
Choosing an Independent School

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Parents have an obligation to visit several and assess first-hand the climate and culture of each school, how teachers teach, students learn and everyone treats one another

As a parent, there is no more important role to play than finding a school that “fits” your child, one that helps him or her grow into a successful and honorable student, a sure pathway to a meaningful and contributing career and life. Independent schools (private, nonprofit schools that are governed by boards of trustees) are one option among the many different types of schools. Independent schools are called “independent” because they have independent boards of trustees, and they are independently financed, primarily through tuition, charitable contribution and endowment income. Independent schools are a choice with a proven track record of preparing students well, not just for school but for life.

With independent schools, you have the opportunity to choose a school with a mission—a school’s philosophy, values, and approach to teaching—that is the right fit for your child. Independent schools vary greatly in size, mission, and style, but all are dedicated to helping students attain their goals. There are day and boarding schools; coeducational, girls', and boys' schools. Enrollment varies from a few dozen to a few thousand students. Some independent schools are centuries old, others just five years old; some are progressive, while others more traditional in approach. Independent schools also serve students whose abilities and interests vary. Some schools offer special programs such as intensified instruction in the fine and performing arts, experiential learning projects, or global initiatives. Some focus on gifted students, while others are dedicated to average learners. Some specialize in teaching bright students with learning disabilities. Regardless of their missions, independent schools challenge students to excel.

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Independent elementary schools place a strong emphasis on creating a positive learning climate for each child. They nurture a love of learning that lasts a lifetime while building solid academic and social skills. Independent schools tend to be small, so teachers get to know the strengths and challenges of each child. Teachers offer individualized attention to help children grow and reach their potential. Schools form strong partnerships with parents, which helps reinforce common goals and values.

As children progress through middle and high school, schools focus on academic preparation for college. Independent schools help adolescents build the study skills necessary for success. They have high expectations for students, stretching them to do their best and encouraging students to persist in their studies even when the course is challenging.

Elements of Independent School Success

Small schools, close-knit communities

Independent schools tend to be smaller than many other types of schools, which encourages students, teachers, and families to form bonds that last a lifetime. Students thrive in these tight-knit communities. The median student-teacher ratio in NAIS* schools is 8.5 students for each teacher, which allows for lots of individualized attention. Teachers get to know each student, learning about their strengths and challenges, and discovering what motivates them to excel. Teachers can tailor their approaches so that they reach every student, providing extra help for students who need it.

Common goals and a commitment to character

Because independent schools are based on mission statements, everyone in a school community shares a common goal and a commitment to the philosophy. Education for character is so important for many independent schools that they develop curricula that specifically address ethics and values. Schools teach students about academic integrity and expect honorable behavior. They encourage children to develop a strong ethical core that helps them navigate moral challenges as they grow. In many ways, values are one “value-added” of an independent education.

Partnership with parents

Independent schools seek an active partnership with parents to provide together the ethos and climate that nurtures strong growth in children. Communication among teachers, students, and parents is a key component of independent school success. Parents are intimately familiar with their child’s personality and interests. Teachers are professionals with expert knowledge in child development. When parents and teachers share their knowledge, the child benefits.

Parental involvement can take many forms. Independent schools often outline the best ways for parents to communicate with teachers and administrators. Many produce newsletters to communicate news and most set up parent-teacher conferences to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goals for the student.

Parents are also encouraged to be part of the school community, from attending sporting or extracurricular events to helping out in the classroom or on field trips, or serving on school-wide committees.

An inclusive environment

Independent schools are committed to nurturing diverse communities. Of students attending NAIS schools, 21.2% in 2005-06 were students of color, a figure that increases every year as schools improve efforts to attract under-represented groups. Independent schools' commitment to diversity goes beyond attracting students, however. Most schools work actively to ensure that they are inclusive in every way.

In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, independent schools strive to make themselves accessible to students from broad socio-economic circumstances. Of students attending NAIS schools, 17.3% received need-based financial aid in 2005-06 (15.7% of students at day schools and 30.9% of students at boarding schools). This ensures that the school serves families from all economic backgrounds.

Because they are committed to serving students from all backgrounds and can attract students from many different areas, some independent schools are actually more diverse than the local public school, which can serve only students in a particular neighborhood area.

Rigorous academics and mastery of core knowledge

Independent schools challenge students to stretch their minds. They encourage students to master core knowledge at an early age and acquire advanced skills in math and language that pave the way for success in college.

According to a study from the U.S. Department of Education, NAIS independent school students were more than twice as likely to take algebra by the eighth grade compared with their peers in all schools (70% of NAIS students compared to 32% of all students). For foreign languages, the level of achievement is even more striking. The percentage of independent school students who study a foreign language *before the eighth grade* (85%) exceeds the national average of students who study a foreign language *before graduating from high school* (82.6%).

