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Choosing a School

In Duval County today, parents are presented with more options than ever and sorting through the education landscape has been described as a “full time job.” Below are some factors and questions, based on previous conversations with parents, to consider asking schools about when making this important decision.



Top Priorities

Previous research has found top priorities for all parents, regardless of race, household income, political ideologies, or what type of school students attend, when choosing a school:

Strong core academics
in math and reading

An emphasis on Science,
Technology, Engineering,
and Mathematics
(STEM) skills

Encouragement of
critical thinking and
study habits

Encouragement
of excellent
communication skills,
verbal and written

Research also shows there are a variety of other factors parents consider depending on the specific strengths, needs, and interests of their individual children. Continue reading for questions you can choose to add to your list if that factor is important to you and your child.

Additional Priorities and Questions

| Priority Area and Questions | Reasons for Asking |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
|-----------------------------|--------------------|

Strong Core Academics

How do you know your school is strong in mathematics?

How do you know that students are doing well?

How will you communicate academic successes and struggles to me and my child?



Schools with a focus on academics may explain how those are being measured/approved by a district, statewide, or national standard; make performance comparisons to similar sized schools or districts; bring up school grades; or by their own evidence informed standards. Schools with a focus on academics should also communicate student performance, positive and negative, to parents regularly so that parents can readily support where needed.

Emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

What specific STEM courses do you offer for my child's grade and beyond?

Are STEM skills emphasized in non-STEM courses?

Do you offer internships or certifications offered for STEM careers?



Schools that emphasize STEM might mention: increasing the number of STEM specific courses being offered/required (e.g., computer science, robotics); offering certifications that will set students up for STEM careers; encouraging skills essential to STEM careers, like critical thinking, throughout all courses; and having partnerships with businesses in the community for internships or work placement.

Non-Core Academic Offerings

Do you have a course in ___? (fill in the blank with child's specific interest)

Who decides what non-core classes are offered?

How often are students attending non-core academic courses?

What is the likelihood they will continue to be offered for the next 5 years?



Growing research suggests that non-core academic courses such as music, art, carpentry, and dance foster skills and experiences that students say they use more often in their lives than skills gained in core classes. Some schools even take student input into account for non-core classes to help develop leadership and confidence. As these types of courses have received less attention and priority than core classes, they are not guaranteed to be in every school or for multiple years.

Access to specific extra curricular activities

Do you have a ___ sports team? (fill in the blank with child's specific interest)

Do you offer ___? (fill in the blank with child's specific interest for example art, dance, etc.)

How long have these activities been around?

What is the likelihood they will continue to be offered for the next 5 years?

WHY

Academic success in isolation does not always transfer to navigating work or school post K-12. Research suggests that other skills, such as motivation and the ability to integrate into new social situations, are also essential to life success. Extracurricular programs, due to their more flexible structure and expectations of students, are great places for students to develop or hone these additional skills.

Access to opportunities for broadening extracurricular interests

What other extracurriculars do you offer?

Can students take multiple extracurriculars?

What is the likelihood they will continue to be offered for the next 5 years?

WHY

Student development is a lifelong process through exploration. What interests students today is unlikely to be the only interest they have for a lifetime. Research shows that early opportunities to try out different work interests are linked to improved life skills such as time management and confidence, reduced stress around decision making, and increased likelihood of interest in a field the student never knew existed.

Student Belonging

Will my child be able to relate to anyone who teaches them?

Will my child be able to relate to anyone who makes decisions about them?

Will my child be prepared to work with others from different backgrounds at this school?

Will my child feel respected and included here?

WHY

Student belonging has been linked to greater motivation and academic engagement as well as lower truancy rates. This happens more naturally when students and teachers share some commonality, but research has also shown that the availability of adults from different backgrounds and identities can also improve all students' skills related to effectively working and socializing in diverse settings.

Student to School Personnel Ratio

How many students are in a typical __ grade classroom? (fill in the blank with your child's school grade)

Will there be any aids or paraprofessionals in any of the classrooms?

What other support exists for students?

WHY



Research is consistently clear that individualized support is linked to better academic engagement and outcomes. Individualized support is more readily available to students in schools where there are supportive adults for them to go to in addition to teachers, such as paraprofessionals and counselors. This is especially impactful for students who experience sensory or attention challenges in classrooms but all students generally benefit from access to a group of supportive adults.

Values

How does your school handle individual behavioral and peer confrontational issues?

What does your school believe is the purpose of K-12 schooling?

What post K-12 pathways do you emphasize?

WHY



Research shows that when parents and school personnel are on the same page about values and related practices, students experience less stress and fewer barriers going from home to school. The school's beliefs about behavior, discipline, and the purpose of schooling are some examples of values that are linked to better student outcomes when they are aligned with your own values.

Communication

How often do you contact parents?

What information will you share with me without being asked?

What modes do you provide communication? For example, email, parent portal, letters in the mail, letters with students, and phone calls.

Is information provided in multiple languages/my native language?

WHY



Truly excellent schools recognize parents as partners in supporting the development of students. An important ingredient of successful partnership is communicating in a way the parent finds accessible and as often as the parent finds helpful. Schools that offer frequent and different modes and languages of communication are signaling commitment to seeing parents as partners in education. Frequent communication is essential for keeping parents and school personnel on the same page and team.

Involvement

What does your school believe is the role of parents in education?

How does your school involve parents?

Is there a process for if I want to become more involved?

When do meetings with parents occur?

WHY

There are levels to the ways that schools can view the role of parents in education: 1) solely raising the child in the home, 2) communicating with the school 3) helping the children with education at home 4) volunteering and in-school support 5) being involved in advocacy and decision making and 6) getting others to get involved at the school. There is no "right" level of involvement for every parent but it is important to be aware of how the school views parents.

Teacher Quality and Relationships

How many years of experience do your teachers have on average?

What percentage of your teachers are certified?

Do teachers have the opportunity to teach the same students beyond one academic school year?

Are teachers given dedicated time to get to know students better?

WHY

Research has linked supportive relationships with teachers to positive academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students. High turnover disrupts the relationship building process. Historically teachers with 3 or more years of teaching experience have been more likely to stay in the profession. In the midst of a nationwide teacher shortage, many schools are facing high turnover and an increase in non-certified personnel.

Factors that Reduce Choices

Research has found factors outside of parents' and schools' control that can reduce the choices that are actually available to consider.

Time it takes to search and test run various schools

The amount of travel time during peak travel hours

The schools' distance from home

Distance from your support network

Distance from other children's schools or after school activities/services

The cost of the school

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