

THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

# Choose your child's school with CONFIDENCE



religious? magnet?

home?



Which School?

public?

private?

charter?







# Step Five: Chapter 17 Getting In Is More Than Spin: Secure a Slot for Your Child

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 17

- ➤ **Get organized and stay organized** to make sure you take all the *right steps* at the *right times* to apply or register for your child at your top five Target Schools.
- **Timing:** The typical school hunt process falls between August and April of the year before your child would start the next grade.
- ➤ **Admissions Testing:** Your child may need testing, a group observation and/or interview for admission into some schools:
  - ✓ Consolidate testing by hiring a private tester to do one round of tests, if possible
  - ✓ Schedule smart: plan only one admissions/testing event per week for your child and never two days in a row
  - ✓ Manage your child's stress, fatigue and health during test and interview weeks, and
  - ✓ Consider optional test preparation for older children only, but not the same week as actual testing.
- **Relationships Count.** To build a long-term relationship with the school you ultimately pick and to sell yourself and child to selective schools, stick to these four principles:
  - ✓ Be Polite say please and thank you; speak with respect
  - ✓ Be Genuine be yourself and encourage your child to do the same
  - ✓ Be Firm ask the questions you need to ask; get the information you need
  - ✓ Listen Well give schools a chance to say what they need to say
- **Each school type has typical steps** for admissions and registration; review these along with helpful tips in the chapter text.
- **Each individual school has its own calendar.** You'll need to follow the specified steps of each school you consider.
- > All is not lost if your child does not get a slot in your top pick school:
  - ✓ Hang on many children are admitted off of waiting lists to both public and private schools. Let selective schools know *you* want *them* and *why*.
  - ✓ Prepare to make the most of the school your child will attend.

# Chapter 17

# Getting In Is More Than Spin: Secure a Slot for Your Child

## **The Waiting Game**

Once you've decided which school best matches your quality and fit needs, you will wish you could just pluck it off the shelf and ring it up at the cash register. Those of you who've chosen the assigned public school for your child can strut about while the rest of us live in a nervous twit. Alas, the real life agony of applying and waiting remains for many of you, for public and private school-of-choice hopefuls alike. If your top pick school is selective or has limited spaces, you may be left tapping your toes for a few weeks to several months or more.

Don't panic if it seems like every family you know is trying to send its children to the same school. We hope you know by now that high demand does not always equal high quality, and there are hidden gems in many towns and cities.

But the word to the wise is this: do not assume you will get your first choice or even your second, unless your child is guaranteed admission and you've completed the required registration. Make sure your child knows that your top pick school is not a sure bet (unless it is, of course).

Meanwhile, take time to point out the positive aspects of your lower-ranked school options. This will help take the pressure off any testing your child must undergo and lessen the blow if your top pick doesn't materialize. This pressure release may be particularly important for older and more mature children who are sensitive to test stress.

Getting in really is more than spin.
Please, please always, always follow your particular
Target Schools' admissions and registration requirements precisely.

You may feel a wee bit of stress yourself. Indeed, choosing a school is emotionally all-consuming for many parents and families during the major school choice months, from August through April. Remember that a wide range of strong feelings about this matter is normal, and even more likely if you care greatly about the quality and fit of your child's school.

Focus your energy on the practical world of applying and registering. Different types of schools – regular public, magnet, charter, private, and so forth – have different sets of steps for admitting children, and the specific steps may differ by individual school, as well. We'll cover the typical differences among school types in the second half of this chapter, but please, please *always*, *always* check into your particular Target Schools' admissions and registration requirements. First, though, let's focus on the similar issues most of you will encounter. As you progress from choosing a school to getting the school to choose your child, the two biggest concerns will be logistics and relationships.

# Logistics: Get Organized, Stay Organized

It's your job to stay organized during your child's school hunt, and especially so during the application and registration process. You might wish someone else would keep up with the deadlines, appointments and paperwork, but they won't, and so you must. Schools are simply too busy to keep up with you, so you must keep up with them. Public schools may send you a registration notice of some kind, particularly if you and your child live in a city with significant choice among public schools, but you won't want to count on this. Private schools have many prospective students and their parents flowing through during the typical peak admissions season from October through March. If you plan to home school, your state may have deadlines for informing the powers that be of your intent. Few schools at the elementary level will actively recruit individual students, and even then they are unlikely to cut you slack if you miss a key registration or application deadline. So, even if your child is a top candidate or a seeming shoo-in, you must do what is required at the right times to ensure your child's spot in the school of your choice. Our Getting In Is More Than Spin! worksheet on page 316 will help you keep tabs on your efforts school by school.

