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**PUBLIC IMPACT**



# **Step Two: Chapter 7**

## ***What Do You Want Your Child To Learn?***

**This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:**

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

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## LIGHTNING LIST

### What To Know from Chapter 7

- **Fit Factor #1 is What Your Child Learns:** these are your family's values and goals that influence what *subjects and at what level of difficulty* your child should be taught.
- **The two family characteristics for Fit Factor #1 are these:**
  - ✓ **Values about Content** = you the parent strongly value a subject or subjects and need for school to cover the subject(s), such as:
    - Core academic subjects (reading, writing, math)
    - Other academic subjects (foreign language, etc. – make your own list)
    - Morals, ethics, character, religion
    - Other non-academic: e.g., social, emotional and physical development
    - Other topics important to you
  - ✓ **Goals for Your Child** = you the parent have particular goals for your child *and* your child is at risk of not meeting the goals, including:
    - Grade progression: child at risk of failing required subject or not meeting standard for grade progression
    - Academic performance: child is capable of performing above grade level but at risk of not achieving potential
    - College opportunity: you want child to attend college and child is capable, but child at risk of not achieving goal
- **You can identify the Fit Factor # 1 characteristics most important for your family** by thinking about and discussing whether there are particular subjects/topics you consider essential and whether you have goals for your child that your child may be at risk of not meeting.
- **Remember, you must identify the few most important characteristics of your family** to match with schools for a Great Fit.
  - ✓ **Values about Content** will be a Must Have for some families.
  - ✓ **Goals for Your Child** will be a Must Have for some families.

## Chapter 7

### Family Fit Factor #1: What Do You Want Your Child To Learn?

*Paul and Andrea are both computer systems analysts. They definitely want their only child Lisa to use computers at school, especially since time at home is limited.*



*Richard and Kitty value well-roundedness. Kitty, now a lawyer, went to college on full scholarship (as did her twin brother) because of her combined academic, athletic, and leadership prowess. They want their children to attend a school that teaches and promotes the same values.*



*Sandra is a single mother and works as a fundraiser for nonprofits serving the homeless. She wants her only child Anders' school to reinforce the importance of community service and social welfare. After failing to pass kindergarten, Anders was recently diagnosed with dyslexia, and so Sandra is very concerned about having a school that will not only address his disability now, but stay on top of things to ensure that he makes grade level. She's wondering if one school can meet all of her needs and wants.*

### Identifying Your Family's Learning Content Values and Goals

You may have strong opinions about two aspects of *what* your child learns in school:

- **Values about content:** *what subjects or topics* are covered in school
- **Goals for your child:** whether the topics taught will help your child meet *goals you have* for your child (e.g., grade progression, academic performance and college attendance).

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*If you do not have strong preferences about what your child learns, that's O.K. A high quality school will meet your child's needs in the core academic subjects.*

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Some parents may have strong, clear preferences, while others may merely have assumptions lurking beneath the surface. When you take time to think about it, most of you will have some idea of what you expect your children to learn and how that content will help them in life. Your thoughts on the content of your child's learning may be driven by many things: your own childhood experiences, your ethnic and cultural background, your religious beliefs, your reading of parenting books and articles, your work experiences or your "gut" feelings.

If you do not have strong preferences about what your child learns, don't sweat it! You may be open to new ideas and willing to follow the curriculum of the school that fits best in other ways. Many of you will be content to follow the needs of your *child* in selecting learning content. If so, you can move on to the next chapter. But *if* you have strong opinions about what should or shouldn't be taught – confess now and include your wants in your school hunt.

## Values about Content

*Roger and Sophia both grew up traveling the world in military families. Roger is fluent in two languages and Sophia in three. These capabilities have brought them not only career success (in the Foreign Service) but also much pleasure and convenience during leisure travel. They very much want their twins Anna and Zan to experience the same benefits of fluency in multiple languages. But the parents settled into jobs in the U.S., making "on the street" learning for their children unlikely. Fortunately, two foreign language immersion magnet programs opened at a high quality public school in their city, one in Chinese and another in Spanish. Anna wanted to learn Spanish and Zan Chinese. Anna was admitted for kindergarten through the lottery process, but Zan was not. Roger and Sophia did not give up. They kept Zan in the private preschool/kindergarten program the children had attended previously and kept him on the magnet waiting list. When a student's family moved and opened up a space in the Chinese program, Zan was admitted mid-year, much to his parents' delight.*



*Tamara and Greg are not picky about many things at all. They pride themselves on "letting our children grow up to be who they are meant to be, not who we want them to be." To this end, they care very much about their children having early opportunities to become well-rounded. They want their children to be socially capable, emotionally self-aware and physically active, not just academically high-achieving. After settling on a popular, nearby private school for their first child's kindergarten, they were*

