ASK		NOTES ABOUT THIS SCHOOL	GRADE
Child: Basic Learning Capabilty - Bright/Gifted • Frequent monitoring • Focus on critical thinking		 Indiv. learning goals ahead of grade level or high overall goals Frequent monitoring Focus on critical thinking 	 Indiv. learning goals ahead of grade level or high overall goals Frequent monitoring Focus on critical thinking 	4	· Every student has "Learning Contract" at/above gr. level · Bi-weekly reports to parents · Not sure - critical thinking	4
Child: Motivation – Weak X • Frequent feedback for parents Family: Values about how –		 Variety of teaching m Frequent feedback for Individual work with t 	 Variety of teaching m Frequent feedback for Individual work with t 	ethods parents eacher	 Teachers trained each year in using varied methods Bi-weekly rpts to parents Daily indiv. work w/teacher 	▼
Classroom Behavior – controlling/strict X Clear behavior expectations X Clear punishments & rewards			 Clear behavior exi Clear punishments 	pectations ; & rewards	· Several rowdy kids a handful for teacher	(८)
Family: Student Community - X critical mass of gifted children designated gifted children designated children grade level)		· High % of childred" or so levels on tests (grade level)	 High % of childred or seed gifted or selevels on tests (grade level) 	en designat- coring at high not just% at	• 17% of students in grades 3-5 are in gifted program • 23% of students scored at "advanced" on state tests	8
Family: Child-care - need afterschool Transportation - bus to & from Transportation - bus to & from		• Afterschool aw • Bus to and fron able (for after	 Afterschool ave Bus to and fron able (for afters 	uilable n school avail- school, too)	Afterschool to 6 pm Bus to school, but not from afterschool Public school	8
• Money – afford up to \$6,000 plus \$1000 for afterschool; prefer less than \$7000 in more than \$6,000, or total prefer less than \$7000 for more prefer less	• Tuition & fees & more than \$6,C with afterschool than \$7000	• Tuition & fees more than \$6,C with afterschoothan \$7000	• Tuition & fees wore than \$6,C with afterschot than \$7000	minus aid is no 100, or total ol no more	(afterschool = \$2,400)	∢

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Ridgefield Academy

School Name:

Personalized Great Fit Checklist

▶ In the first blank column, list in pencil the precise names of your top child & family needs based on your Child and Family Needs Summaries (pages 38 and 110) and on your reading of Chapters 2-9 and related tables. For example, write:"Basic Learning Capability, Typical." See a complete example on page 176.

➤ Check whether each of your needs is a Must Have or Nice to Have.
➤ In next big column, make note of the characteristics a school must have to

➤ Include specific questions to ask school principal, teachers, parents, and others (or use our *Interview Forms* on page 273).

Make an extra copy and fill in notes for each school you consider.
 After you gather the information you need, grade each school on how well it fits each Must Have and Nice to Have item:

A perfect fitC halfway fitB very good fitD poor fit

very poor or no fit

FIT	CHILD & FAMILY NEEDS: Must Haves & top Nice to Haves	MUST	NICE TO HAVE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR and QUESTIONS TO ASK	NOTES ABOUT THIS SCHOOL	GRADE
<i>What</i> Your Child Learns	Child: Basic Learning Capabilty - Bright/Gifted	×		 Indiv. learning goals ahead of grade level or high overall goals Frequent monitoring Focus on critical thinking 	 No indiv goals: overall goals seem just a little above avg Four report cards/year Each child produces "major project" every year. 	ţ
How Your Child	Child: Motivation – Weak Family: Values about how – Classroom Behavior – controlling/strict	×		 Variety of teaching methods Frequent feedback for parents Individual work with teacher Clear behavior expectations 	 Most instruction teacher-directed, but frequest field trips look stimulating Four report cards/year Some small grp; no one-on-one 	-B 4
Social	Family: Student Community - critical mass of gifted children	×	×	• Clear punishments & rewards • High % of children designated "gifted" or scoring at high levels on tests (not just% at	 Very orderly classrooms No scores available Staff say majority of kids 	B(?)
Practical	Family: • Child-care – need afterschool • Transportation – bus to & from	×		grade level) Afterschool available Bus to and from school avail- able (for afterschool, too)	gitted" Afterschool to 6:30 pm Bus to and from school	4
Matters	. Money - afford up to \$6,000 plus \$1000 for afterschool; prefer less			 Tuition & fees minus aid is no more than \$6,000, or total with afterschool no more than \$7000 	• Full cost after \$3000 aid about \$7000 including afterschool. (Donations?)	В