Even if your child is a top candidate or a seeming shoo-in, you must do what is required at the right times to ensure your child's spot in your school of choice.

#### **Timing**

As in most areas of life, timing is not really *everything* in a school hunt – unless, that is, you miss a deadline. So, do all you can to be sure that you don't. What kind of timeline are you likely to see? This certainly will vary, and you should check the dates for each school you consider. But here is a typical set, just to familiarize you with the usual order of things:

#### **Model School Choice Calendar**

This is a model. Always follow the steps and deadlines of each individual school you consider.

#### August/September:

- You read or review this Picky Parent Guide to gain an understanding of school quality and determine your child's and family's needs (with professional help if needed)
- > You find out what schools are available and begin to screen for quality and fit

#### *September/October:*

- ➤ Open houses and tours begin you sign up to screen promising schools
- ➤ Written applications, registration forms and school brochures available
- ➤ Test score information from previous school year available
- ➤ You schedule and begin interviews, by appointment, with principals and teachers of most promising schools
- ➤ You gather documents needed for application and registration at many schools (child's birth certificate, social security number, and proof of residence)

#### **November:**

- ➤ Applications for some private and religious schools due
- ➤ Some public school initial registrations due
- ➤ Some private, religious, and selective public school interviews, testing begin
- ➤ Open houses and tours continue
- ➤ Your school research gathering information, conducting interviews continues, and you begin to narrow your list of Target Schools to five top choices

#### December/January:

- > Private and religious school applications due, including reference letters from child's current teachers
- ➤ Public school applications and written registration due, especially for magnet schools, schools in cities with choice programs, charter schools and special programs within schools
- Private, religious, and selective public school interviews and testing continue
- ➤ Your school research continues, and you rank your Target Schools

#### February:

- ➤ Interviews and testing continue, as scheduled
- ➤ Your school research continues to get more details, if needed

#### March:

- ➤ You wait while schools make admissions decisions, run magnet and charter school lotteries and complete registration input
- ➤ Some schools notify families about admission and registration outcomes

#### April:

- ➤ Rest of schools notify families about admission and registration outcomes
- ➤ Public schools continue registration (but typically little choice among schools at this time)
- You take appropriate action if your child is waitlisted at your top pick school

#### **Paperwork**

You'll have some, though we think if you keep it organized you need not spend too much time on low-value paper shuffling. Shuffle less, learn more in the precious time you devote to choosing your child's school. Try this:

- ➤ Keep a calendar. If you are already a calendar-in-hand type, then you will sail through this step. If not, start now. As soon as a school hits your top five on the Target School list even though you may change your mind later record, in pencil, the application or registration deadline as well as get-ready reminders for any pre-work needed at least two weeks ahead (e.g., filling in application, getting a teacher's recommendation, finding your child's birth certificate).
- ➤ File it. Make a file for each Target School, and put the admissions or registration materials that you must return to the school in the front of the folder. Hopefully, this will be easy, since you already have a file for investigating each promising school (right?). Write in big letters on the front of each file the final date for application or registration for that school. Sure, you already have these dates recorded on your calendar, but this will just serve as another reminder.

## Testing, Group Observations and the Like

Some schools will require formal assessments of your child, perhaps including learning styles, I.Q., social skills and other measures of academic readiness and fit. Testing may be done by a private third party (a child psychologist or school placement expert) or by an employee of the school. Private schools are most likely to have testing requirements, but some public schools and public charter schools may, as well. Testing also may be required for admission into a special program within a larger school, whether public or private.

The types of tests and assessments you might see include these:

- ➤ A written or oral test of current academic capabilities and/or intelligence
- Assessment of emotional, social and physical (large and fine motor) development
- ➤ Observation of your child in a school-like group setting
- > Social interview
- Assessment of your child's previous work (that you submit to school)

If a public school requires an assessment, it almost certainly will provide it for free, usually administered by school or district staff. Private schools typically include the cost of testing in the application fee. But many schools, both public and private,

will accept test results from an approved private tester (e.g., a child psychologist or education counselor). You can save yourself and your child some trouble by limiting the total number of tests and assessments. The easiest way to do this is asking if schools will accept test results from a common third party. If you can swing it financially and your child is going through lots of testing, it may be worth the money. Each assessment session is a new situation and likely to cause some stress, even if it is fun for your child (as it often will be). Some schools may want to conduct an informal social interview and group observation in addition to testing, and this certainly will de done by school staff rather than an outsider.

Testing may be done with groups of children or one-on-one with a tester. If your child is shy or sensitive to new environments, aim for a one-on-one assessment when possible. Some schools will offer a group test for free but allow you to pay for an individual assessment if that's what you'd prefer. Remember, a child won't over test, but your child may not fully show his capabilities or act like himself if tired or stressed.

Some schools want to see how your child operates in a group, since so much of the school day is spent this way. Private and selective public schools may ask you to bring your child at a specified time for a mock day at school, where children will be grouped in a class with other student candidates and a real teacher from the school. In rare circumstances, a school may offer to observe your child in his current school or group day care.

Regardless of where and how your child is tested, be a thoughtful planner for your child:

> Spread out your child's school admissions events. We might say "use your common sense," but truly you may need to be more sensible than is common. One special event per week is enough for most children. Really. Your child will both absorb your stress and feel his own from the new situations you are introducing. Never, ever schedule two admissions events – tests, group observations, or interviews – on the same day or two days in a row, unless you absolutely have no choice in the matter.

Start asking your friends and acquaintances, and you'll likely hear several sad stories of stressed children and frustrated parents as a result of overscheduled school assessments. While most adults can gear up for several focused "performances" for a few days, young children typically need longer to recuperate. The stress and fatigue your child feels will lead to a lack of self-control and an inability to think clearly. This has been the downfall of many a school applicant, much to the parents' dismay. Even if your child is a gung-ho groupie, group observations can be stressful. Every group has different rules and norms, and your child will be stretched to pick up on the new norms fast. That's hard work. You might allow more than one

event per week for a child in fourth grade or older. Consider your child's age, how well your child handles other new situations *and* how tired new events leave her.

If you need to reschedule an event, call as far in advance as possible and explain why you would like to make the change. Many schools will notice and appreciate your sensible parenting. If you realize after the fact that your child just wasn't "himself" on the day of observation or testing, be sure to let the school admissions/testing staff know and offer an explanation (for example: sick, tired from another event of some kind).

- ➤ Avoid other stressful or tiring events. In the day or two before your child attends a test, interview or group observation, stick to your usual routine, or if your child's life is hectic, cut back a bit. Hard as this may be for the avid parent, save play dates with new (or feisty) friends, the circus, new extra-curricular activities, and the like for weeks when your child is not going through the school admissions wringer.
- ➤ Keep your child healthy. Focus your child's life on the healthy basics for a few days in advance (at least) healthy meals and snacks, plenty of outdoor exercise, an earlier-than-usual bedtime, frequent hand washing and plenty of water to drink. Whatever your child knows and can do, a healthy body will let her show her stuff at test time.

## Relationships

While you are flitting about finding facts about schools, the schools are getting to see you the parent, and sometimes your child, in action. You'll want to use this chance not just to collect the information you need and meet formal admission or registration criteria, but also to get your relationships with potential schools off to a strong start. Remember, after all, that one of these schools you are grilling is the one you'll marry – ahem – choose for your child, and you'll want those early interactions to have been warm and fuzzy even as you put schools (and perhaps they you) through the wringer.

Your relationship with a school starts the first time you call to sign up for an open house or obtain admissions materials. You are learning about how the school operates, and they are learning about your child's family. In short, you are forming a bond that may last for years, or be broken within months. Until you've chosen a school for your child, and your child has secured a spot, the dance you do is a tentative one.

From the "getting in" perspective, your job is twofold: first, to sell your child and family to a school (even as they sell themselves to you) and second, to

At one school you consider (which one?) you are starting a long-term relationship, not just selling your child. That school will care for your child for 30 plus hours each week.



#### To Prep or not to Prep?

You may be wondering whether you should prepare your child for tests, group observations and interviews. The best way to "prepare" your child is to play an active role in your child's overall development from day one (or before, prenatal experts would argue). Your child is far more likely to display knowledge, social skills, self control and physical prowess in a testing situation if they are part and parcel of his everyday world. Encouraging your child to use "good manners" in an interview is practically futile if your child has no ideas what "good manners" are or is not routinely asked to use them. Wishing your child could quickly learn to spell his name by Friday falls far short of asking him to recall a name he's seen written, heard spelled and touched on letter blocks for years.

Yes, for your older child, you might consider a private test preparation course in advance (*at least* several weeks ahead). But really, if you are feeling the need to do this, perhaps you should consider finding a tutor for your child during the rest of the year, not just for test preparation. The best show of what your child knows and can do will come from deeply imbedded habits, skills and knowledge.

By the time you get to choosing a school for your child age four or older, the appropriate question is, "how can I make choosing a school a positive and meaningful experience for my child?" Help your child form an attitude that will allow him to perform his best without fear of disappointing you. Let your child know that – for better or worse – life is full of tests, interviews and social judgment-making of one kind or another. Each of us will shine on some occasions and flounder on others. At some times we'll be able to show all that we know. But sometimes, our capabilities will stay locked away inside our weary or self-conscious brains and bodies. As much as you can, help your child know that we all have good days – and bad.

