

PARENTS AND EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANTS: PARTNERS IN THE SCHOOL SEARCH

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Teamwork is necessary to make a good school choice. Educational consultants know schools and can help you understand their differences so you can make an informed decision about which is most appropriate for your child.

For most families, a good education is a top priority.

But a good schooling choice doesn't just happen. Dozens of schools provide exciting environments in which young people can grow. The choices and options can be confusing. And, like most important decisions, the choice of a school should be the result of careful and thoughtful planning.

There are many "right" and "good" schools for each student. A particular school is "right" when it has been selected thoughtfully from among options and when it is an academic and social match for a student.

Helping families make good educational choices is what educational consultants do. To the process of educational planning, consultants bring knowledge and experience to help a family make a decision that is well informed and wise — a decision that will best enable a student to grow to full potential.

Dating back at least 40 years, the profession of educational consulting has become more and more central to the process of school shopping. Although the first consultants were located on the East coast, they are now available coast-to-coast. It is the purpose of this article to describe the role of the consultant as parents seek to find an appropriate school for their child.

Below are questions often asked by parents about educational consultants: their identification, qualifications, procedures and practices.

1. ***What are educational consultants?***

Educational consultants are professionals trained to assist students and families in

the process of educational decision-making. The goal of educational consultants is to help students and parents select schools that are educationally and socially appropriate. (More recently, some of these professionals are also known as Educational Planners.) Many consultants were former admission officers or school administrators, some come from work as a psychologist or teacher, and others have chosen a profession in which they could affect the lives of young people and have learned their craft on-the-job.

2. ***How do I find an educational consultant?***
Are all educational consultants the same?
How do I know who can help us the most?

An initial list of consultants in your area is available from the Independent Educational Consultants Association in Fairfax, Virginia, 703-591-4850, www.IECAonline.com. If you live in an area not serviced by a trained professional, call a consultant in a nearby state and ask if he/she is able to make arrangements to help you.

When in receipt of names of professionals in your area, call and ask to meet. Ask for their approach to working with young people. Get a sense for their philosophy and their sensitivities. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions about his/her background, operational style and fees. A good consultant will appreciate the thoroughness of your investigation.

You might explore whether the consultant attends regional or national meetings of such groups as the Independent Educational Consultants Association, the Association of Boarding Schools, the Secondary School Admission Test Board, the National Association of Independent Schools or the Learning Disabilities Association. Still other organizations that provide professional opportunities for the consultant include the European Council of Independent Schools, the American Counseling Association and the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs.

Membership in the Independent Educational Consultants Association is an excellent sign that the consultant is networked and follows clearly established ethical guidelines. In recent years, educational consultants became eligible to earn designation as a Certified Educational Planner (CEP). You might look for that designation as another indication of his/her commitment to professionalism.

Most are generalists and work with a wide range of students. Some specialize in specific areas like boarding schools, day schools and international schools. Still others have expertise in the areas of schools for learning disabled students or with those needing a school to meet students' therapeutic or behavioral needs.

Most educational planners have aided a wide variety of young adults. They have worked with the student who is gifted, the one wanting a "good combination of athletics and academics", the student who has a unique learning style or learning

difference, those wanting to explore financial aid issues carefully, those "looking West", and the student for whom a multiplicity of "issues" exist, to name but a few.

3. ***How can a consultant help us learn about independent schools?***

The first educational consultants in the U.S. served families who wanted sound advice and judgment about independent school options. These schools have historically provided alternatives to public middle and high schools. And well over 200 of those independent schools are boarding schools, where students both live and learn. The consultant is an individual with the informed perspective and time to enable a family to make a good decision.

Consultants are equipped to identify and explain the unique features and capacities of each school. We know which students a school best serves, and we represent each option fairly. Our primary concern is the welfare of each student, and the appropriate schooling recommendations are gauged to enhance the growth and development of the student.

