

Why Parents Choose Independent Schools

Understanding Parent Decisions

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Introduction

To remain competitive in today's complex school marketplace, it is essential for independent schools to identify their core audiences, understand why their audiences chose their school, and become knowledgeable about what their audiences value about their school. Since 2003, we have partnered with numerous schools across the country, seeking answers to these very questions. Our research-based strategy projects have actually resulted in nearly 20,000 parents surveyed, and, while each survey was customized for the specific project we were conducting, some results of our surveys are certainly capable of broad generalizations. We have taken a meaningful, representative sample of our responses – roughly 6000 – and compiled them in this report. We have also taken the time to cross cut data in different ways in order to reveal some of the more foundational questions regarding parental choice at independent schools. We believe this information will be helpful to you.

A Critical Observation

Our firm primarily serves tuition driven independent schools and colleges. While independent schools and colleges may be different genres of education, these two groups of educational institutions share many similarities, from pricing and financial aid models to curriculum development. However, one area in which they are fundamentally different is in their approach to research. Private colleges, as a general cohort, are relatively mature at collecting and analyzing data to drive decision-making. In fact, every private college client with which we have worked as a firm has a position or office formally devoted to institutional research. This office collects data, synthesizes and analyzes it, and parses it out to relevant groups across the campus in order to make informed decisions. Interestingly, we have yet to work with an independent school that possesses such a function. Our point? Independent

schools have not made institutional research a priority and, as a result, often make critical or strategic decisions without the benefit of data or research.

We are a research-based strategy firm. What matters most to us is creating strategy based on fact – not anecdote – and developing initiatives that are grounded in research. Solid institutional research helps inform decision-making. It doesn't make the tough decisions for you, but it provides context and promotes wise choices in decision-making. We believe that strong research can strengthen an institution in making sound strategic decisions and that it needs to be an essential core function of any independent school.

This report is not a panacea. It is a starting point. We hope that publishing it will provide your school some food for thought and begin the conversation about the importance of integrating research-based decision-making into the capabilities of the school. Feel free to give us a call to discuss this report. We would love to discuss how we might be able to assist your school in answering questions essential to successfully competing in the marketplace.

What is important to Families when Choosing an Independent School?

Families consider many factors when selecting a school for their child/children. In our surveys, parents were asked which factors were most important in selecting a school. Attributes that were considered by parents in our surveys included:

- Academic reputation
- Access to faculty
- Athletic programs
- Attractiveness of campus
- Cleanliness of the school facilities
- Distance from my home
- Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities
- Overall cost to your family
- Personal attention given to students
- Quality of academic facilities (library, labs, classrooms)
- Quality of extracurricular facilities on campus
- Safety of the school environment
- Small class size
- The area/setting surrounding the school campus
- Utilization of technology
- Value for the cost

Relationship of the Attributes

Before we examine which attributes are the most important, we looked at the correlations of these questions. Questions correlated with each other indicate parents answered them similarly and, as a result, several common themes emerged.

- Cost – Value for the cost, overall cost to your family
- Extracurricular Activities – Quality of extracurricular facilities on campus, athletic programs, opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities
- Physical Environment – Attractiveness of campus, quality of academic facilities (library, labs, classrooms), the area/setting surrounding the school campus, cleanliness of the school facilities, safety of the school environment, utilization of technology
- Attention, Focus on Student – Personal attention given to students, small class size, access to faculty

For at least one of these themes, every question was very important to parents. The correlation matrix for all 15 school attributes is appended at the end of this report.

Most Important Factors When Choosing a School

Based upon our research, the following demonstrate the results of over 6000 independent school parents across the country regarding the most important school attributes in selecting a school at the initial point of entry. Ratings were made on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important).