Manage the stress by telling him ahead of time what to expect logistically (e.g., how long each interview or test will take, generally what kinds of questions he might be asked) and by limiting the pressure to perform beyond your child's current capabilities. Well before each test, interview or group observation, tell your child what kind of reasonable behavior you expect (e.g., to try his best, to listen well, to be considerate of others). If you wait until the last minute, your child will feel your stress, and it will make him feel stressed. On the big day, do no more than this: let your child know you love him, hug him, and take care of your child's healthy routine (exercise, early bedtime, healthy breakfast, snack and so on). Afterward, congratulate your child's effort and ask if he had fun. If the event took place at the school, ask your child what he thought of the teachers, other staff and activities. Let him talk if he wishes, but don't press it.

begin building a long term relationship that will help your child in the school she ultimately attends. So while you are investigating and applying or registering with schools, you can get your relationship off to a start that will improve your child's odds of entry or, at the least, set the right tone for your relationship later.

#### **Guiding Principles**

You need to do no less than a fine balancing act to build your relationships with prospective schools. Keep these guiding principles in mind:

- ➤ Be polite
- ➤ Be genuine
- ➤ Be firm
- ➤ Listen well

Be Polite. Even as you ask tough questions to probe for a school's strengths and weaknesses, say "please" and "thank you," and speak with respect in your voice. Nobody particularly wants to deal with a crabby person, and schools are no exception (even if your child is the eighth wonder of the world). Write a brief thank you note to school staff members who are especially helpful to you in your school hunt, whether or not you think their school will be #1 on your list. Do this even for public schools and others where admissions are by lottery rather than selection (because you may be starting a long term relationship, not just selling your child). Especially praise people who are courageously candid with you about their own school's weaknesses or who help you think about other appropriate (great quality or fit) schools beyond their own.

Be Genuine. Pretending that you or your child is something different from what you are won't help anyone in the long run. Be as honest about your child's strengths and challenges as you want schools to be with you. Remember, schools know that a parent who understands her child's strengths and challenges is a better partner for a school and its teachers than a parent who wants her child to be something the child is not. Plus, a school cannot fully communicate what it can do for your child if it doesn't have an accurate picture of your child's needs and family situation. Resist the dramatic urge you feel to impersonate the wealthy socialite you may secretly wish you were to get your child into an "elite" school. It may be as important from the school's perspective that child and family will add positively to the school community – not just through donations and social connections, but also through parent volunteer work, diversity and your child's contributions both in the classroom and out.

Be Firm. Let neither politeness nor humility prevent you from getting picky about important matters. You must obtain the information you need about a school to make a good choice and work with the school later. Great Schools, and even many mediocre ones, will appreciate that you care enough to ask good questions about quality and fit. Remember, many people working with schools know that children of engaged parents perform better. If you've been through the (hopefully uplifting) toil of learning about school quality and fit, let your new know-how and enthusiasm shine through. Ask the questions you need to ask to get the information you need. If a school is not answering your questions with specifics, ask more specific questions until you understand what the school is and isn't going to offer your child.

Some principals and teachers will dismiss your questions as "not important here at our school," and this may embarrass you. One mother told us of her tough decision not to choose the school her twin sons wanted to attend (their best friends were going there). The principal repeatedly dismissed the mother's concern about whether her typical son would get the basic academic reinforcement he needed while his highly gifted twin got the very advanced instruction in mathematics that he needed. In the end, she realized that the school offered a one-size-fits-all approach. The principal's semi-rude responses to the mother's questions were simply a way of covering the unfortunate truth.

Many parents have suffered through feelings of dismay and insecurity after polite tongue lashings from principals and teachers who lacked good answers to important questions about quality and fit. You are not alone. Stay strong, and know that merely by asking your questions you may be improving the lots of children and families who follow. When principals hear a consistent and compelling demand from parents for real quality and a variety of fit options, more will feel obliged to improve.

Listen Well. While you'll want to spend much time asking your specific questions, it is just as important to hear what a school says for itself. You will need to be on the receiving end some of the time. Some parents are so eager to share what they know and want, that they walk away without a clear view of how a school sees itself (and why). At the beginning of interviews, offer a one-minute set of "headlines" of your child's and family's biggest fit and quality concerns. Listen to what they want to say first, then fire away with your questions when the time is right. In open houses and school tours, listen to the school's spiels, then ask your specific questions if they have not already been answered. You'll learn much about the focus and consistency of the school if answers are rolling off their tongues, and equally as much if you have to hunt and peck for scraps of information. Just as important, you will show yourself to be both a concerned parent and one who wants to be a school partner, not dictator.

