

Choosing

THE RIGHT SCHOOL



A guide to help you select a Catholic school where your child will thrive.

The Catholic Education Office of the St. Louis Archdiocese receives many inquiries from concerned parents wondering how to be sure they are making the right choice when it comes to their children's education.

This brochure contains some suggestions that will help guide you through the process of choosing the right school for your child and family.

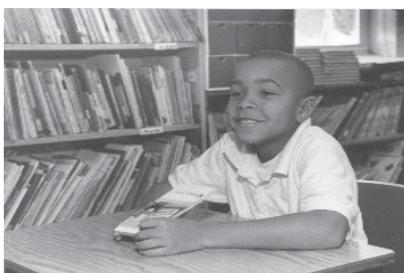
WHY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Every child is a unique gift from God. Similarly, while all Catholic schools share a common mission as part of the Church's educational ministry, every Catholic school is a unique community. As a parent or guardian, one of your most important responsibilities is to choose a school that "fits" your child's personality and learning needs, as well as your family's practical needs and educational priorities.

In electing to send your child to a Catholic school, you have already made some very important choices. Most importantly, you have chosen to blend

your child's academic and spiritual development in accordance with the educational mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church.

A vital premise underlying that mission is that every child has strengths, talents, and interests to be encouraged and developed. Equally important is the commitment to an educational approach that nurtures "the whole child" in an environment of spiritual development, academic excellence, moral values, respect and safety. Catholic schools provide that environment, treating each child as a special "gift" that will flourish with individual care and attention.



THE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Where Every Child Is A Gift

WHERE TO START

Choosing the right school can be a big project, so let's simplify it by starting with the basics. That means deciding what your family's values and priorities are when it comes to education.

There are two main areas to consider: PRACTICAL issues and PHILOSOPHICAL issues. The practical issues are things like location and cost. The philosophical issues are value-oriented, such as opportunities to grow in faith, strong academic programs, and the overall school climate.

Here are some simple questions that can help you build your foundation based on *practical* and *philosophical* considerations:

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Location

You'll probably want to choose a school that is located conveniently near either your home or work.

- What areas (i.e. north county, south county, etc.) are convenient for your family?

Admission Policies

While not all parish elementary schools require the family to be a registered member of the parish, most Catholic families do send their children to their parish school. If you choose to send your child to another parish school, there are some things you will need to consider.

- Will the parish you are registered in give you permission to send your child to a different parish school?
- Will the school(s) you are interested in accept students whose families are not registered members of the parish?
- If not, are you willing to move your family within the parish boundaries of a school that only accepts parish children?



Cost

Keep in mind that tuition costs do vary from school to school. While financial assistance is often available, it is important to consider how much of your family's budget will be dedicated to education.

- Remember to consider other costs such as supplies, school uniforms and fund-raising requirements.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Religious Development

All Catholic schools provide an opportunity for children to grow in their faith and develop personal spirituality. How does your family practice the faith, and what do you want the school's role to be in the spiritual growth and development of your child?

- What opportunities does the school provide for students to learn about their faith?
- What opportunities do students have to pray and to receive the sacraments?
- What opportunities do students have to be involved in Christian service?
- What is the relationship between the school and the parish?

Values

What values does your family hold that you want the school to reinforce?

- What type of educational philosophy and priorities does the school possess?
- How does the school involve families?

Special Needs

If your child has any special educational needs, you'll want to make sure that any school you consider has the necessary resources to meet those special needs.

Once you have considered your family's practical and philosophical needs, you should develop a list of schools that "qualify" and have a solid idea of the values and special services your family requires.

Depending on how many schools "qualify," you may want to narrow your list down to a few "target" schools that you will investigate and evaluate more thoroughly.

The Director of Marketing and Community Relations at the Catholic Education Office can provide you with a list of Catholic schools in the areas of your choice, including the phone number for each school. Call 314-792-7304 for more information. Or, visit our web site: <http://www.archstl.org/education>

Now that you have a few “target” schools that meet your family’s priorities, how do you choose the one you want? In order to make the right choice, you’ll need to know with whom you should be talking and what questions you should be asking.

First, connect with the right people.

There are several ways that you can get valuable information about your “target” schools.