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School Name: Elm Street Elementary

PAGE 1

Great School Quality Checklist

 Complete a separate <i>Great School Quality Checklist</i> for each school you consider. In Notes column, make notes about each school. Which factor elements are strengths? Weaknesses? After gathering available information, grade each school on each overall Great School Quality Factor: A school has all of the elements C school has about half of the elements D most of the elements are missing F school has none or almost none of the elements 	ıl you consider. ments are strengths? Weaknesses? overall Great School Quality Factor:	
GREAT SCHOOL QUALITY FACTORS	NOTES ABOUT THIS SCHOOL	GRADE
 1. Clear Mission Guiding School Activities • Written mission communicating focus and priorities • Staff, parents & written materials state same mission • School-wide goals support mission • Student goals, curriculum & teaching support mission 	 Principal, teachers, and parents we talked to all echo "one child at a time" motto Literature repeats indiv. focus 	4
 2. High Expectations for All Students: High Minimum Expectations for All • Challenging but achievable student learning goals (standards) for each grade level • School-wide plan and actions ensure that all students achieve at least grade level in basics, no excuses • All or near all children achieve grade level • Progress scores high for all, including lowest scorers Higher Expectations for Students Who are Ready • Learning goals raised for ready students • Clear, written progression of goals beyond grade level • Plan and actions ensure students meet higher goals • At least gifted students achieve very high test scores • Progress scores are high for top students 	 School uses state standards For children who are ahead, teachers use nextgrade-up standards (and higher? Not sure) Each child signs "Learning Contract" every six weeks setting indiv. goals 	4
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A CONFIDENT CHOICE Tool

Great School Quality Checklist PAGE 2	School Name: Elm Street Elementary	ıtary
 3. Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching • School assesses individual student progress (weekly is ideal) • Teachers change teaching approach to ensure that every child achieves his or her learning goals 	 Students have one-on-one time with teacher or aide each day Assignments vary for diff. students 	⋖
 4. Focus on Effective Learning Tasks Instruction approach proven to work Class time allocated according to subjects' importance Materials & facilities allocated in line with importance Principal and teachers limit class interruptions 	 Reading and math blocks seem shorter in this school than others Materials, facilities out of date (?) Classes interrupted:visitors,announc. 	v
 5. Home-School Connection • School tells parents what children will be learning • School tells parents how to help own children learn • School updates parents on own child performance • School works with parents to resolve problems 	 Bi-weekly reports to parents on children's progress Lots of "parent workshops" but they focus on kids who are behind 	8
 6. Safe and Orderly Environment Students know how they are expected to behave Students focus on work in the classroom Consequences for behavior are clear and consistent School keeps students safe from harm 	 Discipline seems like an issue for some kids; most kids focused on work; teachers spending time on this School expels worst offenders 	S
 7. Strong Instructional Leadership Clear performance expectations for teachers Principal recruits, keeps great teachers Teachers work together within & across grades Principal monitors individual teacher performance Staff regularly identifies problems, improves school Professional development focused on school goals Principal acts on high and low teacher performance 	 Principal seems to expect a lot of teachers; one struggling K teacher was dismissed last year mid year Teachers have a lot of workshops on individualizing teaching; principal and other teachers rate each other four times yearly 	68
6 000 h.: A manage at 10 011 inches was a 100 cm		

Ridgefield Academy

School Name:

PAGE 1

Great School Quality Checklist

After gathering available information, grade each school with factor elements A school has about half of the elements C school has most of the elements C school has more or almost more properties C school has more or almost more of the elements C school has more or almost more properties C school has more or almost more properties C school has more or almost more properties C school has pour mission C school has properties C school has pour this described each mission C school has pour this described each mission C school has pour th
Ties NOTES ABOUT THIS SCHOOL ties Motto is "Scholarship, leadership, character" but no rate same mission ing support mission and support mission in the arming goals (stan-rethat all students is convected and that all students is coverable in glowest scorers are Ready are Ready and Ready Motto is "Scholarship, leadership, character" but no reputation? About is "Scholarship, leadership, character" but no mission reputation? Applea of the sting on the sting of
rites The same mission The same same mission The same mission The same mission The same same mission The same miss
 Generally school seems to expect all students to be a little above average No sense that school sets specific goals for individual children if they are ahead. If they're ahead, "they're fine" we heard. Not sure what that means. ics, no excuses de level Ing lowest scorers Ing lowest scores Indents Indents
dent learning goals (standent standard) sets specific goals for individual children if they are ahead. If they're ahead, "they're fine" we heard. Not sure what that means. Sasics, no excuses grade level uding lowest scorers to are Ready students by our Coverall? Not sure. B-?) (B or Coverall? Not sure. B-?) (B or Coverall? Not sure. B-?)
t scorers (B or C overall? Not sure. B-?) prade level er goals est scores
(B or C overall? Not sure. B-?) ser goals

