



A Parent's Guide  
to  
**Choosing a  
Christian School**  
in the  
**Metro Chicago Area**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Deciding how to educate your children can be one of the most stressful decisions you make as a parent. Whether you're moving to a new area or setting out on the journey of choosing a school for the first time, there are lots of important variables to weigh and you have lots of options to choose from.

No longer is it as simple as sending your child to the one local school in the area. Now you've got public, private, charter and homeschooling options – all vying for first place.

You know that your child's schooling can be one of those make-it-or-break-it parenting decisions. But it's not always clear what qualities are going to have the biggest impact on your child's life.

To help you in your search, we've compiled a list of 7 criteria to look for when choosing a school in the Chicago area. Through research and familiarity with a host of different schools and communities, we've found these things to be critical for families in their choice of a school.

Though different families will value some things more than others, this list represents some of the most important considerations to keep in mind in your search.



## 1. GENUINE FAITH

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As you're looking for a school, one of the most important things to look for is whether or not the community is genuinely Christian. Some Christian schools are only Christian in name. Whether it's how the students act when the teachers aren't looking or what the teachers post on Facebook when the administration isn't looking, it's easy for the average Christian school to lose some of the spark of authentic Christianity.

When trying to gauge this in a school, we recommend reading the statement of faith on their website. Also, it's worth asking the school how they evaluate families for acceptance. Are families expected to be practicing Christians plugged in to a local church?

Or is the school just open to whoever is willing to pay the tuition dollars?

Nothing beats visiting the school yourself and talking with some of the parents and teachers to see what really matters to them. You're looking for a place that's unapologetically Christian and gospel-centered. Everything should be affected by a biblical worldview, not just chapel or Bible class.

### **Here are a few important questions to ask to get the temperature of the school's faith:**

- How does the school evaluate the faith of their faculty? Are they asked to sign a statement? Tell their testimony? Attend a local church?
- Is the Bible used in classes other than Bible, theology or chapel? How do they integrate faith with other subjects?
- What churches do the families go to? Is it one main church in the area? Or is there a big spread of churches? Is the school denominational or independent?
- How are students living out their faith? Are there service projects? Mentoring or discipleship programs?
- Do they read the whole Bible, or just parts? How well do students know the Bible?
- Do the students and faculty pray together on a regular basis? Do they engage in corporate worship together? If so, what does this look like?



## 2. ACADEMIC RIGOR

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You might think it goes without saying that a school should be academically rigorous. It's a school, after all, right? But actually there are a lot of Christian schools that are more focused on making a way for every student to do whatever sport or extra-curricular they could possibly want than the fundamentals of good academics.

If you want your student to be challenged academically and pushed to meet their potential, you have to look for it.

It's worth taking some time to consider what goes in to rigorous

academics. At the very least, it includes challenging teachers, quality curriculum and a solid core of academic classes that will prepare students for college.

- How thoughtful and articulate are the teachers? Do they push their students to grow? What degrees and education level do they have?
- What is the curriculum like? Do they read hard books that have stood the test of time?
- What's expected of students to "graduate"? Do they need to meet a certain standard?
- How easy is it to get an A? Is there a slip into grade inflation?
- Does the school track students in math and reading? Are weaker students challenged with the same curriculum?
- Are students pushed equally in language arts, math and science?



### 3. SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS

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Of course, a school might have academic rigor, but no support from its teachers. Students are pushed and challenged to meet test scores and get into the best colleges, but they aren't always treated as human beings.

Unfortunately, this is too much of a reality in our world. While you don't want a school that lets your kids coast, you also don't want a school that stresses them out with an endless amount of homework and the nervous strain of too much pressure to succeed.

The best antidote for this common problem is supportive teachers who will come alongside your student even when they fail or struggle.



- Do the teachers really care about the students? Or are they just pressured into getting results?
- Do teachers ever meet with struggling students outside of class time to help them get a skill or concept?
- Is there a partnership between parents and teachers? Or do teachers resent a parent's interference in their classroom?
- Are students encouraged to keep trying at things that are hard for them? Or are only "winners" accepted at this school?



## 4. LOVE OF LEARNING

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At the end of the day, there's probably nothing more important than whether or not your kids become life-long learners. In our world the fact is that the average person is likely to change careers many times, and the job you end with may have no connection with your major in college. A 2015 study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that young baby boomers (born 1957-64) changed jobs on average 11.7 times between the ages of 18 and 48. If that's the case for the baby boomer generation, what's it going to be for our kids?

It's those who love learning who are going to have the best chance of success in our new economy. So you want to find a school that embodies that. You want an atmosphere that excites that love of learning in each student. At many schools there's a culture of disinterest or jumping through hoops to get a grade. You don't want that to spread to your child.

Instead, you want to find a school community where learning is its own reward.

- Are students at this school passionately engaged in their studies? Do they like going to school every day?
- What awards have students received? Do they go above and beyond outside of class?
- How does the school inspire its students for life, not just to get a grade?
- What field trips and outside opportunities are available for students?
- How has this school influenced the way its students spend their free time? Are they readers? Do they spend time getting really good at a skill or ability?



## 5. INSPIRING EXTRACURRICULARS AND SPORTS

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Alongside fostering a love of learning, extracurriculars and sports are a good indicator of a vibrant school community. You don't want a school of students who don't have any interests of their own. Students should be developing their skills and abilities. They should be discovering areas of passion and following meaningful pursuits.

A school doesn't have to have all the bells and whistles to make this a reality. It's more about what the students and teachers get out of it and how passionate they are about it.

- What are the school's unique offerings? Do they align with your child's interests?
- Does the school body come out for games and events? What's the school spirit like?
- What do students get really excited about at this school? What do they do with their free time?
- Do the extracurricular programs have passionate leaders? Are they teachers and community members or outside hires?



## 6. SAFE COMMUNITY

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One of the biggest warning signs at any school is the presence of cliques, bullying and all the stereotypes of youth culture. While no school can completely eradicate these sorts of problems, it's important to gauge the temperature of a school community. Are there major discipline problems? Or does the school intentionally strive for a safe atmosphere to learn and make friends?

We all have experienced or heard about the toxic environment at some schools. There are few things that put a damper on student learning and achievement like a negative culture.

To be a countercultural community of Christians, a school should have proactive measures in place to foster positive relationships among students. While you want discipline to be gracious, schools should have strict policies against bullying or other harmful



behavior. If internet is available, they should have ways to minimize the possibility of students exposing other students to inappropriate content.

Talk with parents at the school before you get too far into the admissions process. That's the best way to see if the community is the warm, accepting place you want for your kids.

- What is the discipline policy at the school?
- How closely are students monitored throughout the day?
- Do students engage in positive peer-to-peer interactions with other students throughout the day?
- Is there a sense of family and acceptance at the school?
- Are younger students mentored by older students?

## 7. A COMPELLING MISSION

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The best schools are not just good at academics, extracurriculars and sports. They are unified around a compelling mission. Like other great organizations, a great school needs to have a Why, a unique purpose that drives it to excellence in all the areas we've already mentioned.

If your child can be educated at a school with a compelling vision, odds are they will gain vision and purpose for their own lives. Aimless schools breed aimless young adults.

In a way, it doesn't matter too much what this purpose is, as long as it's Christ honoring and compelling enough to drive everyone in the school forward together.



“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18 KJV).  
The fact that a vision exists is half the battle.

Maybe that mission is about reaching the lost for Christ, or leading in corporate America with strong Christian values, or excelling in our callings to the glory of God. Whatever it is, you want a culture that eats, sleeps and breathes its unique mission.

- Do the faculty and staff, board members and parents know the school's mission or vision?
- How does the school's mission impact its choices, in academics, extracurriculars, strategic planning?
- Are there unique programs or aspects of the school that embody its compelling mission? Or is it just a saying on a page of the website that no one reads?
- Can I get behind the school's mission and vision, so that my family can be part of something bigger than just our own kids' education?



## NEXT STEPS

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When you're looking for a place to educate your child, there's so much more to it than just a name. You're looking for a school

community: a community of faith and learning, an atmosphere of relationships, and an educational mission that's going to set your child on a trajectory for life.

### **So, what do I do next?**

- Using this list create a list of qualities that are most important to you and your family.
- Research schools in the area. A good place to begin is by browsing school websites with your criteria in mind.
- Schedule a tour or visit at schools that you think might be a good fit for your family.
- Prayer for discernment and that God would lead you to the right school community.



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