



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

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

**INCLUDES**  
Easy to Use  
Tool Kit



religious?  
magnet?  
home?



Which School?



public?  
private?  
charter?



Bryan C. Hassel, Ph.D. & Emily Ayscue Hassel

**PUBLIC IMPACT**



*Here's what people are saying about*

# **Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School With Confidence**

***The Elementary Years (K-6)***

*"As the son of a public school teacher, the father of four children educated in public schools, and someone who has spent over 30 years working to improve public education, I can say this book will be an invaluable guide for parents who are seeking what's best for their children."*

—JAMES B. HUNT, JR., Former Governor of North Carolina

*"Picky Parent Guide is phenomenal – just what parents need to stay calm and productive during the admissions process. I would consider the child of any family that has read and used this book an attractive candidate."*

—JEFF ESCABAR, Director of Admission, Marin Country Day School

*"There's not a parent in America who wouldn't benefit from the ideas and tools in Picky Parent Guide. If you have choices, this book will help you choose with confidence. If you don't, use this guide to press for the changes our nation needs — more options and higher school quality for every child."*

—HOWARD L. FULLER, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Education,  
Marquette University and Chair, Black Alliance for Educational Options

*"This wonderful new book will help parents understand the many excellent options they have within the public education system."*

—BART PETERSON, Mayor of Indianapolis

*"Picky Parent Guide addresses a neglected part of the educational choice movement: parent education. Parents need a guide to the spectrum of options that confronts them, and this is it! I would like to give this to all our families."*

—EMILY LAWSON, Founder and Executive Director, D.C. Preparatory Academy

*"This excellent book will guide parents of academically gifted children in selecting appropriate educational options. The advice is on target and very appropriate."*

—JAMES T. WEBB, Ph.D., Co-author of the award-winning Guiding  
the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers

*"Picky Parent Guide is an outstanding guide for parents. It provides them with an invaluable resource that will only strengthen the choices they make regarding their children's schools. In this day and time, it is a must read for parents contemplating this important decision."*

—MICHAEL J. FEDEWA, Superintendent of Schools, Catholic Diocese of Raleigh, NC

*"This is a first rate, practical guide for helping families match their children's needs with the right school. You'll learn everything from the secret ingredients of great schools to how to crack the mystery of securing a slot in the school of your choice."*

—BRUNO V. MANNO, Ph.D., Senior Associate for Education, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

*"A terrific and useful book that does not obsess over distinctions and labels about public and private but instead shows parents how to really get inside of all kinds of schools and make the right decisions for their children."*

—ANDREW J. ROTHERHAM, Director, 21st Century Schools Project, Progressive Policy Institute

*"Picky Parent Guide is a great tool for parents of preschool children. It can help transform what is often an overwhelming and anxiety-provoking process into a manageable and empowering experience that serves both parents and children throughout the elementary years."*

—JACQUE GRILLO, Executive Director, Lone Mountain Children's Center, San Francisco

*"I have a feeling that the Hassels will be keeping parents and schools on their toes for some time to come."*

—TOM LOVELESS, Ph.D., Director, Brown Center on Education Policy, The Brookings Institution

*"Choosing a school is hard, but when it works, it unlocks worlds and possibilities for families. The Hassels have created an indispensable guide to help parents undertake this most challenging responsibility: matching their kids with schools. The tools provided are the right ones to make the smart call. The lively and accessible format, the checklists and the charts are all informed by the reality of today's schools. Armed with this knowledge, families will find choice truly satisfying, and great learning will take place."*

—JOHN AYERS, Executive Director, Leadership for Quality Education, Chicago

*"Picky Parent Guide is a tremendous resource for parents and school leaders alike. All parents should have this book by the time their kids are 3 years old, if not sooner. It provides thoughtful guidance so that parents have tools to match their children's strengths, needs and interests to the schools that will serve them best. It also helps school leaders better answer the questions posed by informed parents."*

—JOHNATHAN WILLIAMS, Co-Founder and Co-Director, The Accelerated School, Los Angeles, The Time Magazine Elementary School of the Year 2001

*"I love this book! Choosing a school is a very personal decision, and Picky Parent Guide will enable parents to make the best decisions possible for their children. In writing this book, Bryan and Emily Hassel have provided a real service for parents, children and schools."*

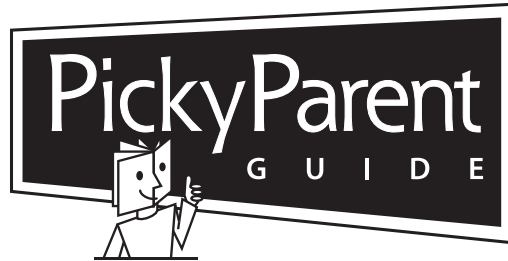
—GAYNOR MCCOWN, Executive Director, The Teaching Commission

