

Why Choose an Independent School?



Independent schools are known for providing a safe, nurturing environment in which students are encouraged to reach their full potential. Independent schools are, by definition, unique. The goal for parents is to select the school that is just the right fit for their child. Parents have many choices when it comes to their child's education.

In addition to visiting the school website and school campus, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) recommends that you ask these key questions during your search:

- Do students feel challenged by their school?
- Are the teachers of high quality and committed?
- Does the school have a low student-to-teacher ratio?
- Do parents, teachers and students share a strong partnership?
- Does the school climate support achievement?

Additionally, the answers to the following important questions are provided as a guide for parents in their search for the best academic, social and emotional fit for their child.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why an independent school?

The goal of choosing a school is to match a child's abilities, interests and needs with the most appropriate educational setting. Independent schools have unique missions, philosophies and core values. The right school for any child is the one that can best meet the needs of that child. This decision may be made at the beginning of your child's educational career or even in "midstream". If an independent school was not your initial choice, at some point in your child's education, you may decide that your child is not thriving and you want to pursue a different learning community.

Independent, private, public....what's the difference?

- Public schools, funded by the state, are available free of charge for every child. There are many public schools options, including traditional, fundamental, magnet and charter schools. Public schools adhere to a set curriculum and all students participate in annual state standardized testing.
- Private schools often have a religious affiliation and were founded by parents and community members who adhere to a certain philosophy. They are supported by their religious community as well as through tuition from parents.
- Independent schools may be secular or religious and may be based on a particular educational philosophy. They are governed by a board of trustees that is solely responsible for the school and are independently funded, mostly through tuition. Independent schools are characterized by strong academics, adherence to quality standards, autonomy in choosing curriculum and adherence to school mission.

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- All types of schools typically administer annual standardized tests, but nonpublic schools are free to choose the testing program that best fits its educational goals, rather than state mandated tests.

What's the process for applying to an independent school?

After researching the schools in your area by visiting web sites and talking with friends, neighbors, business associates and colleagues, call the school to arrange for a campus tour while school is in session. During the tour, ask key questions regarding curriculum, faculty, mission, extra-curricular activities and accommodations. Each school's process will be unique, but in general, the steps following the school tour may include: completing an application, inquiring about a shadow date for your child, completing financial aid forms, if applicable, arranging for any required testing and contacting current school to have transcripts, testing results and references forwarded.

What is the relationship between the independent school, teacher and parents?

Independent schools adhere to a "triangle" approach to education – student, family and school. These three are linked together to ensure a solid education for each child. Thus, parents are considered integral to the success of their child. Regular communication, including parent-teacher conferences, on-line and/or paper progress reports, newsletters and, sometimes, parent portals, are the norm in an independent school. Parents are encouraged to be active participants in the life of the school! Schools typically have a wealth of volunteer opportunities where your involvement will be welcomed.

Why do some people believe independent schools are exclusive or elitist?

Years ago, independent schools served only the affluent in our society; that is no longer the case. Independent schools are now distinguished by adherence to mission, academic rigor, diversity, autonomy, character education, and service learning programs in an environment that fosters respect.

When is the best time to send my child to an independent school? Elementary, Middle or upper school?

To fully benefit from an independent school education, the optimal time for a child to enroll is PreKindergarten or Kindergarten, while continuing in a similar school community through graduation. Independent elementary schools typically provide students with a solid academic base and study skills that will be beneficial for a lifetime. Middle schools usually focus on the emerging young adults; many schools have advisory and character education programs to guide students through this transitional stage. Independent upper schools generally provide rigorous academic work, opportunities for leadership, service-learning in the community and athletics, and opportunities for strong college placement guidance.

Do independent schools have good sports programs?

Many FCIS schools are members of FHSAA, the Florida High School Athletic Association, and compete within their classification with other schools across the state in a multitude of sports.

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Independent schools typically offer a wide range of sports, often have excellent facilities, and encourage students to participate and experience multiple sports. Independent schools recognize the importance of extra-curricular activities and are therefore committed to a successful program.

What can I expect from teachers in an independent school?

Faculty who choose to teach at an independent school are passionate about children and committed to excellence in their subject area. They understand the value of forming relationships with students and working with students in many capacities (classroom teacher, club sponsor, coach, advisor). They value the autonomy they are given in the creation and implementation of curriculum that both meets the school mission and engages students. Teachers value the parent/teacher/student relationship and welcome parent input.

What is the value of small class size for my child?

Small classes allow faculty to truly get to know each child. Teachers have time to monitor progress, answer questions in depth, and build a relationship with each child. Additionally, small class size allows time for interdisciplinary projects, collaboration, technology integration and field trips.

My child has a learning difference. Is there any room for my child in an independent school?

There are FCIS schools whose missions are dedicated to students with learning differences. In addition, some schools have an academic support program with specialists trained to work with children and their unique learning styles and differences.

Tuition in area independent schools is quite high. How will I know if my family will qualify for financial aid?

Financial aid is based on family need; many families with above-average family incomes will qualify for some support. The amount of aid varies from school to school. As part of the admission process, many schools will allow you to submit a Financial Aid form, which is the initial step in calculating the financial aid award. The average FCIS school provides financial aid to 16% of its families (NAIS Statistics 2010-11).

What about diversity in independent schools?

Independent schools in Florida are quite diverse. According to NAIS Statistics from the 2010-11 academic year, FCIS schools enrolled 21.1% students of color. Increasingly, many schools offer programs in diversity and service learning that provide students with multiple opportunities in building cultural awareness.

How will an independent school education prepare my child for the “real world” in a 21st century society?

Independent schools increasingly adhere to the following values and skills that, according to Pat Bassett, President of NAIS, are crucial for success in the 21st century: Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical thinking, Character Education and Cosmopolitanism, or the

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understanding of global communities. In the fall 2011 edition of *Independent School*, an NAIS publication, an article entitled “Independent Schools: A Well-rounded Preparation for College and beyond”, cites impressive comparative statistics between public and independent school graduates. For example, demonstration of a high degree of open-mindedness and tolerance (66% Ind school vs 58% public school), creativity (60% vs 54%) and leadership (63% vs 60%) are a few examples where independent school graduates outperform their public school graduate peers. Independent school graduates appear to have acquired many skills that will enable them to look beyond the school campus and interact with the world at large.

What other questions should we be asking as we contemplate this decision?

Finally, ask for the names of parents with whom you can speak. If you are looking for an upper school, ask for the most recent senior class profile, which will provide a list of colleges where graduates have been accepted. How much guidance is provided each student and when does the college guidance process begin? Ask about the school’s philosophy, core values and mission, and how these were developed. With regards to curriculum, how extensive are course offerings? Ask about professional affiliations for faculty, coaches and administrators. What about accreditations?

Is enrolling my child in an independent school a good investment?

Recent statistics report the following in SAT average scores for 2010-11:

	Public	FCIS
Reading	497	557
Mathematics	514	573
Writing	489	556

Finally, it all comes down to some basic questions:

- Is there a “spark” in my child’s eyes and an interest in learning?
- Is my child engaged and nurtured?
- Is my child curious and challenged?
- Is the process of learning more important than the testing and rote learning?
- Are my child’s needs being adequately met in the present situation?

Education: The Gift of a Lifetime

Sources include: NAIS Statistics 2010-11, *Independent School*, NAIS Publication Fall 2011, AISNE website, *Independents: The Newsletter of the Florida Council of Independent Schools*, Sept/Oct 2011