These courses are often considered "gatekeepers," because advanced courses build on the basics introduced in beginning courses. By covering the core courses early, independent school students are able to tackle more advanced subjects in their high school careers.

Achievement at top colleges

Although nearly all independent school graduates go on to attend college, *The Freshman Survey Trends Report*, a study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, found that 85% of students who attended independent schools that belong to NAIS went on to attend “very high” or “highly selective” colleges and universities.

Further, a U.S. Department of Education study called the National Educational Longitudinal Study confirms the academic success experienced by independent school students. The study, which tracked student attitudes and outcomes from the time they were eighth graders until adulthood, found that almost all NAIS students in the study pursued postsecondary education by 2000 (when they were in their mid-twenties). More than three-quarters of the NAIS students polled had graduated from a college, including 9.5% who’d completed advanced degrees such as the Ph.D., M.D., or J.D. Only 38.1% of public school students had attained four-year college degrees by the 2000 follow-up survey. The majority (55%) of graduates from NAIS schools polled in the study said they intended to complete a master’s degree, Ph.D., M.D., LL.B., J.D., or D.D.S. by the age of 30, a rate significantly higher than other study participants.

Persistence and the culture of high achievement

The rigorous academics at independent schools encourage students to master course materials that challenge them, nurturing a key element of student success: persistence. Persistence ensures that students don’t give up when the program is challenging. Colleges know that this value impacts success in college and throughout life.

Independent schools value academic rigor and persistence, which nurture a culture of high expectations for academic achievement. When all students are well-prepared and encouraged to take on academic challenges, they feel comfortable pushing themselves to excel. In independent schools academic achievement isn’t something eschewed as *nerdy*; it’s just something that everyone strives for as the norm.

Developing team-skills and leadership potential

Colleges also know that participation in sports, the arts, and other extracurricular activities tracks well with success in higher education and in life. While most students drop interscholastic sports in secondary school, most independent school students play on sports teams (or their equivalent in the arts) throughout school, including high school.

Because independent schools are frequently smaller than some other types of schools, and many focus on educating the “whole child,” all students are expected to participate in school activities such as athletics and other extracurriculars. Indeed, 71% of public school students drop team sports by secondary school, whereas only 6% of independent school students do not participate. Compared to 41.8% of NAIS students, 27.9% of public school students contribute to the school newspaper or yearbook.

Taking part in community activities such as athletics, drama, or clubs helps students learn how to “be a team player.” Working in a team environment helps nurture positive social skills and teaches students how to work toward common goals. In this environment, even average kids end up being exceptional contributors, a pattern in independent schools that translates into success thereafter for graduates.

Commitment to community service and civic participation

Academics, athletics, and the arts are important components of a quality education, but independent schools also value community participation. They help students develop into responsible, independent, and community-oriented adults.

In a survey of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, graduates of NAIS independent schools were more engaged with their communities than students from other types of schools. Of independent school graduates, 41% said they expected to participate in volunteer or community activities in college, compared to just 24% of the whole group. Independent school graduates were also far more inclined to consider “keeping up-to-date with political affairs” essential (46% independent school, 31 % all).

The National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) also confirmed the strength of independent school graduates’ commitment to community service and active civic participation. While slightly more than one out of five survey participants reported volunteering for civic events, nearly one-third of independent school graduates said that they regularly participated in voluntary activities in their communities. Independent school students were also nearly twice as likely to volunteer to work for political campaigns and political causes. And independent school students were committed to exercising their civic duty as voters. Whereas slightly more than half of all NELS participants voted in the presidential election before the study, more than three-quarters of NAIS independent school graduates registered their voices.

Lifelong benefits of an independent school education

Beyond success at the college level, independent school graduates express high degrees of satisfactions with their careers later in life. Of all students polled in the NELS study, 84.4% expressed contentment with their jobs in the follow-up surveys conducted when most in the group were in their mid-twenties. By contrast, 90.8% of NAIS independent school graduates were satisfied with their careers. Independent school graduates were also comfortable in their use of technology. Virtually all (95.5%) NAIS graduates indicated that they use technology skills in their work compared to just 72.6% of the entire group.

Independent school graduates also pursued healthy, active adult lives: 46.7% of independent school graduates played organized sports and 25% engaged at least three times per week in fitness activities, a higher percentage than the group as a whole (44% played sports and 21% exercised at least three times per week).

Conclusion

Parents have many choices when it comes to considering the right school for their children, but parents have a common obligation: to visit several schools — public, parochial, and independent — and assess first-hand the climate and culture of each school. It won't take more than a couple of hours observing how teachers teach, how students learn, and how everyone treats one another to determine where one's child should be for the most formative years of his or her life. 

** National Association of Independent Schools*

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