

Choosing the Best School for Your Child

Choosing a school for your child's formative years may be the most far-reaching decision you'll make regarding his or her long-term success and happiness.

In their early years, children gain not only a solid foundation in academics; they develop all-important "inner skills" as well – the personal attitudes and habits that will support them in their quest for success throughout their lives.

Living Wisdom School Science Fair. This exhibit, on the science of making great brownies, drew unusual interest – for purely scientific reasons, of course – not the free samples. (*Click to enlarge.*)

Thus identifying the best school while your children are very young is a sound investment. It may be as important as choosing a college.

What's the most intelligent approach to selecting a school?

The San Francisco Bay Area is blessed with many excellent private schools. Most use similar language to describe themselves in their marketing materials. Virtually all of them tout their academic excellence, and the attention they give to each child's personal development.

Before you make a decision, it's important to look beyond the schools' marketing materials and identify their actual differences. For the differences are very real.

This guide offers an approach to getting beneath the surface of the schools you are considering. It will help you ask the right questions that will help you understand the hidden differences between the schools, and how they will impact your child.

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1. Watch the students’ year-end speeches online

The best school will help your child develop the dynamic energy and magnetism that will propel him or her to success in all future endeavors.

What is a good approach to evaluate whether a school will help your child develop academic enthusiasm, the energy and joy to embrace ever-expanding possibilities, and the personal magnetism to attract the support and cooperation of others?

Perhaps the best method is to observe the students; and with today’s technology, it’s something you can do quite easily from your home. For example, the students’ year-end speeches and other personal presentations and performances, if they’re posted online, will often tell you more about the school than the school’s official literature.

Watch the videos of the students’ graduation speeches. Assess how well the school has trained the children to speak before a large audience with poise,

intelligence, vitality, and sincerity. The lack of any opportunity to view the students' speeches online may constitute a red flag.

Whether a school gives all of the students opportunities to speak and perform before a large audience may reflect indicates the energy it invests in developing their success skills and personal energy.

At Living Wisdom School, every child speaks at the annual End of Year Celebration. Watch the PreK – 7th grade students [give their “Qualities” speeches](#), and watch the [the eighth graders give their graduation speeches](#).

All of the children at Living Wisdom School also perform in the annual school play, a major production performed on three consecutive days before packed houses of adults and visiting schoolchildren and their teachers. In learning to interact with large audiences, the children develop poise, presentation skills, inner confidence, and personal magnetism. (Watch [videos of the LWS Theater Magic productions](#).)

2. Ask your children to describe their experience of playtime on a “shadow day” at the target school

Many schools claim to teach their students to be kind and collaborative. An excellent indicator of the effectiveness of the school's investment in the children's social and emotional development is playtime. Arrange for your child to come for a “shadow day” during which he/she can participate in playtime and school classes. If the children invite your child to play together, this is a very good sign, especially if your child is reserved by nature.

Children may report that they were teased or made fun of during the shadow day. If this happens to your child, take it very seriously, as it suggests the school hasn't effectively infused the students with respect and appreciation for others – essential skills for success in academics and life.

The teachers at LWS employ many methods to nurture the students' qualities of mutual appreciation, kindness, and respect. For a list of these methods, [follow this](#)

[link](#). And to watch a video of an actual conflict resolution and learn about the Inclusiveness Training program at LWS, [follow this link](#).

3. Which top-flight schools have accepted graduates from the candidate school?

Find out which top high schools and colleges have admitted graduates from the school you're considering. Obviously, not every graduate will attend a top-flight high school or university. As a parent, however, it makes sense to ensure that at least some of the school's graduates have gone on to top schools and done well. It's a strong signal that the school is recognized for solid academics, and that the students are valued for the personal qualities they bring to the new school community.

Living Wisdom School graduates are accepted by top Bay Area private high schools, such as Menlo School, Harker, Pinewood, Woodside Priory, St. Francis, and Sacred Heart.

4. Talk to the students

Ask to talk with the school's students and graduates. It's helpful to talk with students who've transferred to the school under consideration. If the students are articulate, they may give useful comparisons, though younger children usually won't be able to help in this way.

Ask some simple questions:

Do you like school here? How did you like your old school?

Do you like your teacher? How did you like your old teacher?

Do you like your classmates? How did you like the students at your old school?