4. ***How do the services of an educational consultant work?***

Although there are variations depending on the needs of each student and the particular methods of operation of each consultant, the following are the basic elements of most services to families:

Discussions with student and parents pertaining to educational needs and goals. The consultant will meet with you and your child. They will explore such things as academic ability, interests, personality, hobbies and perspectives. They will talk about issues such as your student's curiosity, friendship patterns and study habits. They will, in other words, get to know you and your child.

Review of educational background, transcripts, test scores, psychological data and other materials pertinent to educational planning. (Note: some consultants administer various tests themselves; others refer parents to appropriate professionals if testing is required.)

Identification of factors pertinent to both student and family in selecting an independent school.

Identification and discussion of appropriate educational options.

Discussion of such matters as visits to schools and the application and interviewing processes.

Assistance in making a final choice among school options.

Follow-up with the student and the family through the enrollment and attendance phases.

5. ***What can we expect from the educational consultant?***

You can expect an informed, objective atmosphere in which to discuss your student and educational objectives, choices and plans.

You should also expect a knowledgeable, informed and current overview of potential schooling options. Consultants desire to empower, inform and educate your family toward making a good decision about your student's future. Lastly, you should expect the consultant's best judgment about the different choices. You can expect recommendations about appropriate options.

6. ***Will the consultant get my student admitted to a school?***

No. Our commitment is to enabling you and your family to learn about educational options that are good matches for your student. Our judgment is informed by a professional assessment of the circumstances, requirements, aspirations, abilities and needs of your student. While we assist in your communication with schools and maintain professional relationships with schools, we neither accept nor solicit compensation from any school or institution. We are compensated directly by our clients, hence our advice is free from bias and is based only on our concern for our clients and their educational development.

7. ***Who is the best candidate for an independent school?***

Independent schools serve an amazing variety of students. Historically, superior students were most attracted to the perceived advantages available in independent schools. Now, however, some independent schools serve superior students; most serve average students; some others include special programs for students with learning differences; and still others combine therapeutic elements with their academic curricula. Most importantly, independent schools provide important alternatives to public schools since they are equipped with resources to provide special learning opportunities for students. The key is finding those schools that provide the best match for each student.

Boarding schools provide a total educational environment. Teachers, advisors and coaches are committed to helping adolescents develop intellectually, socially, ethically and often artistically and athletically. Independent schools offer stable, secure and caring surroundings, centered on academic curricula taught by instructors who are teaching because they enjoy young people and the subjects they teach.

8. ***Are independent schools worth the price?***

Naturally, the value of an independent school education is an individual decision. To some, the value of a school where a young person can succeed and acquire the self-esteem that often accompanies success is inestimable.

Ultimately, the decision about the comparable benefits of an independent school is a decision about family values. An independent school education can be an

investment in the future of a young person. And, quite frankly, sometimes the "return" on the investment is long-range. But, many parents claim that the money placed in an independent school occurs at one of the most important times in a young person's life, when he or she is learning not only extensive amounts of academic content but also social and personal skills as well.

I have worked with hundreds of students who have attended independent schools. The success rate is remarkable using several outcome variables: readiness for college, character development, well-roundedness, ability to interact productively and efficiently with others and general readiness for life.

9. ***Does the consultant help find schools for students who have behavioral, emotional and/or therapeutic needs?***

Some consultants work with families who are in need of schools of these types. There are students who demonstrate dysfunctional behaviors such as underachievement in school, attitude problems, defiance, drug/alcohol abuse and interpersonal conflicts with their families. These students often require a school that meets academic, social and behavioral/personal growth needs. A multidimensional approach is often used by educational consultants to identify the most appropriate setting for the student. Ask prospective consultants if they help parents find residential treatment centers, special needs schools and other individualized educational settings.