# **Tips for Getting In: Public Schools**

#### **Your Assigned School**

- ➤ Find out the required registration date. Even if you've selected your assigned public school, some cities guarantee your child a slot in a particular school only if your child is registered by a certain date. If your town or city allows parents to choose among public schools, you'll need to be especially vigilant.
- ➤ Get the required paperwork as soon as it is available so you won't have to rush



#### **Up Your Odds: Understand The Admissions Game**

"Selective" schools come in two varieties. Some have admissions criteria – they accept only kids with a particular targeted combination of test scores, other capabilities and family attributes. Others (typically public schools) are open to everyone though some kind of lottery, but have more applicants than available slots. In either case, you can up your odds of getting in simply by understanding the dynamics of admission at the school.

Individual schools vary, so it's important to do some up-front homework.

- ➤ How many slots are available at your child's grade level? How many applicants are expected?
- ➤ What are the criteria for admission/registration, and do those criteria change in higher grades?
- ➤ Do siblings (and/or alumni relatives) get preference over other applicants?

The slots available even in the lowest grades may be fewer than you think. Most selective schools guarantee admission to returning students, who occupy most seats in the upper grades. So most of the new student slots will be in the school's starting grade, typically kindergarten or pre-K at an elementary school. In some schools, both public and private, many of those starting-class positions will be spoken for by *siblings* of current students, who usually have a leg up in the admissions/registration process (in some schools absorbing well over half of the available slots).

But you may find other windows of opportunity. In both public and private schools, some families will move each year, opening some number of slots. Some families may find the school to be a poorer fit than anticipated, and so will change schools. Seats may open up for other reasons as well. A K-12 private school, for example, may deliberately leave spaces open in higher grades (e.g., 6th and 9th) to allow for

- ➤ Gather required documents in advance (may include birth certificate, copy of social security card, proof that your child lives at the residence you claim and immunization history)
- ➤ Don't be creative now use the forms supplied by the school district
- ➤ Register turn in that paperwork by the assigned date
- ➤ You may be required to bring your child in person to a checkpoint do it if required
- ➤ Make sure you have met the principal
- ➤ Let principal and teachers you meet know that you've made a proactive school choice for your child, even though the school is your assigned school

#### **Up Your Odds...continued**

new entrants, but those slots will typically be reserved for students with proven high academic achievement.

In many private schools, lower grades are populated by children of families who will send all of their children to the same school. Despite what some admissions officers may tell you, these schools will bend over backwards to admit siblings so that family loyalty is not split between schools. And family characteristics are typically more important for the lower-grade elementary slots. But to remain academically competitive when student achievement becomes more visible in middle and high school, these schools reserve some slots in higher elementary and middle school for very high-achieving applicants. Your child's achievement, rather than family characteristics, becomes more important in the higher grades. *Know that quality and fit may differ considerably among a K-12 school's elementary, middle and high schools, particularly if the programs have different leaders.* 

If you understand these dynamics, you can "play the game" more effectively by doing things like:

- ➤ Applying for a school's Pre-K program. The Pre-K class may have more open slots than kindergarten, and once you're in, you're in. But scrutinize the quality and fit of the elementary program specifically before you take this leap. Every year counts a huge amount at this age. Think hard before you accept mediocre K 5 years for the hope of better quality in grades 6 12.
- ➤ Leading with a younger sibling. It may be tough to get your rising second grader into an already full school. But if her little sister is admitted to Pre-K or K, then your second grader's chances are boosted by her sibling status.
- ➤ Waiting for a window. If your child's current grade level is full, ask about future grade levels. Perhaps waiting a year could up your odds considerably.

#### **Public Magnet Schools**

- Find out the required the registration date
- ➤ Get the required paperwork as soon as it is available so you won't have to rush
- ➤ Gather required documents in advance (may include birth certificate, copy of social security card, proof that your child lives at the residence you claim and immunization history)
- ➤ Complete any testing or other admissions requirements well in advance of the deadline (in case there is any delay getting results or a re-test is needed); test deadlines may be different from the paper application deadlines
- ➤ Gather needed teacher and other recommendations make this easy for recommenders by providing detailed instructions, all the necessary forms, and sealable envelopes; pre-address and stamp any items they must mail
- ➤ Don't be creative now use the forms supplied by the school district
- ➤ Register turn in that paperwork and any test results by the assigned date
- ➤ You may be required to bring your child in person to a checkpoint do it if required
- ➤ Make sure you have met the principal
- ➤ Let principal and teachers you meet know that you've made a proactive school choice for your child

#### Other Public Schools in Your District

By Petition. If your overall best quality, best fit school is a public one to which your child is not assigned (and your city has no formal choice program), call your local district office to find out if petitioning for a transfer is possible. Get your hands on your school district's formal policy for transfers – why, how and when are they allowed? The more clearly your case fits the official rules, the easier a time you'll have.