Means of Independent School Attributes

1	Not at All Important	2	Somewhat Important	3	Moderately Important	4	Very Important	5	Extremely Important
				3.08	Distance from my home	4.10	Quality of academic facilities		
				3.20	Area/setting around school campus	4.22	Access to faculty		
				3.33	Athletic programs	4.37	Value for the cost		
				3.39	Attractiveness of campus	4.45	Safety of the school environment		
				3.61	Quality of extracurricular facilities	4.47	Small class size		
				3.79	Overall cost to your family	4.51	Academic reputation		
				3.84	Opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities	4.71	Personal attention given to students		
				3.94	Utilization of technology				
				3.98	Cleanliness of the school facilities				

Parents indicated *personal attention given to students* was the most important school attribute when choosing a school. Note that *small class size* and *access to faculty* questions that were highly correlated are also very important. Parents highly value that their child will be attended to and cared for and loved in ways that are basically an extension of the family unit. Parents often write in responses to this question and responses such as “*nurturing*”, “*warm*”, and “*friendly*” are common. A good bet for any marketing message is to find ways to communicate to parents that they will attend to and care for the child/student.

Academic reputation is the second most important attribute to parents. Parents who pay for the independent school experience have certain expectations of the school. This attribute is likely measured by parents in terms of college placement or preparatory placement at the next level.

Safety of the school environment is an attribute that is also very important to parents. Parents want their child to be safe and if faced with alternative situations that they thought were less safe, this attribute resulted in being very important to parents.

Value for the cost and quality of academic facilities are the rest of the attributes that were very important to parents. The other nine attributes were moderately important.

Consistency of Parental Attributes Deemed Most Important

Factors family consider when choosing an Independent School	Mean	Standard Deviation
Distance from my home	3.08	± 0.95
The area/setting surrounding the school campus	3.20	± 0.85
Athletic programs	3.33	± 0.99
Attractiveness of campus	3.39	± 0.78
Quality of extracurricular facilities on campus	3.61	± 0.85
Overall cost to your family	3.79	± 0.99
Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities	3.84	± 0.84
Utilization of technology	3.94	± 0.81
Cleanliness of the school facilities	3.98	± 0.77
Quality of academic facilities (library, labs, classrooms)	4.10	± 0.76
Access to faculty	4.22	± 0.79
Value for the cost	4.37	± 0.77
Safety of the school environment	4.45	± 0.73
Small class size	4.47	± 0.65
Academic reputation	4.51	± 0.66
Personal attention given to students	4.71	± 0.50

As discussed above, *personal attention given to students* was the most important school attribute to parents when choosing a school. It is informative to note that the standard deviations for this question along with the questions that were correlated with it – *academic reputation* and *small class size* - were the lowest. These questions were consistently important to the majority of parents. *Personal attention isn't just something that greatly appeals to some parents and barely appeals to others, it appeals to the majority of parents.*

Large standard deviations also tell a story. For example, *distance from my home*, *athletic programs* and *overall cost to my family* all had standard deviations close to 1. This indicates that parents used a broader range of importance when answering these questions. For instance, although some parents indicated driving distance was of low importance, a 2 on our scale, there was a group of parents who indicated that it was very important, a 4 on our scale. Also, *athletic programs* and *overall cost* enjoy a similar relationship. Although the means are in the moderate importance range, the standard deviation indicates some parents did think it very important.

For messaging purposes, it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at these attributes. For example, *driving distance*, if there is a group of parents who care considerably about driving distance, then maybe there's a group of students who did not choose your school due to driving distance. Further investigation may reveal advantages to more organized transportation such as a bus or organized car or vanpool.

Which Information Sources Are Most Influential When Choosing an Independent School?

Parents are influenced by a variety of information sources, from word of mouth to the website. It is important to know what sources are most effective in influencing the school choice decision. We asked parents to indicate the importance of the following information sources in making a decision to enroll their child a given independent school.

- Campus tour
- Contact with alumni of the school
- Contact with parents whose children attend the school
- Contact with students who attend the school
- On-campus meetings with school staff
- Open house
- Print advertising
- Referral from a previous teacher/educator
- Referral from a professional colleague
- Referral from a realtor
- Referral from civic organization
- School-developed print publications
- School Web site
- Written follow-up communication from school

Relationship of the Information Sources

We looked at the correlations of these information sources to gain insight into how parents rated them. The following are key findings from our examination.