*"Picking a school for a child is the single most important decision a parent can make. Picky Parent Guide provides well-written, common-sense advice that will help parents make better, more informed decisions. Your child deserves to have you read this book."*

—THOMAS W. CARROLL, President, Foundation for Education Reform and Accountability, Founder, Brighter Choice Charter School in Albany, New York

*"These tools eased our worries and helped us choose just the right school for our child and family. When our needs changed, we switched schools with confidence that we were making the right move."*

—GRAY DUNAWAY, Mortgage Broker and Mother of Two



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Picky Parent Guide  
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The Elementary Years (K-6)  
By Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel

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The ideas and tools within this book are offered as general assistance to parents, to help stimulate their own thinking. We have made reasonable attempts to be accurate and helpful. We do not promise that following the advice contained here will result in improvements for individual children or families. We cannot promise that any child will be accepted to any particular school. We cannot promise that any particular child will have a particular experience in school or out. We cannot promise that our method for planning for education expenses will produce accurate estimates of your income or costs. By reading this book, you accept this disclaimer. If you do not agree to this disclaimer, please return your book for a full refund to: Armchair Press, P.O. Box 215, 6 Southwood Ave., Ross, CA 94957. Names and details from true stories have been changed to protect privacy. All school names are fictitious. Any resemblance of any name used to any real person or school is unintentional.

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Dedicated to our own first teachers,  
Sedley, Chris, Emily and Ozzie,  
who parented us well, jumped through hoops  
to choose the right schools for us along the way,  
and encouraged us to participate in those choices.

And to our own children, Margaret and Christopher,  
who put up with us.

## Acknowledgements

Great thanks to the many parents who shared their stories, past and present. These tales brought life and personal meaning to our ideas. We cheer those parents who have overcome social pressure and practical barriers and put their children's needs first in making education choices. We thank each and every parent who uses our work to choose the right school for a child and to help shape excellent schools for the future.

We admire immensely those teachers who, without the benefit of an excellent school to support them, manage the heroic task of providing an excellent education for their students. They have boosted their students' minds and spirits for a lifetime and presented the possibility of educational excellence for all.

We laud the school leaders who have overcome organizational and practical barriers to build schools in which all students achieve and all are challenged, despite overwhelming pressure to settle for something less.

Thanks to the brilliant thinkers, researchers and authors of works on children and education on whose shoulders we stand to help parents choose and shape Great Schools.

We are thankful to all of the Public Impact staff, former teachers and education nonprofit professionals, who have contributed so much to our thinking about education over the years. We are especially grateful to Lucy McClellan Steiner for her enthusiasm about this topic and her excellent reviews of relevant research, much of which undergirds our thinking and writing here.

We thank the dozens of people who reviewed part or all of the manuscript before it was published. Their thoughtful reactions have improved the book immeasurably. We especially thank Malcolm Campbell for insightfully reviewing our early material, tutoring us on the world of book publishing, and encouraging us ceaselessly.

Many thanks to our colleagues in the education field who share our commitment to every child's success. We have learned from every one of you, and we would not have been able to complete this project without your support and insights.

Thanks to Ozzie Ayscue and the staff and contractors of Armchair Press for excellent editing, design, and fast-track sailing through the sea of publishing red tape to bring this book to parents quickly and in good form. Kudos to California design firm BGD1 for doing a terrific job of giving the book just the right look. Thanks to Karen Quigg for speedily assembling hundreds of pieces into one book. Most especially thanks to Ozzie for adopting this project and applying his considerable talents to it, truly treating it like his own baby.

A special thanks to family and friends – you know who you are – who shared both ideas and personal support during the arduous process of researching, writing and publishing this book. We are obligated to inform you that our parents are not responsible for any grammatical errors in this book.

## Preface

As professionals, we have been working for years to improve quality and variety in K-12 education. We're not alone. Well-meaning educators, academics and politicians are working diligently to improve quality and parental access to choice among schools. In our work, it occurred to us over and over that parents have largely been left out of the discussion. Very little has been done to help parents choose and work with their children's schools. What is available tends to be academic, narrowly focused, or largely based on authors' personal and political opinions. You should have more than that to rely on when making decisions that will affect your children for the rest of their lives!

By coincidence, after we'd launched this project, the public schools in the city where we lived at the time adopted a new city-wide choice program under which parents could choose from among schools throughout the district. Add to that a healthy set of private, charter and magnet schools, and parents around us were swimming in a sea of excitement and confusion. We were amazed at how frequently the topic of choosing a school or dealing with the one they had chosen came up in conversations among parents, whether they were choosing schools for the first time or questioning the wisdom of prior choices. The level of commitment among parents from all walks of life to doing right by their children fueled our fire. The most striking aspect of these conversations was that many parents seemed to be very much adrift, either completely lacking confidence or locked onto easy-to-see "window dressing" and popular school offerings. Parents were on a journey about which they cared intensely, but for which they had no roadmap or sense of direction.