But if your case does not fit the "rules," don't stop there. You should make your case anyway, telling why the preferred school will fit, why the assigned school does not fit, and the likely impact on your child, family and your child's classroom teacher if a transfer is not granted. State your case clearly and stick to your main Must Have fit needs. Do this in writing – addressed to the person or people responsible for such decisions – and follow up with phone calls. You, having very carefully considered your child's and family's needs, will be in a great position to articulate clearly why one school is a far better fit than another. Your child is less likely to be awarded a transfer based on quality than on fit, unless your assigned school has been deemed low performing by the state for several years. Under federal legislation in force as of this writing, districts must offer students in such schools transfers to better schools.

You may feel like a big squeaky wheel, and that may make you cranky. It is only because some schools (and districts) have fallen into the unfortunate habit of ignoring the differing needs of children and their families that you need squeak at all. You need not be nervous (though it's perfectly normal to feel this way), and do not worry about sounding slick. Be firm and persistent, but polite, too. You are doing the right thing for your child, and that's what's most important. By the way, if your child is granted a transfer, make sure to get the decision in writing to avoid confusion later. And thank the people who helped you.

By Choice Plan. If your school district has a formal choice plan that lets you pick from among not just magnet schools but "regular" public schools, as well, make the most of your flexibility. If you find that one of these is your best pick, take the steps to maximize your child's chances of getting in:

- ➤ Find out the required the registration date or dates. There may be a pre-registration to give the school district notice that your child may attend a public school and then another date by which you must indicate your preferred school(s)
- ➤ Get the required paperwork as soon as it is available so you won't have to rush
- ➤ Gather required documents in advance (may include birth certificate, copy of social security card, proof that your child lives at the residence you claim and immunization history)
- ➤ Complete any testing or other registration requirements well in advance of the deadline (in case there is any delay getting results or a re-test is needed); test deadlines may be different from the paper application deadlines
- ➤ Gather needed teacher and other recommendations make this easy for recommenders by providing detailed instructions, all the necessary forms, and sealable envelopes; pre-address and stamp any items they must mail
- ➤ Don't be creative now use the forms supplied by the school district
- Register turn in that paperwork and any test results by the assigned date
- ➤ You may be required to bring your child in person to a checkpoint do it if required
- ➤ Make sure you have met the principal at your top pick school as well as your back-up school
- ➤ If your first choice isn't granted and the school your child must attend is a poor fit, consider petitioning for an exception using the guidelines above
- ➤ Let principal and teachers you meet know that you are an engaged parent and that you've made a proactive school choice for your child

#### **Public Charter Schools**

➤ Charter schools may follow their own time frames and procedures, so do not assume that the deadlines and steps are the same as for other public schools in your area

- Find out the required the registration deadline
- ➤ Get the required paperwork as soon as it is available so you won't have to rush
- ➤ Gather required documents in advance (may include birth certificate, copy of social security card, proof that your child lives at the residence you claim and immunization history)
- ➤ Complete any testing or other registration requirements well in advance of the deadline (in case there is any delay getting results or a re-test is needed); test deadlines may be different from the paper application deadlines
- ➤ Gather needed teacher and other recommendations make this easy for recommenders by providing detailed instructions, all the necessary forms, and sealable envelopes; pre-address and stamp any items they must mail
- ➤ Don't be creative now use the forms supplied by the charter school
- ➤ Register turn in that paperwork and any test results by the assigned date
- You may be required to bring your child in person to register do it if required
- ➤ Make sure you have met the school principal
- ➤ Let principal and teachers you meet know that you are an engaged parent and that you've made a proactive school choice for your child

# **Tips for Getting In: Private Schools**

Private schools generally are more complicated beasts than public ones at admissions time (See the box *Up Your Odds: Understand the Admissions Game* on page 306). Not only are you building a potential long-term relationship, you are selling your child and family. Some parents live for this moment, others dread it. If you are in the dread lane, slog through it *with confidence*, knowing that you are doing the right thing for your child (assuming you have focused on quality and fit in your choice).