- School Communications - Campus tours, school developed print publications, school web site, written follow up communication form the school, open house, on campus meetings with school staff
- Attendees & Former School Attendees - Contact with parents whose children attend the school, contact with students who attend the school, contact with alumni
- Referrals - Referral from a realtor, referral from a professional colleague, referral from civic organization, referral from a previous teacher/educator

Most Important Information Sources

Here's what over 6000 independent school parents across the country indicated was the most important information sources. Again, ratings were based upon scales of 1 to 5 in our survey.

Means of Independent School Information Sources

1	Not at All Important	2	Low Importance	3	Moderate Importance	4	High Importance	5	Very High Importance
1.57	Referral from a realtor	2.25	Print advertising	3.10	Referral from a previous teacher				
1.95	Referral from civic org.	2.70	Contact with school alumni	3.12	School Web site				
		2.77	Referral from a colleague	3.32	Open house				
		2.92	School-developed print publications	3.55	Written follow-up communication from school				
				3.55	Contact with students who attend the school				
				3.60	Campus tour				
				3.77	Contact with parents whose children attend the school				
				3.95	On-campus meetings with school staff				

On-campus meetings with school staff is the most important information source to parents when making their school choice decision. Similar to a job interview, an interested party can do all sorts of background investigation, talk to people, spend time on the website, pour over the print communications, but the face-to-face meeting seals the deal and is the most critical piece to assure that the school is a good fit.

It is interesting to note that the top six most important information sources, including the highest rated *on-campus meetings*, involve some aspect of personal interaction. Examples include *contact with parents of and current school attendees, touring the*

campus, written follow up communication¹ and open house. This is an important reminder to all admissions and school staff who are interacting with parents at these meetings of the importance of those interactions as well as the importance of maintaining positive relationships with students and their parents.

Referrals from a realtor or a civic organization are the least important and probably the least used, as we will see later when we inquire how long a family has lived in the area.

Information sources families consider when choosing an Independent School	Mean	Standard Deviation
Referral from a previous teacher/educator	3.10	±1.36
Referral from a professional colleague	2.77	±1.31
Contact with alumni of the school	2.70	±1.17
Open house	3.32	±1.15
School Web site	3.12	±1.12
Campus tour	3.60	±1.10
Contact with students who attend the school	3.55	±1.07
Contact with parents whose children attend the school	3.77	±1.05
Referral from civic organization	1.95	±1.04
Written follow-up communication from school	3.55	±1.02
School-developed print publications	2.92	±0.97
Print advertising	2.25	±0.96
On-campus meetings with school staff	3.95	±0.95
Referral from a realtor	1.57	±0.85

¹*written follow up communication* has a standardized, generic aspect, but there is a personal touch involved as far as timeliness, and providing the appropriate types of information that follow up on questions and interests particular to the student and/or family.

Referral from a realtor was very low in importance and based on a smaller standard deviation it is very low in importance to the majority of parents who answered the question.

Based on the larger standard deviation, *referral from a previous teacher or educator* was high in importance to some parents.

It is interesting to look at the standard deviations for importance of school attributes compared to the standard deviations for information sources. Parents rated the school attributes much more consistently than parents rated information sources.

Retention Intentions

Retention is an important issue facing any independent school. We all know that it is more cost effective to keep current students attending the school than to replace a student who leaves the school. We asked parents to share with us whether it was their intent – at the initial point of enrollment – to keep their child enrolled at the independent school of choice through the final grade the school offers. Our results indicate that most parents intend for their child to remain at the school through the final grade the school offers.

Yes	No
85%	15%

Total Schools Considered

It is imperative to understand the competitive environment in which your school is operating. We asked parents: “How many total schools did your family initially consider for your child?”

1 School	2 Schools	3 Schools	4 Schools	5 Schools	6 Schools
21%	27%	30%	13%	5%	3%

Nearly 80% of parents considered more than one school, about one-fifth of parents only considered one school. Again, the market place is competitive. Understanding how to differentiate your school from the competition is crucial.

Repeat or Returning Customer?

It is important to understand if your school is marketing to an audience who is already familiar with private schools and already leaning toward that choice for his or her child or if your audience is new to the private school market. Parents with different backgrounds may be influenced by different messages.

Did either of the child's parents attend an independent or private school for primary or secondary education?