As we conducted our research for this book – including formal and informal interviews with parents – we were awed. We were awed by the amount of time, effort and emotional involvement many parents commit to choosing and working with their children's schools. We were awed by the level of savvy that parents develop about the specific issues that arise concerning their own children, often after years of seeking desperately to understand their children's needs and how to meet them. Parents can and do learn about very "specialized" areas of education when their own children's learning and joy are at stake. We found parent after parent who had rebounded after near-misses, full-blown disastrous decisions, and good-decisions-gone-bad to find the right schools for their children. We recount for you



some of their stories here. More importantly, we translate the wisdom they earned with great angst into a series of litmus tests for you to use in seeking a school that fits your child's and family's top needs.

We, too, are parents. And we ourselves are not too persnickety about most things. Living life with children – plus work, a household to run, relationships to nurture, and other activities – can make for a bumpy ride. It's a rare day that doesn't hold one surprise or another – a last minute schedule change, a child in tears, a mountain of unexpected work, a plumbing leak – you name it. When life is full to the brim, even we, who know a thing or two about schools, have felt both fretful and meek about our children's educations when things weren't quite right. We know it's hard to ask pointed questions when you don't feel you have enough expertise to back you up. We know it is easy to defer to teachers and principals, even when you know in your heart that your child isn't getting what he needs. As our personal and professional worlds have merged, we've become convinced of this: some matters are more important than others, entirely and unquestionably worth being picky about, and your child's education is high among them.

As we completed our research and began writing this Picky Parent Guide, we became committed to helping parents be not just careful, but also confident. You can be both with no hesitation, because this book will:

- Raise your standards by using the best available research about school quality
- Help you consider your personal needs and values, for both child and family
- Organize the process so that you can relax and seek a school without wasting precious time, knowing that you are doing all you can for your child
- Expand your understanding of the school options available to your child, and
- Motivate you to choose wisely and to stay engaged in your child's education.

Expert ideas, your values. That's a whole lot better than relying on pushy pals, nosy neighbors, forceful family members or anyone else who'd like to shoe-horn you into their view of the school world, regardless of real quality or fit with your particular needs. This book is about putting parents in their place – at the front and center of their children's educations. We are your partners in the process. We want what's best for your child and family. Enjoy!

Bryan C. Hassel  
Emily Ayscue Hassel  
*Chapel Hill, North Carolina*



Photo: Can't Hide Talent Images

## About the Authors

BRYAN C. HASSEL is Co-Director of Public Impact. A Rhodes Scholar, he is a nationally recognized expert on school choice and school reform who speaks frequently on these topics. He has advised leaders across the political spectrum, from city halls to the White House, on educational issues. He has organized and led national conferences. He has authored and edited dozens of books, articles, toolkits and other publications for schools, policymakers, and parents. President Bush appointed him as one of 19 members of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education. Bryan received his undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which he attended as a Morehead Scholar. He earned his doctorate from Harvard University, where he concentrated his studies on education policy, and his masters from Oxford University.

EMILY AYSCUE HASSEL is Co-Director of Public Impact. Emily previously worked as a consultant and manager for an international human resources consulting firm, helping for-profit, non-profit and educational organizations to maximize the effectiveness of their employees. In addition to assisting parents with their school choices, she has authored publications on school leadership, professional development and selecting school designs. President Clinton's Secretary of Education chose to distribute her professional development toolkit, *Learning From the Best*, to all 15,000 U.S. school districts. Emily received her undergraduate degree in psychology and graduate degrees in law and business administration, all from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

BRYAN AND EMILY each attended both public and private schools. Between them, they personally experienced assigned public, magnet, neighborhood, traditional, open, single-sex, private day, and co-educational boarding schools, as well as at-home tutoring.

BRYAN AND EMILY are also parents of two school-age children, one girl and one boy. Their children have attended both public and private schools. They have personal experience with the challenging process of selecting schools for their children in this era of burgeoning parental choice.

## Visit us at [PickyParent.com](http://PickyParent.com)

Check us out online. You will find more tips related to this book, links to other resources and opportunities to give us feedback and share ideas and stories about your search for the right school and the ups and downs of educating, developing and nurturing your child. So come and visit. Tell us your stories. Let us know what you like and don't like about this book. And read what others have said.



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

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

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

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

*... and much more!*

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

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

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

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should go it alone.  
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with you!

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**Bryan C. Hassel, Ph.D.** and **Emily Ayscue Hassel**  
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the White House.  
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here they help  
you get what your  
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