



11 Questions to Ask When Considering a Private School



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Introduction



A look to the future tells us in no uncertain terms that our children will face a very different world in the coming years. It calls on educators and parents to focus on developing students who are self-directed, innately curious and have the knowledge and confidence to find their way in the world.

At Whitby, we have taken this challenge head on and created an environment designed to develop rich minds. With our innovative integration of Montessori and International Baccalaureate, we ready students with the world skills they need to thrive in the 21st century. Every day we see in our school classrooms what international brain and education research has validated: that inquiry-based learning presented in a prepared and well-defined environment empowers children to become independent, confident and critical thinking adults.

Whitby School is an independent, coeducational private day school for students ages 18 months through eighth grade located only 45 minutes from New York City in Greenwich CT.

This guide was written by a passionate team of educators at Whitby School.

Be sure to connect with Whitby on social media.



1. What is your school's mission and strategic plan?

A school's mission is the quickest way to determine a good fit for your family's educational values. A mission-driven school is one where the mission statement is not only prominently displayed, but is visible in the teaching and learning throughout the school. If you are visiting a school, be sure to ask where the mission statement is on display as well as how it influences strategies that the school uses to educate its students.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

Whitby's mission is to inspire a passion for learning and empower each child to take responsibility as an open-minded, principled citizen in a global community.

Strategic Plan

A private school's Strategic Plan is just as important as its Mission Statement. Far too many excellent missions fall by the wayside because of a lack of a concrete plan to support achieving the mission. That's why we always recommend parents ask private schools about their Strategic Plan as well as their Mission Statement.



TIP: Be sure to ask for specific examples of how the school has been achieving its mission from each year to the next.



When students have a voice in their learning, they feel empowered and become inspired to learn even more. An inspired student will spend the rest of their life teaching themselves whatever they need to know to achieve their goals.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

One of the ways we help students develop a passion for learning is by providing them opportunities to inquire into the world around them and to investigate the things that they are excited to learn more about.

2. How does your school empower students to take ownership of their learning?

Students in the 21st century need to know how to approach a challenge with a learning mindset. They also need to understand their own learning strengths and challenges, so they can figure out how best to teach themselves the knowledge they need to succeed.

Effective schools can be measured by their ability to develop students who don't need to be told to do their homework or to study for tests. A great school will produce students who feel empowered to be self-advocates as they research, experiment and take risks.

Learning More Than Facts

At Whitby, we use a variety of strategies, such as the use of rubrics, to empower students to assess the quality of their own work.



Empowering students to take ownership of their learning is a critical element of any educational strategy.



TIP: To assess how a private school helps students take ownership of their own learning, ask them about their education process. Programs focused on inquiry-based learning encourage students to guide their own education through self-led experiments and hands-on learning engagements in a variety of subjects.



3. How does your school differentiate learning?

One of the main reasons to send your child to a private school is to reap the benefits of a low teacher-student ratio. The smaller the group, the more attention a teacher can give to individual students.

However, not all private schools make differentiating the learning a priority. The way in which schools view their use of low teacher-student ratios to enhance learning is the key differentiator. That's why, when choosing a private school, we recommend parents zero in on how a school differentiates its learning processes from those of other schools.



TIP: Ask about the specific tactics they use to provide a unique educational experience for your child at their school.

Sample questions you might ask:

- If I were to step into a classroom at your school, what would stand out to me as being different from the other private schools I've visited?
- What unique educational practices are less obvious to a casual visitor, but have a big impact on your student's success?
- What types of students and learning styles have the best success at your school?
- How many full time teachers are actively involved in each classroom?



Each child is unique and may be challenged in one area, and excel in another. Classroom groups that are fluid and personalized allow students to learn in ways that best suit their individual strengths.

All schools have certain basic requirements that they need to fulfill. What really makes a private school stand out is how they create a learning environment that enables different types of students to succeed. At Whitby, differentiating the learning means meeting students where they are at in their understanding of a given concept and developing this understanding further without concern for limitations.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

In our Lower School classrooms we staff two fully certified instructors. This allows our teachers a chance to really get to know the students and give them personalized attention—and our students are able to expand their worldview by adding multiple perspectives within each subject.

4. How does your school view the role of technology in the classroom?

The rate of technological change is accelerating exponentially. Still, some schools have not adopted the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning, while others have severely limited the use of technology in the classroom. Depending on your beliefs on the role that technology should play in your child's future, the answer to this question is a quick way to determine the best fit for your child.

Many schools talk during the admissions process about the technology available to their students; but, as a parent, it's more important to consider how technology is actually used by students and teachers to enhance the learning process.