Yes, attended private school	No, did not attend private school
49%	51%

Unlike a generation ago when parents seeking out a private school were perhaps more likely to have attended one themselves, approximately one-half of the parents with children attending an independent school had attended an independent school themselves.

Did either of the child's parents attend a private college or university?

Yes, attended private university	No, did not attend private university
58%	42%

The percentage that attended a private university was higher than those who had attended a private primary or secondary school. Like primary and secondary private schools, there are many individuals who did not choose the private sector.

Length of Residence in the Area

We asked parents how long they had lived in the area of the independent school their child/children currently attend.

0-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	over 20 years	Don't live in the area
5%	6%	13%	15%	14%	46%	1%

The amount of long-term families is significant. Adding in those families residing over 16 years, the figure goes up to almost 60%, and add in those residing over 10 years and it includes 75% of families. Families who are new to the area or living in the area for just a few to several years account for just one quarter of the responses.

Income Levels

What is the approximate annual household income (pretax) of families we surveyed? The following is self-reported income from independent school families during the past three years.

less than \$30,000	2%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	18%
\$60,000 to \$99,999	25%
\$100,000 to \$139,999	19%
\$140,000 to \$179,999	10%
\$180,000 to \$219,999	6%
\$220,000 to \$259,999	16%
\$260,000 to \$299,999	1%
\$300,000 to \$339,999	1%
\$340,000 to \$379,999	0%
\$380,000 to \$419,999	0%
\$420,000 or higher	3%

under \$100,000	45%
over \$100,000	55%

When we collapse these ranges, close to one-half of parents who reported earning less than \$100,000 and just over one-half of parents reporting earning more than \$100,000 annually.

Distance from Home

How far is the child's primary residence – in terms of miles driven – from the school campus?

Less than 1 mile	7%
1 to 5 miles	36%
6 to 10 miles	26%
11 to 15 miles	15%
16 to 20 miles	7%
21 to 25 miles	3%
Over 25 miles	5%

Over one-third of parents lived within 1 to 5 miles of the school. 85% live less than 15 miles from the school.

A Closer Examination of School Attributes

We have examined what school attributes and information sources were important to parents - information that is invaluable to any school. With the information we have collected, we are also able to examine in more detail certain groups or segments of parents. There are numerous segments available depending on the questions that were asked and what we are interested in learning.

In the following table we looked at parents grouped by the grade of their enrolled student. Parents were grouped based on whether they had a student in kindergarten thru 4th grade (elementary school) or a child attending 5th thru 8th grade (middle school) or a child in 9th thru 12th grade (high school). In addition to student grade, we also grouped parents by reported annual income. Parents who reported they earned less than \$100,000 annually were in one group and parents who reported they earned more than \$100,000 annually another group. We also segmented parents who attended a primary or secondary private school and parents who did not attend a primary or secondary private school.

School Attributes	Grade			Income		Did either parent attend an independent school for primary or secondary education?	
	K - 4th grade	5th - 8th grade	9th - 12th grade	Less than \$100,000	More than \$100,000	Yes	No
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
How important was Academic reputation	4.57	4.53	4.49	4.49	4.53	4.51	4.51
Access to faculty	4.22	4.20	4.25	4.21	4.20	4.24	4.20
Personal attention given to students	4.73	4.70	4.68	4.71	4.70	4.73	4.69
Utilization of technology	3.96	3.93	3.95	3.89	3.95	3.91	3.97
Small class size	4.51	4.47	4.41	4.46	4.48	4.47	4.48
Quality of academic facilities (library, labs, classrooms)	4.17	4.05	4.04	4.09	4.11	4.09	4.11
Cleanliness of the school facilities	4.01	3.94	3.95	3.94	3.99	3.97	3.97
Attractiveness of campus	3.43	3.36	3.36	3.39	3.40	3.40	3.38
Distance from my home	3.09	3.06	3.07	3.05	3.08	3.07	3.08
The area/setting surrounding the school campus	3.24	3.18	3.12	3.19	3.19	3.19	3.19
Safety of the school environment	4.51	4.45	4.38	4.44	4.43	4.44	4.45
Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities	3.85	3.83	3.82	3.81	3.87	3.87	3.81
Quality of extracurricular facilities on campus	3.64	3.59	3.53	3.60	3.62	3.63	3.58
Overall cost to your family	3.78	3.84	3.79	4.09	3.55	3.71	3.86
Value for the cost	4.38	4.39	4.37	4.48	4.27	4.33	4.40