10. ***What sort of commitment can we expect from the educational consultant?***

Our commitment is to provide the very best in educational consulting. Our commitment is to recommend schools where children will be happy, productive and grow in maturity and independence. We are committed to finding appropriate educational options for all of our students. We are committed to giving each student, regardless of school, educational background, or personal attributes, equal time and attention.

11. ***Can we conduct a school search using guidebooks and websites?***

Yes. And some good sources of gathering information are listed below. The consultant, as this article has made clear, can be an invaluable partner to you in exploring choices for your child. He or she can make it easier for you to focus on those issues that are most important in your school search.

Needless to say, you would be unlikely to attend to your lawsuit by buying *The Airheads Guide to Lawsuits*. You are likely to ask for the assistance of a person trained in the law. Particularly in recent years (as consultants have developed more and more expertise and the awareness of the differences among schools has grown), parents are turning to the advice of an educational professional.

Of course you will want to do research on your own, as well. Your research should consist of looking at a wide array of information about schools. For example, *Peterson's Private Secondary Schools* has been used for years in

gathering general information about schools. *The Educational Register* is filled with useful information about schools. The Association of Boarding Schools (800-541-5908, www.schools.com) will send you a free copy of their directory of boarding schools. Peterson's (www.petersons.com) has an on-line directory of schools as does the Secondary School Admission Test website (www.ssat.org). As stated above, the Independent Educational Consultants Association (www.IECAonline.com) has a complete listing of consultants who meet membership requirements of this international organization. Lastly, most schools have websites of their own. Further, schools are quick to respond to your request for written materials. Engaging a consultant can be helpful to the student and the parent who want facts, not rumors and gossip; want knowledge, not over-reliance on rankings and ratings; want perspective, not 'quick-fix' and assembly line answers; want an appropriate list of good match schools, not a canned list from persons or web sites that don't know your student or the schools.

12. *How does a consultant stay current on "what it's like" at various schools?*

By spending several weeks a year visiting schools, attending professional meetings, writing, reading and by being immersed in the world of children, adolescence and schools. And things change over the years. An experienced consultant will be able help you understand how things at a school you may have known well as a youngster or as a young adult has changed over the years—in terms of academic rigor, reputation and special features for children.

13. *How should we look at fees for an educational consultant?*

The fees for the services of an educational consultant include individual meetings, background review, direct contact with school personnel and general assistance with the selection and admission processes.

Consultants vary in fee structures: some charge a set or "package" fee for a series of meetings and involvements, while others charge by the hour.

The cost for retaining a trained consultant is not inexpensive. Fees can be seen in a number of ways. We live in a world of specialization, and consultants are specialists in secondary education and the school admission process. You are paying for experience in admissions and educational consulting. This knowledge can be efficient by saving money traveling only to schools that are most appropriate, "cutting to the chase" by giving you options in the right categories and by explaining differences between schools. Most consultants travel to schools annually and are immersed in school matters on a daily basis. Like any other professional, clients pay for the level of expertise that is provided. Since consultants are compensated directly by clients, their advice is free from bias and is based only on their concern for their clients and their educational development.

Making good matches means that educational consultants know schools. Educational planners can help you understand their differences. When you know how they differ, you can make an informed decision about which school is most

appropriate for your child. Consultants bring objectivity, as well as sensitivity to the issues surrounding the choice of a school.

It is important to underscore the teamwork that is necessary to make a good school choice. Parents, students, the consultant and the school admission staff are the main players. In addition, and depending on the circumstances, teachers, other counselors, therapists and others provide input. The educational consultant can help coordinate the various perspectives of those involved.

I end with a personal note. I have been helping students and families with educational decisions for over 20 years. I can't think of a better job. The ability to affect the lives of young people, to help them help themselves, to assess needs and desires, to help families explore . . . what incredible work. Students fill my days with interesting perspectives, amazing insights and many laughs. The country is dotted with people just like me. These are the people who have chosen educational consulting as a profession because they believe in the power of education and in the inherent goodness of every child.

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