Asking the following questions will help determine how technology will play a role in your child's education:

- What technology do students use in their day-to-day learning?
- How does your school support students in their use of this technology?
- How do you incorporate technology into multiple subjects?
- How do you support your students in learning to use new technologies?
- How do you teach your students the self-management and decision making skills they need to turn off their devices?



The technology landscape is constantly changing and new technologies are coming out which create opportunities to change the way we learn.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

We believe it's more important than ever for students to be digitally and technologically literate. That doesn't mean, however, that the focus should be on learning technology for technology's sake. It should always be about learning to use technology in the context of enhancing learning.

5. Is your school student-centered or teacher-centered?

The traditional educational model expects students to repeat back the knowledge provided by their teachers. The teacher is the center of attention and information flows out in one direction. This teacher-centered style often fails to truly engage students and inspire them to become involved in their own education.

Student-centered learning allows students to become responsible for their own education putting them at the center. Students are challenged to engage with real life issues, set a strategy to find the answers, and determine how successful they are in their learning through regular self-assessment.

Ask these questions to determine the learning environment in the classroom:

- How much influence do students have on what they learn?
- How are the students provided a voice?
- Are the desks in rows with the teacher's desk at the front or are the desks arranged in small groups spread around the room without a clear "center"?
- As you tour, who is doing the talking in the classroom?
- What does instruction look like? Is the teacher up front instructing, or does the environment change?
- How much emphasis is placed on becoming a problem solver?



Real life doesn't come with a set of textbook answers and an exact process to follow. That's why it's essential for schools to help students learn how to solve problems on their own.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

Whitby students are introduced to topics through IB Units of Inquiry such as "Get a Job," "Then and Now," "Our Changing Earth," "Economics and What Does the Body Good." They are encouraged to ask questions and investigate to find answers that allow them to find meaningful conclusions.

Inspiring Wonder

Whitby encourages students to explore the questions that interest them. Every classroom has a Wonderboard where students can post the questions they wonder about. In our 3rd and 4th grade classrooms, students use the Wonderboard as inspiration to pick passion projects to explore. It is amazing how well students learn when they are able to throw themselves into answering a question that captures their imagination.

6. How does your school give kids a global perspective?

The widespread adoption of the internet has changed the world dramatically in the last decade. It has made it possible for companies to work in real-time across borders and time zones. When your child grows up, he or she will have to be able to work with people from many different cultures in their daily life.

The true value of achieving a global perspective is learning that there are multiple ways to view a challenge and multiple ways to approach a solution. Developing the ability to see things from multiple perspectives is one of the building blocks of being a creative problem-solver.

For that reason, it's important to assess how a private school values the diversity of its community as well as provides opportunities to develop your child's ability to see things from multiple perspectives.



Great schools will aspire to provide kids a global perspective to give them an edge in understanding the challenges of their own culture.



The more exposure your child has to different cultures and languages, the more prepared they will be to compete in a global work environment when they're older.

Ask these questions to determine how they help their students develop a global perspective:

- How do you incorporate language learning into the school day?
- How do you expose students to other cultures within the curriculum?
- How do you give students first-hand knowledge of how other cultures operate?
- How are students taught to value diversity and challenge archaic ideas?

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

We are proud to say that Whitby students represent 40 countries and speak more than 15 languages and we employ teachers and faculty from all over the world. We believe this diverse range gives our students daily exposure to different cultures, perspectives and insights.

7. How does your school provide opportunities for the faculty to develop?

The answer to this question is a great litmus test for understanding the culture of a school. Schools with cultures that truly value continuous improvement will make investing time and resources in professional development a priority for both faculty and administrators because the best educators are the ones who are always learning themselves.



TIP: Ask for concrete examples of how faculty engage in professional development.

Here are two things that can help you identify if a school is constantly improving:

1. Teachers with Passion

When you're looking for a private school for your child, look for one where the teachers are motivated to constantly improve their teaching practice. Students are more likely to develop a love of learning when they are taught by educators who love to learn.



Higher levels of teacher engagement lead to higher levels of successful learning for students. Engaged teachers equal engaged students. It's a win-win for everyone.

2. Support from the Top

Look for a school that supports their faculty and staff on their learning journey. It's hard for even the most motivated teacher to learn without support from the top.

Here are some key indicators that will help you determine if faculty and staff are properly supported:

- Foster their growth through conferences, seminars, workshops and advanced degrees/studies.
- Investigate educational areas of interest to them.
- Experiment with new educational techniques and strategies in the classroom.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

At Whitby, nowhere is the fact that we are a community of learners more apparent than in the school's mission statement which clearly talks about inspiring a passion for learning.

8. How does your school create a community?

The old proverb says “It takes a whole village to raise a child.”
Students learn best when they are part of a learning community.

