



## ***Independent School FAQs***

The following questions are from the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) brochure *America's Independent Schools, Learning, Leading, Achieving*. For more information, go to [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org) or [www.pnais.org](http://www.pnais.org)

### **What are Independent schools?**

Independent schools have **unique missions**;

Independent schools are **privately supported** by tuition payments, charitable contributions, and endowment revenue;

Independent schools are **governed by boards of trustees**; and

Independent schools are **accountable** to state and regional accrediting associations. Through the accreditation process, schools hold themselves publicly accountable to all who seek assurance that they meet generally acceptable standards of educational quality, operation, and staff competence.

### **How are Independent schools unique?**

Independent schools are independently governed by a board of trustees which allows schools the opportunity to define their own mission and the freedom to design a quality curriculum which best meets its mission. The financial support for independent schools does not come from taxes or church funds, but rather from tuition-paying families and charitable contributions. Such support only comes from families who recognize that their children are receiving a quality education.

Families value the fact that independent schools work hard to create communities where students thrive in small classes led by quality faculty members who set academic standards consistent with the mission of the school. Families also like the fact that independent schools stress a well-rounded education by encouraging students to participate in sports, the arts, and a variety of other co-curricular activities. Indeed, parents are also provided with substantial opportunities to become involved in the life of the school.

These important qualities were reinforced in the 1999 National Public Opinion Poll on Perceptions of Independent Schools commissioned by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). This poll found that, "independent schools are seen as most different in offering a more personalized, customized education, and an environment that is civil and controlled.

Small class sizes, individualized attention, values, manners, and discipline are the most particular factors describing differences perceived between public and independent schools". If such qualities are important to you and your child, then the next step is to find the right independent school for your child.

## **How do I begin the process of selecting the right school for my child?**

While all the schools in this Association are committed to providing a positive and safe educational experience for all their children, there is no common mold for our schools. Each school has developed a distinctive program and culture based upon its mission and suited to its own community. Finding the "right match" is not an easy process and parents should gather as much information as possible. It is recommended that parents begin this process the fall before the year in which they wish to enroll their child. Also, parents should consider a number of schools as many schools have more applicants than places for new students.

Just as each school is unique, so each child possesses differing needs and desires. A family should spend time assessing what these needs and desires are. How competitive or supportive an academic setting is desirable? Is remedial help needed in certain areas? Does your child perform better in a structured or relaxed environment? Would your child be more comfortable in a single sex or a coed school? Is a day school or a boarding school setting a better environment? Are there special programs that would be of particular interest (international exchange, experiential education)? What are your child's favorite subjects, activities, sports?

At the same time parents need to consider their own preferences and concerns. What level of formality (dress code, approach to discipline) would make you most comfortable? Do you want opportunities to volunteer at school? Where do you hope your child will go for the next level of education? Do you have questions about costs and/or financial aid? Do you need an extended day program? Is transportation a concern?

Other key questions parents should ask have been posed as part of the Independent School Advocacy Initiative.

As you attempt to answer these questions, you should also begin collecting information about the various schools in which you are interested. Call and request admission brochures and application materials or go to the PNAIS School Database to find links to our member schools. Find out the requirements and deadline dates of the admission process. Are interviews with you and your child required? What type of admission testing or academic assessment must your child go through? Are references from current teachers required? Are there deadline dates for various steps in the process? When will schools make admission decisions and/or financial aid decisions? What factors does the school take into account when choosing between students? The more information you can pull together, the better able you will be to understand and navigate the process.

## **How do I decide which school is the right choice for my child?**

Once you have heard from the schools that accepted your child, you will be given a certain amount of time to make your choice - usually two weeks. While schools have a range of policies and procedures regarding additional visits, you might be able to visit the school again.

Many families seek out parents whose children are already enrolled in the school. These parents can provide useful insights about the value of the school's community, program and faculty. Making the final decision is never easy, but be sure that your decision does take into account as many of the things you were looking for in the first place.

Whichever school you choose be sure to inform the other schools which accepted your child of your final decision. Many schools have candidates on waiting lists, and these students are anxious to learn whether a space will become available. Therefore, prompt responses are not only considered a common courtesy, but important. Once you return the enrollment contract along with a tuition deposit, your family will be considered part of that school's community. You will hear several times from the school before the start of the next school year and will begin to experience the sense of community and caring that is such an important part of the independent school world.

## **How can I finance an independent school education?**

While everyone will agree that a private school education can be expensive, it doesn't have to break your budget. Affording a quality education does take some planning, and most families employ several strategies to keep the costs within reach. In this planning it is important to realize that the family bears the primary responsibility for financing their child's education to the extent that they are able.

The best source of information lies with the financial aid officers at the individual schools you're considering. They can explain the full range of financing options that the school offers so that you can see how these options fit within your financial planning.

Among the most common of financing options is financial aid. These grants are based upon the financial need of a family and do not need to be paid back. The money for these grants comes directly from a school's budget and demonstrates the school's commitment to having a socio-economically diverse student population.

Another common option is a monthly payment plan. These plans are administered either by the schools themselves or by outside agencies approved by a school and allow families to spread out their tuition payments over a period of eight to ten months. In most cases, payments start before the school year begins.

Occasionally schools also offer loan programs. Loan programs differ from payment plans in that they charge interest, require creditworthiness, and often include fees beyond interest payments. Families utilizing this option should look carefully at both the short and long-term financial impact.

Remember that financing a private school education requires some planning on your part and most families take advantage of at least one of the above options. No matter which of these options you decide to use, following deadline dates for submitting the necessary forms is most important. Missing a deadline or not following directions might well diminish your chances of utilizing that particular financing option. And remember that the admission and/or financial aid officers are willing to help you understand these options. They are interested in the same thing you are - providing a quality education for your child!