*feeling more committed and energetic two years later when child #2 was ready for school, too. A careful search revealed that another school – requiring a 45 minute bus or car ride – was committed to the kind of “whole child” approach they valued. With a wide variety of school clubs and physical fitness opportunities, explicit teaching of “emotional intelligence and social awareness,” and a school-wide mission to “help children discover and be who they want to be,” the school was a perfect fit for this family’s strong values about content.*

### **Values About Content: What They Are, Why They’re Important**

The content of your child’s school education includes the subjects and topics covered at school, both through the main curriculum and other school activities. You may be a “just the facts, Ma’am” type of person, and therefore want a school that focuses mostly on the basic subjects (reading, writing, math). Or you may crave breadth and want a school that presents the basics in the *context* of science, social studies, foreign language, music, art and other “interesting” subjects. You may have strong moral, religious or ethical concerns and want to have those taught formally in the school curriculum. You may highly value the growing importance of computerized technology and want your child’s school to reinforce this with more exposure than you can offer at home. Or you may want your child’s school to promote well-roundedness – an understanding and appreciation of *many* academic subjects and topics, as well as social, emotional and physical well-being, too. Whatever your preferences, you need to decide now if they are ones that will influence your school choice.

If you are nodding to yourself that, yes, indeed you do have strong notions about what topics your child should study in school, think about the origin of your feelings. Your preferences may have something to do with your *own childhood* experiences. If you found math drills mind-numbing, you may be seeking something a bit more inspiring for your child. If you feel that the basics got short shrift in your early schooling, and this neglect affected your ability to perform in school or work, you may want to ensure your child gets a more solid start.

Then again, what you want your child to learn in school may have more to do with your *adult* view of the world. Many of you will find that you have a world view – your personal perspective on what is important for people to do, to know, to think, to feel and to be – that dictates your own sense of what’s important for your child to learn at school. Your world view may come from your religion, your work, your background, or other aspects of your adult life. Your religion may dictate that your children absorb particular knowledge, and nights and weekends may not leave enough time. Your own work may require specific skills, knowledge or capabilities that you would like your child to begin learning in

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*Your child is  
part of your  
family, but  
your child is  
not you.*

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school. You may want your child to be exposed to, or even immersed in, a culture and language that's part of your family's heritage. You may enjoy foreign travel or live in an ethnically diverse area and want the study of foreign languages and culture to be an important element of your child's education.

Schools differ in their focus on learning content, or what subjects they teach and how much time is spent on each. Some schools focus primarily on the basics. Others balance the basics with other subjects. Some schools teach only alternative subjects, covering the basics entirely *through* these others. We want to jog your memory to help you discern any preferences *you* might have as parents, independent of your individual child's needs.

**The Basics.** All schools cover the basics – reading, math and writing – in some fashion. The relative investment that schools make in these three subjects – including staff time, materials, facilities and your child's time – varies according to each school's priorities.

Schools vary not only in their focus on the basics versus other subjects, but also in the relative emphasis among the three basics. Some schools focus largely on reading and math, and only somewhat on writing. While you might think reading and writing are connected – and they most certainly are – reading is often emphasized over writing in grade-level testing. Hence, some schools that seem to focus on “the basics” give writing short shrift. Others give writing, and communication in general, great emphasis, perhaps adding oral presentations, debate and speechmaking to the standard fare. In some schools, either math or language arts (reading and writing) are emphasized.

In later chapters we'll help you figure out what subjects are covered in schools you consider. For now, though, you need to decide whether you have a strong opinion about the extent to which the three basics are emphasized over other subjects, and what strong views you have, if any, about the comparative emphasis on these three.

**Additional Subjects.** Subjects such as foreign language, science, geography, computer technology, art, music and physical education can serve three purposes. First, they can *motivate an otherwise uninspired student* to learn the basics. A child who thinks writing letters and learning letter sounds is as inspiring as cleaning up toys may come to life when learning about the planet Mars while studying the letter M. A child who finds math tedious and unimportant may feel the spark when using fractional measuring cups and spoons to make a green, gooey slime in science. A student who doesn't see the point of writing stories may change his tune when he gets to write a short autobiography as part of a social studies lesson. In each case, and many more examples like them, children who do not feel interested in school can feel differently when the subject matter is interesting. Thus, some schools will use non-basic subjects to inspire an interest in basic reading, writing and math skills.



Second, additional subjects can *stimulate multiple areas in the brain* and provide context for better memory. For example, there is some evidence that learning a foreign language helps children understand and use the English language better. Some research also shows that early exposure to music improves mathematical ability, perhaps because music provides a context for counting and numerical relationships. For a struggling student, tapping into multiple areas of the brain and providing context for memory – through interesting sights, sounds, ideas or hands-on experiences – may mean the difference between making the grade or not.

Third, schools can teach non-basic subjects for their *intrinsic value* – the knowledge and skills gained in each subject. You may want your child to study foreign languages not to benefit her study of English reading and writing, but to learn the foreign languages themselves. You may want your child exposed to a great variety of subjects and topics not just to help with the basics but to get a taste of the richness of our world. For many parents who have a strong preference about what topics their children learn, this will be the driving factor.