For most of these school attributes there is little difference between parents of elementary, middle or high school students, or based on income or parent private school attendance. There is a notable difference in *overall cost to your family*. Parents who earned less than \$100,000 rated it as very important (4.09) whereas parents who earned more than \$100,000 rated it as moderately important (3.55). Parents who earned less than \$100,000 also rated *value for the cost* more importantly than parents who earned more than \$100,000 annually. Families who earn less than \$100,000 are more sensitive to the cost of the school than parents who earn more than \$100,000 annually.

A notable trend is that elementary school parents rated every school attribute, except the two directly dealing with school cost, as more important than parents of middle school or high school age children. For instance, the rate of attendance of parent teacher conferences for elementary student parents and high school parents would indicate this since there is almost always a better attendance rate for elementary school parents than high school parents. This difference has implication for messaging as well as admissions staff in managing different families depending on where their student is in school.

A Closer Examination of Information Sources

We used these same segments, student grade, income greater or less than \$100,000, and previous parent private school attendance and examined the information sources parents reported were influential in their school choice. The following table outlines our results of this cross tabulation.

	Grade			Income		Did either parent attend an independent school for primary or secondary education?	
	K - 4th grade	5th - 8th grade	9th - 12th grade	Less than \$100,000	More than \$100,000	Yes	No
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Please indicate the importance of the following	3.68	3.54	3.48	3.58	3.61	3.55	3.64
School-developed print publications	2.98	2.86	2.88	2.96	2.90	2.90	2.93
School Web site	3.22	3.05	3.04	3.16	3.11	3.07	3.15
Written follow-up communication from school	3.59	3.53	3.53	3.59	3.52	3.53	3.56
Open house	3.41	3.25	3.27	3.36	3.30	3.32	3.33
On-campus meetings with school staff	3.96	3.90	3.99	3.99	3.92	3.93	3.97
Contact with students who attend the school	3.52	3.60	3.59	3.55	3.56	3.57	3.54
Contact with parents whose children attend the school	3.80	3.79	3.74	3.71	3.83	3.79	3.76
Contact with alumni of the school	2.72	2.67	2.72	2.75	2.69	2.74	2.66
Print advertising	2.26	2.24	2.26	2.34	2.22	2.22	2.27
Referral from a realtor	1.52	1.60	1.61	1.58	1.57	1.53	1.60
Referral from a professional colleague	2.76	2.77	2.79	2.75	2.81	2.70	2.83
Referral from civic organization	1.94	1.95	1.95	2.02	1.91	1.91	1.97

There are a few things of note in the information sources. Parents of students in elementary school rated each of the following information sources somewhat higher than parents of middle school or high school children: *campus tour, school developed print publications, web site, follow up communication from school and open house*. The largest differences were found in *school developed print publications* and *school website*. As far as the information sources that involved greater contact with people, such as *on campus meetings with school staff* or *contact with parents and students currently attending the school*, there was not an increased rating in elementary parents ratings.

These sorts of occurrences seem similar to what was noted in the school attributes that parents of younger children approach school choice a bit differently, that they are more serious, and bring greater intensity. Elementary school parents may do more “homework” relying more heavily on what media is saying about the school and do not rely as much and probably not have the opportunity on as much what folks are saying about the school, instead making their decision in more isolation than parents of older students.