Children learn best when their parents are involved in their education. That’s why it’s so important to ask about how the private school you’re considering welcomes you into their community. You want to find a school that offers you opportunities to be involved at many different levels, as well as one that focuses on keeping the lines of communication open between parents and the school.

Ask the following questions in regards to how they involve parents in the school’s learning community:

- What opportunities are there for parents to get involved in supporting the school?
- Is there a Parents Association? What does the Parents Association do?
- What events take place during the school year to involve parents?
- Does that school do a weekly newsletter?
- How do educators communicate with parents?
- How do parents stay up-to-date on their children’s progress?

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Creating a tight community of parents, educators and students is the key to helping students succeed.

9. How does your school view the role of community service?

Students who volunteer not only develop a richer perspective of the world they live in, they benefit academically and socially as well. Research shows that students involved in community service become better problem solvers, gain a greater sense of responsibility and learn that their actions can make a difference. Interestingly, volunteering also has academic benefits.

Students who participate in service-learning score higher on student achievement tests and increase their grades in reading, language arts and math.

Here are some questions you could ask to determine if their students get involved in community service:

- What are the community service requirements at your school?
 - Can you share examples of how students of all ages get involved in the community?
 - Do you provide opportunities for students to develop a global perspective by volunteering abroad?
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Although many schools view community service as an option, it has tangible social and academic benefits for students. That's why if you're looking for a private school that will set your child up for success, we highly recommend finding out how the school gets students involved in the greater community.

AT WHITBY FOR EXAMPLE:

Whitby requires 7th and 8th grade students to perform at least 15 hours of community service every year. Our students choose to work in animal shelters, clean up the Long Island Sound, work with elders in assisted living communities, volunteer at the YMCA, the Special Olympics and even abroad.

10. How do you prepare students for secondary school success?

High school is one of the most important times in a student's education. The secondary school your child goes to will influence the future of their education when deciding to attend college. Students who do well in high school are often prepared emotionally and academically at an early age.

Ask the following questions to determine how your child may be prepared for secondary school success:

- How do you help students prepare for the next level of schooling?
- What steps do you take at the elementary school level to help students prepare for higher education?
- If we were to talk to the Admissions department of the local private high school, what would they say distinguishes your graduates from the other students who apply?



TIP: Find out how a private school helps students get into the high school that best fits them. The high school that is the best fit emotionally, culturally and academically will benefit your child the greatest.

Ask the school you're considering:

- Which high schools have your students attended?
- What do you consider when you recommend high schools to students?
- What is the student's role in this process?



Students should be able to evaluate their own high school options and choose one that matches their particular learning needs.

11. How does your school maintain safety and security?

Recent life-changing events at schools across the country have shown that no school is immune to potential threats. This means that the safety of children needs to be a high priority to ensure that learning can thrive within a safe and secure environment.

We recommend gaining an insight into the security infrastructure when visiting schools you are considering. The school should be able to clearly articulate what they're doing to provide a safe environment, and how they keep faculty and staff trained to perform in a crisis.

Here are three essential areas schools should focus on to create a safe environment for students.



1. Monitoring

High quality—high-definition video surveillance strategically placed around the school to capture all exits and entrances. Ideally, the system should be able to capture license plates of cars entering and exiting the campus.

Here are some questions to ask about monitoring:

- Does the school use security cameras to monitor campus grounds both inside & out?
- Who monitors the security cameras?
- Are the monitors focused in one area, or are there several sets of monitors placed in key locations around the school so multiple administrators have the ability to fully monitor the campus?



2. Facility

Access control is the the first line of defense in protecting students.

Here are a few questions to ask about facility access:

- Does the school keep doors locked all day except for when students arrive & leave?
- How does the school manage visitors?
- How are students released to family and approved caretakers at the end of the day?
- What precautions has the school taken when building the facility?

11. How does your school maintain safety and security? (cont.)



3. Emergency Response

Swift, calm responses from faculty and staff can keep situations from escalating. When you're looking at a private school, dive into how the school manages their emergency response.

Here are key questions to ask about their emergency response plan:

- How are school employees trained to deal with emergency situations when they begin working at the school?
- What kind of training do they receive on a regular basis?
- How does the school communicate with parents?

As a parent, it's important to feel that a school is doing everything possible to keep your child safe.

Conclusion



Choosing the right school is one of the most difficult decisions a parent has to make. With so many schools offering such a wide range of educational experiences, parents need to put considerable thought into determining their own educational values. Assessing how each school's thinking and educational practices align with your own is essential when selecting a school.

We hope this guide helps you choose the right school for your child. If we can be of help to you in any way, please contact us.

—The Whitby Team



Find out more at www.whitbyschool.org