In their [graduation speeches](#), some of the LWS eight-graders make comparisons with the schools they previously attended. These comments are worth noting.

5. Compare the students' science fair presentations

A science fair project can help your child grow in ways that will be of tremendous benefit in high school, college, and adult life.

It can teach them priceless lessons about what it's like to live, learn, and serve in real life – by helping them grow in essential “success attitudes” such as positive energy, enthusiasm, mental focus, perseverance, cooperation, and a spirit of joyful exploration.

A science fair project will obviously challenge the children intellectually. It requires the students to plan, research, organize, experiment, draw conclusions, and communicate their findings.

Listening to each child describe his/her project is a wonderful way to answer important questions about the school's educational approach:

Are the students actually participating in experimentation and discovery? Or are they merely following “canned” plans, and regurgitating information they've gleaned from books?

How diverse are the projects? Has each child chosen a topic that evokes genuine personal interest, or are they all doing similar experiments, perhaps influenced by a teacher with little time or energy to run herd on a broad range of projects?

How eloquent and poised are the students as they describe their research, experimental plan and setup, record-keeping, and conclusions?

How enthusiastic are the children about what they're doing? How polished are they in their visual and verbal presentation? How knowledgeable, receptive, and responsive are they in answering the fairgoers' questions?

Do all of the class members participate, or is participation limited to the top “brainiac” students?

You can discover a great deal about the overall quality of a school's instruction from its science fair. For this reason alone, it can be a very good idea to ask the school for access to videos of the most recent fair, and for information about the next one.

At Living Wisdom School, every middle school student prepares and presents a science fair project. Younger students may be invited to participate, especially if they have shown early enthusiasm and ability in science, but it is not required.

We invite you to view short videos of [our middle-school students presenting their latest science fair projects](#). We also invite you to attend our next LWS Science Fair, in the spring. An invite and RSVP are required. To receive an invitation and details of date, time, and location: [Email Living Wisdom School](#)

6. Compare the students' writing

Ask the target school for copies of writings by every student in a class, perhaps the class your child would join, if accepted.

You'll find it easy to compare the quality of thought, research, and writing between the schools you are considering.

Which school's student writings are more interesting? (Reflecting their enthusiasm and engagement.) Which are more polished? (Reflecting the quality of instruction and individual attention to each student.)

Many schools teach writing based on formulaic standard elements in the writing portion of the SAT. This isn't a bad thing; but "teaching to the test" never prepares the students to make their writing accurate, original, interesting, and creative – skills required in most professions today.

Be sure to obtain samples from not only the most talented writers, but from all students. Every class will have exceptional writers; what's important is how well the students are trained at their individual level.

The writing samples will tell you a great deal about the school – not merely if the school teaches writing by formula, but whether it makes an effort to draw out every student's creativity, enthusiasm, communication skills, and individual expression.

Alex, a graduate of LWS, was accepted at a private Bay Area high school with a top-tier academic reputation. Alex reported that his high school literature teacher said, "I don't care about style. I only care about the structure of your writing."

Alex said, “I was one of the very few students who got an A in his class, because he actually did care about style and based his grading on it.”

LWS publishes an annual [Literary Magazine](#) (PDF) that includes writing by every student in the school. The magazine shows the arc of the curriculum from Pre-K through 8th grade. It includes stories, poems, essays, reflections, and research papers. Compare the writings with other schools. Which reflects your desires for your child?

7. Compare the school’s process for hiring, training, and supporting teachers

Very important! A school is only as good as its teachers: those individuals who will work with your child every school day.

How does the school choose teachers? How are the new and experienced teachers trained? Is there a long-term internship for new teachers? Are the experienced teachers deliberately trained in the methods the school claims to employ to meet its goals? How often do the teachers share their methods and discuss issues they encounter with individual students?

See “[How Teachers are Trained at Living Wisdom School](#),” an informative conversation with school director Helen Purcell and middle-school teacher and board member Gary McSweeney.

Any of our teachers will be happy to discuss these practices with you in person. ([Email Living Wisdom School](#)

or call us (650-462-8150) to schedule a meeting.)

8. Ask the teachers to compare the school with schools where they've previously taught

If a teacher has taught at several schools, their comparisons can be revealing.

Do the teachers have ongoing opportunities to collaborate with the other teachers? For example, do the teachers design their curricula across ages? Do they cooperate creatively to create a seamless transition that advances the student's academic and personal development from one grade to the next?