- To get a general introduction to the school, schedule a meeting with the school’s principal.
- To learn how the school community works on a daily basis, you’ll want to visit classrooms and talk with teachers.
- To get a parent’s perspective, talk to other parents who have children in the school.



There are four main categories of questions you’ll want to get answers for:

- General
- Communication and Leadership
- Curriculum
- Academic Growth and Progress

To make sure you get the most out of meetings and conversations, be sure to get organized and ready to ask the questions that deal with the issues that are important to you. Following are some common questions that you’ll probably want to ask. Some can be answered directly and others are based more on observation. It’s up to you to decide if the answers make the school a good “fit” for your family.

General

- What is the registration and enrollment procedure? Are there any special requirements?
- How many students are enrolled in the school? How many children are in each classroom? What is the ratio of classroom teachers to students?
- Does the school offer before- and after-school care programs? Is transportation available for students who need to go to an off-site before- and after- care program?
- What is the school’s behavior code? How are disciplinary problems handled? Ask for a copy of the current parent handbook.
- Are parents welcome to visit their children’s classrooms? Is an appointment needed?
- What opportunities do parents have to become involved in the school? How much volunteer time is asked/required of parents?
- How do parents interact with each other?
- How do the goals other parents have for their children compare with yours?
- Are there any financial requirements beyond tuition?

Communication and Leadership

- What are the principal’s priorities and goals for students?
- What goals do teachers have for their students?
- How does the principal interact with teachers, students and parents?
- What is the principal’s educational philosophy? Is he or she knowledgeable about current educational practices and trends?
- Does the principal seem open to questions, and are the responses direct and empathetic?
- How does the school communicate with its families? How often?
- Ask for any newsletters or calendars that the school distributes to families. These will help you get an idea of what types of activities are held throughout the year.
- What does the school/principal view as the parents’ role in education?
- What are the teachers’ qualifications? Do any teachers specialize in teaching particular subjects or providing particular services?
- What indicators of parent satisfaction does the school have? What proportion of parents express satisfaction with the school?



Instructional Program

- What are the main concepts, skills, and values that will be taught at each grade? [These should be stated in the school's curriculum guide.]
- What proportion of students complete the curriculum successfully?
- How is religion integrated into other subjects and woven into school life? [Look not only at religion classes but at other subjects. Look for opportunities for prayer, receiving the sacraments, days of recollection, service projects, etc.]
- How often are textbooks reviewed and updated?
- What role does technology play in the students' learning? Is there a computer lab? A science lab for older students?

- Are art and music treated as important subjects in the curriculum?
- Are there programs and services for children with special needs, both for students who are academically talented and for students who have difficulty learning? [Distinguish between programs and services that are provided in the regular classroom and those that require going to a separate room to learn apart from classmates.]
- How do teachers address students' individual learning styles?
- What extracurricular programs (i.e. scouts, athletics, band, etc.) are available?
- How extensive is the athletic program?
- Does the instructional program provide for the interests and needs of your child?

Academic Growth and Progress

- How does the school foster growth and development in children, regardless of the level at which they begin?
- Ask for examples of students who have come to the school with particular academic strengths and have been challenged and/or who have come to the school with learning difficulties and have shown great improvement.
- How do teachers ensure that every student achieves to his or her fullest potential?
- What proportion of graduates choose Catholic high schools? What proportion make choices of high schools appropriate to their levels of academic achievement? What proportion of graduates enter the high school of their choice?
- How well do graduates perform when they get to high school?
- Do students' standardized test scores generally reflect their achievement levels? How do students in the school generally score on standardized tests?
- How do students demonstrate growth on standardized test scores from grade to grade?

[Be careful not to place too much emphasis on test scores. Other factors are much more important to choosing the right school for your child. Standardized tests are designed to compare individual students to a group of students representative of all students in the country. They are not designed to compare an individual school to other schools. For school comparison, quality cannot be reduced to a standardized test score any more than a blood pressure reading or cholesterol number can indicate a person's total health.

Keep in mind that standardized test scores do not take into account the reality that some schools admit children who may start at a lower level of achievement and improve dramatically. Such schools' scores will not be as high as those of schools that only admit children who demonstrate high achievement levels. In addition, test scores must differ by a large number of points to truly represent a difference in achievement level.]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES