

Navigating School Choice

Explore your options. Ask meaningful questions. Find what works for your family.

● What is school choice?

School choice refers to the different education settings and programs families may consider for their children. Available options depend on where a family lives, state laws, enrollment requirements, and individual school policies.

There is no single school setting that meets every student's needs. Families may consider a child's learning preferences, interests, educational needs, and the household's circumstances.

● Understanding your options

Traditional Public Schools Publicly funded schools generally operated by local school districts. Many students attend a school assigned according to their home address. Some districts allow transfers or enrollment in other schools.	Public Charter Schools Publicly funded, tuition-free schools operating under a charter agreement. They may have different educational approaches or organizational structures. Enrollment procedures vary by state and school.	Magnet Schools or Programs Public schools or programs that may feature specialized themes such as science, technology, performing arts, languages, or other academic interests. Some have application or selection processes.
Private Schools Independently operated schools that may have religious, independent, or specialized educational approaches. Tuition, admissions requirements, financial assistance, and available student services vary.	Homeschooling Education provided primarily under a parent-directed home education arrangement. State laws govern requirements such as notification, curriculum, instruction, and assessments.	Virtual or Online Schools Programs offering instruction primarily online. Some operate as public schools, while others are private or part of homeschooling arrangements. Supervision, schedules, costs, and enrollment requirements vary.

● What should families consider?

Learning and academics:	Curriculum, teaching approach, academic programs, enrichment, and opportunities for individualized learning.
Student supports:	Special education, language assistance, counseling, academic interventions, and other services.
School environment:	Safety policies, communication, discipline practices, student relationships, and opportunities for belonging.
Everyday logistics:	Transportation, school hours, before- and after-school care, meals, and family schedules.
Enrollment and costs:	Attendance boundaries, application deadlines, selection requirements, tuition, scholarships, supplies, and other expenses.

● Understanding school performance information

Public school report cards provide information such as academic achievement, graduation rates, attendance, and other measures.

Families can review these data alongside school visits, conversations with staff, information about available programs, and their child's individual needs.

Important: Students with disabilities have protections under IDEA and Section 504 in public schools, including public charter schools. Services and legal requirements for parentally placed private school students can differ. Families considering a change of setting may wish to ask how current supports would continue.



My School Choice Worksheet

Use this worksheet to compare options, prepare for school visits, and organize your next steps.

1 What matters to our family?

Check the factors you want to explore:

- ☐ Academic programs and teaching approach
- ☐ Learning supports and special education
- ☐ School climate and student safety
- ☐ Class sizes and student experience
- ☐ Arts, sports, clubs, or enrichment
- ☐ Transportation and school schedule
- ☐ Family communication and involvement
- ☐ Costs, fees, or financial assistance
- ☐ Other: _____

Our family's most important considerations:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2 Compare schools you're considering

What to compare	● School A	◆ School B
School name		
Programs/supports		
Transportation/hours		
Enrollment deadline		
Costs/fees		
Questions or notes		

3 Questions to ask during a visit or conversation

- How is instruction organized, and what makes this school's approach distinctive?
- What academic, developmental, or disability-related supports are available?
- How does the school communicate with families?
- What are the enrollment requirements and deadlines?
- What does a typical school day look like?
- What additional expenses should families anticipate?

My additional questions:

4 My next step

School or program I want to learn more about:

Person or office to contact:

Action I plan to take:

Important date or deadline:

Learn more from trusted sources

U.S. Department of Education — Education Choice

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-grade-12-education/education-choice>

U.S. Department of Education — State School Report Cards

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education/elementary-and-secondary-education/where-can-i-find-my-state-report-card-website>

NCES — Find a School

https://nces.ed.gov/nceskids/school_search.asp

IDEA — Students with Disabilities in Private Schools

<https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/individuals-disabilities/idea/students-disabilities-private-schools>

Explore further with OH FAMILY

Visit <https://www.ohfamilyinc.org/support-programs> and explore the education resources and school-choice information in the Resource Hub.

About this guide

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Disclosure: This guide is for general educational purposes and does not recommend or endorse any particular school or educational approach. School availability, enrollment rules, costs, requirements, and student services vary by state and institution. Families should verify current information with schools and their state or local education agencies. This guide is not individualized educational or legal advice.