Does the curriculum allow the children to collaborate with younger and older children? Do the teachers communicate with each other about the needs of individual children to ensure that all the teachers are supporting all of the children?

Some of the teachers at LWS have taught at public and private schools in the U.S. and abroad. They'll be happy to discuss their experience with you in person, or by phone. Other LWS teachers have been trained in the Education for Life method and have worked exclusively in the Education for Life schools.

9. Does the school adhere to an Integrated Thematic Curriculum as an all-school practice?

An integrated curriculum is increasingly being recognized as the best approach to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm for learning, and prepare them for success in academics and life.

Ask the candidate school if the curriculum recognizes the connections between the disciplines of language arts, history, math and science, social studies, art, etc.?

The integrated curriculum at Living Wisdom School reflects recent brain research indicating that it stimulates the student's brain circuitry to develop new connections.

For example, the study of color (science) may involve an art project that segues into a unit on video creation, poetry or making a public presentation such as the school literary magazine.

The annual “Theater Magic” all-school production serves as a vehicle for a strong interdisciplinary multicultural curriculum that lasts six weeks, is school-wide, and includes academic explorations in language arts, history, music, drama, dance, philosophy, art, and sometimes math and science.

In addition, the theater production supports the development of self-confidence, self-discipline, cooperation, courage, collaboration, perseverance, etc. At the deepest level, it encourages the development of kindness, compassion, empathy, self-knowledge, introspection, and more.

10. Be wary of high standardized test scores

When schools claim that their students achieve high scores on standardized tests across the board, it should be a cause for concern.

Standardized tests measure broad, superficial understanding of a subject. If a school boasts high scores for the majority of its students, it’s very likely that there is a tradeoff for short-term results at the cost of long-term success factors that include depth of understanding, creativity, inquisitiveness, and social and emotional development.

A school may claim to “do it all,” achieving high test scores and developing the whole child. But the statistical nature of standardized, percentile-graded tests means that for an entire student body to score in the top percentiles, the curriculum must be very narrowly focused.

A small percentage of top students can, in fact, “do it all” and should be encouraged to do so. However, all of the students should be given the opportunity to develop their own initiative, creativity, humanity, and vitality, instead of spending all of their time studying for standardized tests. All students should prepare substantial science projects, perform in plays, read for enjoyment, play outside, develop friendships, etc.

We live in a fast-changing technologically oriented society. Our children need to be prepared to succeed in this environment. Boxing their minds into achieving narrow standards limits their coping ability and long-term academic success.

Living Wisdom is an Education for Life School. We believe that an inordinate emphasis on standardized tests prevents a school from offering a truly great education. We do recognize, however, that the high schools that accept our graduates need ways to measure academic achievement.

In our middle school, the children take two international math challenges: the AMC and the Math Olympiads. They also take the Word Master Challenge, which requires them to devise strategies for solving complex analogy problems. The students, of course, take regular in-class exams. Throughout our 40-year history, LWS graduates have routinely scored in the top 90th percentile on high school entrance exams.

Our individualized approach allows us to challenge our most academically gifted students, while nurturing all of the students with a passionate concern for their full academic and personal development. To learn more, please call or email us to discuss these issues with our director and/or the LWS teachers.

11. Testimonials from parents and students

Read as many parent and student testimonials as possible. The school website will usually include a testimonial page. You can also search [Google](#), [Yelp](#), and [Great Schools](#) for unbiased parent reviews. The most useful reviews compare the students' present and previous schools.

A caveat about parent testimonials. Bear in mind that parents don't actually attend the school, and thus may lack a clear understanding of what the school does. Their reviews tend to reflect whether the child is happy at school and scores well on standardized tests.

Also, notice the number of positive and negative testimonials compared to the school's size. Parents are busy, and the fact that many parents have taken time to write a testimonial can be revealing.

You can read [parent and student testimonials](#) on the LWS website. And you'll find more reviews by [googling "Living Wisdom School Palo Alto."](#)

12. Evaluating schools: present pain yields future gain

Realistically evaluating schools, as described above, takes effort and time. As busy parents of younger children, your time is precious. But don't let lack of time tempt you to narrow your focus to include only the school(s) with a good reputation located nearest to your home. Your investment of time and energy in identifying the best school for your children will pay big rewards in terms their happiness and success.