Will a sufficient swagger for Dad and an extra swing in the waddle for Mom get you into that selective school? Maybe, maybe not. Just remember that arrogant is out, confident is in. And confident you'll be inside, so there's no need to cross over the line to arrogant nor to regress back to the parenting wallflower you once may have been. A great you is better than a second-rate, phony someone else. You may not wish to put on a show, anyway. Indeed, many parents are looking for a school where they can just be themselves. But know that wearing the latest designer duds to an egalitarian, crunchy granola school interview may not be the best strategy. Nor your favorite blue jeans with the just-right hole in the knee for a golf-club-dress-code school. For pure influence, you might try fitting in without going to extremes: plot your attire according to the usual garb of other parents with children attending the school. But if you are not in-the-know, don't fret. Just look like you care, but not like you planned the entire week around today's out-

fit. "Dress casual," "business attire" or anything clean, neat and in between will do just fine for private school tours and interviews. Leave your best outfit at home, but do get out the iron and scrounge around the back of your closet for shoe polish.

Sometimes the most effective "selling" is that done by someone else on your behalf. So, should you use your "connections" to get your child admitted to your school of choice? In reality, many private schools are founded and operated as much on social norms and values as on academic goals. While this may be unstated, and certainly frustrating for "outsiders," it is often true. Because of this, having one or more recommendations from parents of current students can give your child a valuable boost in the admissions process (all other things being roughly equal), even when such recommendations are not part of the formal admissions forms. The more a school seems to have a strong social culture – with a homogeneous (highly similar) set of students and many social events for parents and families, not just students – the more likely it is that recommendation letters or phone calls will help.

If you don't know a soul connected in any way to your top pick school, and it is a private one with a strong social following, do not assume that your child will be denied admission. If you have matched your child and family well to a school – considering the fit not only of academic offerings, but also of values and social characteristics – then your child may be admitted even though you've just moved to town or hail from across the railroad tracks. You might consider finding other ways to meet people who attend your Target Schools – religious organizations, preschool, children's extracurricular activities and carefully chosen community volunteer work are a few of the places you might meet more people whose children attend your school of choice. While a brief acquaintance is unlikely to lead to strong arm recommendations on your child's behalf, you might gain insight into the social culture of schools in your area if you have met many families with children attending a variety of schools.

If one or more private schools are on your Target School list, you'll need to:

- ➤ Determine when applications are due and whether you must give notice of your intent to apply in advance (like some public schools, there may be two different deadlines)
- ➤ Get the required paperwork as soon as it is available so you won't have to rush
- ➤ Gather required documents in advance (may include birth certificate, copy of social security card, and immunization history)
- ➤ Schedule and complete any testing or other registration requirements well in advance of the deadline (in case there is any delay getting results or a re-test is needed); test deadlines may be different from the paper application deadlines
- ➤ Gather needed teacher and other recommendations make this easy for recommenders by providing detailed instructions, all the necessary forms, and

sealable envelopes; pre-address and stamp any items they must mail

- ➤ Don't be creative now use the forms supplied by each school
- Turn in that paperwork and any test results by the assigned date
- ➤ If desired, line up friends, colleagues, and neighbors whose children attend the school to write letters in support of your child and family - either have them seal letters and include with your application or have them deliver letters separately
- Make sure you have met the principal at your top pick school as well as your back-up school
- Let your top pick school know that you want them and why. Use your Confident Choice Tools as a guide for communicating just what it is you like about a school. Some private schools are as impressed by the commitment of parents to their children's education as by test results
- Let principal and teachers you meet know that you are an engaged parent and that you've made a proactive school choice for your child

If the school is a religious one, you might also consider taking these steps:

- Include one or more recommendations from leaders in the religious organization you and your child attend; as with other recommenders, either have them seal letters and include with your application or have them deliver letters separately
- If applicable, make sure you have communicated your family's commitment to the religious values of the organization and have made clear that this is one of the reasons you want your child to attend this school

# Tips for Getting In: Special Programs within Larger Schools

In general, you should follow the steps listed above for the type of school you are considering. But also consider taking these steps:

- Make clear the consequences for your child, family and the classroom teacher if your child is *not* admitted into the special program. You, having exceptional understanding of your child's fit needs, will be able to communicate this.
- If you are not satisfied with test results provided by the school or district, consider hiring a private counselor to retest. Include results with your child's application.

## Tips for "Getting In": Home Schooling

➤ Determine the registration deadline for notifying the state (or public school

district if needed) of your intention to educate your child at home.

- ➤ Get the required paperwork as soon as it is available so you won't have to rush
- ➤ Gather required documents in advance (may include birth certificate or copy of social security card)
- ➤ Determine what, if any, showing of an educational plan, materials and facilities are required (and by when)
- ➤ Complete and return the required paperwork by the assigned date; don't be creative now use the forms supplied
- ➤ Start planning your school-at-home now, so that you can be sure you will be ready when the time comes
- ➤ Consider scoping out schools and registering for a backup in case you become disabled or otherwise unable to follow through with home schooling

# When You Don't Get Your Top Pick School

Despite your best efforts, your child may not get into your top pick school – at least not right away. If you applied to a school where admission is by lottery (e.g., a public choice school, magnet or charter school), you may feel angry at "the process" that let you down. Popular schools – whether of good quality or not – often simply have too few slots to take all applicants. Hang on. Some parents of children who got into your top pick school may choose another school, change their minds, move or make other decisions that will open up a spot for your child. Find out if there is a waiting list and how far down that list your child is. This shuffling can happen right up to the last minute before school begins or even a short time into the school year.