A CONFIDENT CHOICE Tool

		1			
cademy	ر-	∢	v	∢	v
School Name: Ridgefield Academy	 Mostly whole class instruction, same assignments across board 4 report cards per year 	 Open Court/Saxon Math; much time! Top of line academic equipment - library, science ctr., writing lab No interruptions; two way mirrors 	 Lots of communication to parents about school (A+ newsletter) Less communication about my child 	 VERY orderly school Students with discipline problems not admitted; or given the boot 	 Principal is very charismatic with us Seems good at teacher recruiting; not sure performance expectations? Teachers told us "she doesn't get involved in our classrooms" Teachers use staff training money for own interest areas
Great School Quality Checklist PAGE 2	 3. Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching • School assesses individual student progress (weekly is ideal) • Teachers change teaching approach to ensure that every child achieves his or her learning goals 	 4. Focus on Effective Learning Tasks Instruction approach proven to work Class time allocated according to subjects' importance Materials & facilities allocated in line with importance Principal and teachers limit class interruptions 	 5. Home-School Connection • School tells parents what children will be learning • School tells parents how to help own children learn • School updates parents on own child performance • School works with parents to resolve problems 	 6. Safe and Orderly Environment Students know how they are expected to behave Students focus on work in the classroom Consequences for behavior are clear and consistent School keeps students safe from harm 	 7. Strong Instructional Leadership Clear performance expectations for teachers Principal recruits, keeps great teachers Teachers work together within & across grades Principal monitors individual teacher performance Staff regularly identifies problems, improves school Professional development focused on school goals Principal acts on high and low teacher performance

School List Tool

Date:	

- ➤ Make your "gut" list of schools you'd like to consider
- > Find out what other schools are available to your child in your community
- ➤ Add a school to your list if you think it may fit at least one of these categories:
 - 1. Fits your child's and family's Must Haves, or
 - 2. Provides better quality than other schools available to your child
- ➤ Consider different types of schools (public, private, religious, home)
- Include schools using designs likely to fit your child or family well
- > Add each school's essential contact information (name, telephone number, website) for quick reference
- ➤ Eliminate schools as needed, based on quality or fit

SCHOOL TYPES	SCHOOLS WE MAY CONSIDER
Public:	
Assigned	
Magnets	
Charters	
Other	
Private Schools	
Religious Schools	
Home School	

Principal Interview

- ➤ List your questions in left column. Use the *Child, Family* and *Quality: What to Look for in a School* tables starting on page 380 to help decide what questions to ask
- Make a copy for each interview. Add school-specific questions on each school's copy
- ➤ Complete right column for each school

Date:	
School Name:	
Principal's Name:	

MY QUESTIONS	ANSWER NOTES

Teacher Interview

- ➤ List your questions in left column. Use the *Child, Family* and *Quality: What to Look for in a School* tables starting on page 380 to help decide what questions to ask
- ➤ Make a copy for each interview. Add school-specific questions on each copy
- > Complete right column for each teacher

Date:	
School Name:	
Teacher's Name:	

MY QUESTIONS	ANSWER NOTES

Parent Interview

- ➤ List your questions in left column. Use the *Child, Family* and *Quality: What to Look for in a School* tables starting on page 380 to help decide what questions to ask
- ➤ Make a copy for each interview. Add school-specific questions on each copy
- ➤ Complete right column for each parent

Date:	
School Name:	
Parent's Name:	

MY QUESTIONS	ANSWER NOTES



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- ✓ 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
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- Customized questions, targeting your needs, to ask when visiting schools
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- ✓ Dozens of ways to get for your child what you can't get at your current school

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