Appendix A: Correlation of School Attributes

	Academic reputation	Access to faculty	Personal attention given to students	Utilization of technology	Small class size	Quality of academic facilities	Cleanliness of the school facilities	Attractiveness of campus	Distance from my home	The area surrounding the school campus	Safety of the school environment	Athletic programs	Opportunities for extracurricular activities	Quality of extracurricular facilities on campus	Overall cost to your family	Value for the cost
Academic reputation	1	.216	.204	.269	.120	.302	.224	.172	-.004	.129	.227	.099	.152	.171	.127	.227
Access to faculty	.216	1	.414	.299	.250	.259	.295	.241	.135	.220	.247	.153	.229	.244	.156	.221
Personal attention given to students	.204	.414	1	.279	.434	.264	.291	.209	.059	.169	.294	.115	.211	.209	.135	.236
Utilization of technology	.269	.299	.279	1	.300	.488	.476	.309	.080	.266	.383	.266	.228	.353	.184	.218
Small class size	.120	.250	.434	.300	1	.263	.242	.165	.086	.160	.215	.053	.123	.135	.110	.163
Quality of academic facilities (library, labs, classrooms)	.302	.259	.264	.488	.263	1	.558	.467	.097	.382	.376	.225	.269	.380	.180	.236
Cleanliness of the school facilities	.224	.295	.291	.476	.242	.558	1	.563	.160	.465	.519	.274	.284	.375	.218	.272
Attractiveness of campus	.172	.241	.209	.309	.165	.467	.563	1	.208	.574	.331	.319	.299	.404	.162	.174
Distance from my home	-.004	.135	.059	.080	.086	.097	.160	.208	1	.315	.118	.095	.090	.115	.195	.117
The area/setting surrounding the school campus	.129	.220	.169	.266	.160	.382	.465	.574	.315	1	.386	.279	.281	.372	.203	.197
Safety of the school environment	.227	.247	.294	.383	.215	.376	.519	.331	.118	.386	1	.210	.268	.318	.223	.306
Athletic programs	.099	.153	.115	.266	.053	.225	.274	.319	.095	.279	.210	1	.560	.559	.174	.180
Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities	.152	.229	.211	.228	.123	.269	.284	.299	.090	.281	.268	.560	1	.749	.145	.181
Quality of extracurricular facilities on campus	.171	.244	.209	.353	.135	.380	.375	.404	.115	.372	.318	.559	.749	1	.183	.217
Overall cost to your family	.127	.156	.135	.184	.110	.180	.218	.162	.195	.203	.223	.174	.145	.183	1	.567
Value for the cost	.227	.221	.236	.218	.163	.236	.272	.174	.117	.197	.306	.180	.181	.217	.567	1

Appendix B: Correlation of Information Sources

	Campus tour	School-developed print pubs	School Web site	Written follow-up communication	Open house	On-campus meetings with staff	Contact with students who attend	Contact with parents whose children attend	Print advertising	Referral from a realtor	Referral from a colleague	Referral from civic organization	Referral from previous teacher	
Campus tour	1	.509	.379	.403	.427	.421	.200	.168	.104	.217	.145	.180	.154	.151
School-developed print pubs	.509	1	.570	.540	.431	.346	.272	.190	.231	.494	.247	.271	.306	.255
School Web site	.379	.570	1	.549	.331	.306	.246	.156	.207	.422	.294	.262	.341	.269
Written follow-up communication	.403	.540	.549	1	.402	.442	.281	.197	.211	.381	.254	.266	.320	.293
Open house	.427	.431	.331	.402	1	.395	.299	.244	.221	.362	.166	.193	.254	.255
On-campus meetings with school staff	.421	.346	.306	.442	.395	1	.331	.273	.189	.212	.127	.220	.200	.268
Contact with students who attend the school	.200	.272	.246	.281	.299	.331	1	.630	.437	.287	.173	.270	.274	.322
Contact with parents whose children attend the school	.168	.190	.156	.197	.244	.273	.630	1	.393	.202	.113	.268	.201	.269
Contact with alumni of the school	.104	.231	.207	.211	.221	.189	.437	.393	1	.388	.237	.278	.354	.352
Print advertising	.217	.494	.422	.381	.362	.212	.287	.202	.388	1	.387	.328	.452	.343
Referral from a realtor	.145	.247	.294	.254	.166	.127	.173	.113	.237	.387	1	.407	.593	.327
Referral from a professional colleague	.180	.271	.262	.266	.193	.220	.270	.268	.278	.328	.407	1	.538	.518
Referral from civic organization	.154	.306	.341	.320	.254	.200	.274	.201	.354	.452	.593	.538	1	.499
Referral from a previous teacher	.151	.255	.269	.293	.255	.268	.322	.269	.352	.343	.327	.518	.499	1