If you have applied to one or more selective schools for your child (e.g., a private school or selective public school program), you may feel disappointed or even embarrassed by the rejection of your child and/or family. You, too, must hang on, as some families may choose other schools, allowing students from the waiting list to enter (make sure you know whether your child is on the list). Popular private and selective public schools, just like regular public ones, cannot take all the students who wish to attend.

But there is no need to brood. Remember, popular schools do not necessarily select students for qualities that you yourself might value. Every year, many stellar students are rejected from schools that claim to be "academically elite" in favor of mediocre students with the right social, alumni or sibling connections.

Every year, schools supposedly seeking "diversity" reject fascinating families in favor of ones who fit each school's standard mold.

If you are waiting to see whether your child will be admitted off a waiting list, public or private, consider these steps:

- Let admissions staff at your top pick school know why their school was your top choice, using your knowledge of quality and fit to help communicate. Knowing how much you want them, a school may nudge your child ahead on the waiting list in some cases.
- Try not to let your feelings of disappointment overwhelm you. Start thinking of yourself as a partner with the school your child will attend. Know that you will have the chance soon to encourage change in that school (Chapter 18 will get you started).
- ➤ If the school your child will attend (barring a waiting list breakthrough) is private, you may need to pay a deposit while you wait to see if a spot in your top pick school opens up. Aside from the sting in your wallet, there's no need to feel bad about spending this money. If your child does get into the top pick later, you can think of the lost deposit as a thank you gift for the school that offered you a good alternative.

Most importantly, make lemonade from lemons. In the next and final chapter, we help you prepare to convert your disappointment into actions that:

- ➤ Improve the school your child will attend and
- ➤ Make up for its weaknesses outside of school.



# Get organized stay organized use our Getting

- ➤ **Get organized, stay organized:** use our *Getting In Is More Than Spin! Worksheet* on page 316 to help keep tabs on your effort school by school. Estimated Time: a few minutes per school, when needed
- ➤ *Mark your calendar and prepare* for interviews, testing, observations and application (or registration) deadlines.
  - ✓ Keep a calendar: record individual schools' deadlines and steps needed in advance to meet them.
  - ✓ File it: make a file for each Target School to keep application and registration materials organized and handy.

Estimated Time: 15 minutes per school to mark calendar with dates and set up file

- **Build relationships** with potential school picks:
  - ✓ To "sell" your child and family to selective schools.
  - ✓ To begin a long-lasting relationship with the school your child finally attends.

Estimated Time: 15 minutes per school to plot strategy

- **Keep your Confident Choice Tools** *close at hand* to help you communicate your needs and expectations to schools. Estimated Time: saves you time
- **Skim our model calendar** on page 299. Estimated Time: 3 minutes
- **Follow the specified steps of schools you consider.** Estimated Time: as needed

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

# Getting In Is More Than Spin!

#### A When-It's-Time-to-Get-Practical Checklist

- Note the names of schools you are considering in top row.
- Check off each step as you complete it for each school. Some items will not apply to all schools; for example, several items apply only to selective schools.
- ➤ Items #16 19 are intentionally blank. Add other steps for individual schools you consider.

GETTING IN STEPS	SCHOOL #1	SCHOOL #2	SCHOOL #3	SCHOOL #4	SCHOOL #5
Get application or registration materials, brochures, other materials					
2. Sign up for open house and tour					
3. Get school's previous test scores					
Schedule phone or live interview with principal (best after tour or open house)					
5. Schedule classroom observations (ideally with chance to ask teachers questions – or do this at open houses)					
6. Interview parents with similar family needs and children like yours					
7. Gather child's documents (birth certificate, social security number)					
Teacher recommendation packages delivered to recommenders					
9. Check with recommenders to ensure letters & forms complete, delivered					
10.Application/registration complete, delivered (make sure school receives)					
11. Schedule interviews and observations (where they interview you and child)					
12. Schedule child testing at schools (or private testing if allowed)					
13. Plan "spin" to get child in (friends, etc.)					
14. All Great School quality information gathered					
15. All Great Fit information gathered					
16.					
17.					
18.					
19.					



"Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

-THOMAS A. EDISON



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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
- ✓ 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
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