### ***When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?***

You will need to decide how important your preferences about the content of your child's schooling are. Whatever your needs and desires, be honest about them up front so you may focus your school search accordingly. Make this a Must Have only if you have a strong opinion.

## **Goals for Your Child**

*Mary and Erasmus both grew up poor and bright. They worked hard, often juggling 20 or more hours of work each week while attending high school. They met waiting tables at a local family diner. After school, they got married, borrowed money from Mary's uncle, and started a restaurant together, building it into a successful business over 10 years' time. Neither had the time to attend college, but both regret their lost opportunity. They want their first son Nikki to have the opportunity they did not. Nikki is a seven year old attending a local religious school, a financial sacrifice his parents are happy to make. But they are not happy that Nikki is not being challenged in school. Reading before age four, Nikki is well ahead of the structured curriculum in his school. The teachers love him, but have little to offer him academically. While they treasure the values the school teaches, Mary and Erasmus know that they cannot be satisfied until their son attends a school where he is challenged and on a clear path toward the college of his choice. A short hunt revealed, to their surprise, that Nikki's assigned public school provides extensive services, both in and out of the*



*classroom, for very gifted children. This fact has attracted many families with children like Nikki into neighborhoods assigned to the school. Nikki would spend at least half of his school time working with similar children on challenging work in core subjects. Mary and Erasmus, with their son's consent, switched him for second grade and donated a portion of their former tuition money to their church and a portion to Nikki's college fund.*

### **Goals for Your Child: What They Are, Why They're Important**

Many parents live with the dream that their children will achieve things in school that they, the parents, did not. In our society where hard work and tenacity carry you far, many parents can provide opportunities for their children that they themselves didn't have. Many parents are satisfied with the content of any curriculum, *as long as* it will help their children achieve the goals they have set for them. We have listed a few very common goals parents have for their school-age children. If you have goals for your child not listed here, by all means include them in your school hunt.

Three common goals parents have for their children and fear their children won't attain are these:

- Grade Progression (moving from one grade to the next without being held back)
- Academic Performance (at a specific level acceptable to *you*)
- College Opportunity (getting admitted to a college acceptable to *you*)

Your goals may arise from your own childhood experiences or your adult view of the world. If you yourself were held back a grade – or just missed a chance to attend the college of your choice – you may have very strong feelings about grade progression or college attendance. If you come from a family of high academic achievers, you may have similarly high goals for your child. If your life has been enhanced or diminished by your own education achievements, you may have goals for your child that would help her avoid or obtain the same experiences you have had.

Some family situations make it more challenging for children to achieve their academic potential. They include at least these: being the child of a single parent, of immigrants who are not fluent in English or savvy about the American educational system, of parents who did not themselves achieve highly in school, and of parents living in poverty. If your child is challenged in Basic Learning Capability or faces other learning barriers described in the Child section of this book, he also may struggle to meet common parent goals.

Whatever your goals, you will want to consider these questions:

- *What is the goal, specifically?*  
Is it that you want your child to go to Harvard only, or is it that you want your child to be able to go to the college of her choice?

► *How likely is it that your child will not meet the goal?*

If your child is challenged in Basic Learning Capability, then you might be most concerned about simply ensuring progress from grade to grade each year. If your child is ahead academically, then your child most certainly will make progress and achieve at satisfactory levels; you might be more concerned about your child being prepared to attend a high school offering advanced courses and good college placement.

► *Is the goal consistent with your child's interests and abilities?*

Are you really ready to decide that little Charlie will go to an Ivy League college? Is your artistic child likely to pursue the engineering career you wanted to pursue and didn't? If not, consider carefully whether or not to make this goal a factor in your school choice.

### ***When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?***

If, upon reflection, you:

- ✓ do indeed have a specific goal for your child and
- ✓ are concerned about your child's ability to meet the goal,

then make this a Must Have, and find a school to help.

### **SNAP TO IT**



#### ***What To Do***

- ***Refer back to your Family "Quick Think"*** on page 109 to refresh your memory regarding things that really stand out about your family. Estimated Time: 2 minutes
- ***Use the Family Needs Summary*** on page 110 to get a quick fix on the Fit Factor #1 *What Your Child Learns* characteristics. Estimated Time: 5 minutes
- ***Use the Know Your Family's Needs table*** on page 375 to further clarify your family's Fit Factor # 1 characteristics and the importance of each for choosing a school. You need not read the whole table: focus only on items you believe may be important for your family. Estimated Time: 15 minutes
- ***Discuss your family's needs*** with your spouse or other parenting partner. Estimated Time: As needed
- ***Record your Must Haves and Nice to Haves*** on your *Family Needs Summary* (page 110). Estimated Time: 10 minutes

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*... and much more!*

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

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