



PASADENA EDUCATION NETWORK

Choosing an Elementary School for Your Child

Selecting a school for your child is one of the most important decisions a parent will make, yet myth and misperception often cloud our conversation about schools. Living in Pasadena, Altadena or Sierra Madre, you may have heard that you should send your children to private school. Many of the people who tell you this haven't been on a school campus in years, and they aren't aware of all the innovative programs and options that our local public schools now offer. In reality, Pasadena Unified School District schools have improved a lot and more families are choosing public school for their children.

So, how do you make the right decision about a school for your family?

First of all, there is no one "right" school for every family. What's right for your family and your student may not be the same schools that are "right" for the next person. Parents have many options when it comes to choosing a school. Of course you want to be sure your child's school has a strong academic program, but that's not the only factor that should influence your decision. Consider the other values that are important to your family and the school culture. And, of course, there's the cost of private school – as much as \$25,000 to \$100,000 per year depending on the school and the number of children you have. This doesn't factor in inflation, annual increases, or your fundraising responsibilities. How will spending that amount of money impact your overall quality of life?

Family Values

Your family values are the most important factor that should guide your school decision. For example, is a strong arts program important to you? Is it important to attend a school in your neighborhood? Do you value racial, ethnic, and economic diversity? Do you want to interact with families that are different from yours? Are you looking for special education inclusion classes or an opportunity for your child to learn another language? What balance do you want to strike between school and extra-curricular or family activities? How do your long-term plans (college, travel, retirement) affect your family's current finances? It's important to discuss these values explicitly, rather than assume that you and your spouse or co-parent are on the same page.

Teaching and Learning

Whether you are considering public or private school, the culture and teaching style will vary from school to school. This means that prior to visiting a campus, we encourage you to think about what type of environment you think might best meet the needs of your student and your family. That being said, the truth is that you don't know your student's ideal learning style yet, so find an environment where you are comfortable, and your child will most likely thrive.

All PUSD schools implement the Common Core Standards, with an emphasis on project-based learning and development of the four "C's": creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication. At the elementary level, there is an emphasis on social-emotional and student inquiry-driven learning.

Students are engaged in the learning process, and teachers are expected to support students so they learn at higher levels. Classroom work is often done in small groups, and teachers differentiate classroom activities so all students receive instruction that supports their skill development.

When you visit a school, look for evidence of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, oral and written communication, creativity, and imagination. You may want to ask for examples of how a school implements project-based learning, how discipline is handled, and how the needs of students with different learning styles are addressed. Although all PUSD schools have the same curriculum and the teachers all have the same professional development, schools have a different culture and may have a specific approach to teaching.

Data

PEN's Fact Sheets provide quantitative information about enrollment, student demographics, and discipline-related statistics, as well as information about the school's mission, programs, and parent involvement. The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress system (CAASPP) is California's testing system for assessing student progress. Test scores are no longer included on our Fact Sheets since the most recent scores are from 2019, and a lot has changed in PUSD since then.

While you may think a school's test scores as the "best" indicator of how "good" a school is, keep in mind two things: 1) your values come first (see above); and 2) test scores are highly correlated to parent education level and family income, so students who are middle and upper income tend to score higher than low income students. In a school district like PUSD that has a very diverse population, this means that overall school test scores trend lower than surrounding school districts. That being said, you can find the 2019 test scores on the [California Dept. of Education's website](#).

Special Programs

After reviewing the data, it's time to consider whether you are interested in enrolling in one of PUSD's [magnet or special programs](#). This includes French, Mandarin or Spanish Dual Language Immersion (DLIP); Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM); Visual and Performing Arts; the International Baccalaureate Programme; and more. Or your preference might be to enroll in a strong well-rounded neighborhood school. PEN's [Fact Sheets and Enrichment Matrix](#) can help you identify which schools have programs that are important to you.

The type of enrichment opportunities, after-school programs, and electives that are available at a school may also play an important part in your decision-making. Your student may need to attend a school with a comprehensive after-school program like PasadenaLEARNS, which operates on most PUSD campuses until 6 pm. If your family will need to use this program or one of the other afterschool options, you may want to ask parents about the various program opportunities at their school.

There are a number of District-wide programs such as a Spelling Bee, Science Fair, Math Field Day, Instrumental Music, the My Masterpieces program which partners schools with local museums and cultural institutions, and the Rose Bowl Aquatics Center's swimming lessons program for all 3rd graders. Other enrichment opportunities – such as school gardens, special music programs, art studios, and science labs – may be largely parent-supported, and will vary from school to school. Each family will need to determine what types of programs are important to them and are a good fit for their child.

Visiting Schools

After you've identified some schools that you think might be a good fit for your family, check the [PEN Calendar](#) to find out when tours are scheduled. We encourage you to visit your neighborhood school first and then check out a few other campuses.

Come on a tour prepared to ask questions and make observations. How do the adults interact with the students? What do the bulletin boards look like? Are the students engaged in the classroom activities? Does the principal know the students? With project-based learning, you will often times see small groups of students working collaboratively on the floor, while the teacher engages with another small group of students. How is the teacher engaging with the students, and responding to their needs? Is instruction being differentiated for different groups of students? Could you envision your student in this environment?

Ask the principal about the strengths and challenges at the school. How you feel about the principal's response – not just the content of her/his answer, but the way s/he responds to your question will help you determine whether the school and its leadership feel like a good fit for you.

Another factor to consider is teacher retention. This will tell you if teachers are happy at the school and whether the principal feels the teachers are successful.

Parent Involvement

Find out if parents are engaged with the school and whether they are encouraged to get involved. Every school in PUSD has a parent involvement goal in their school plan. Parent and community involvement with a school have a direct positive impact on student achievement, so make sure your involvement is encouraged. Are there active parent organizations like PTA and School Site Council? How is the communication between the school and parents? Do parents volunteer in the classroom and on campus? Are parents involved in decision-making? The better the partnership between parents and the school, the higher the academic achievement will be for all students.

Enrollment

After selecting the schools you feel would be a good fit for your child and your family, it's time to enroll in PUSD. If you are happy with your neighborhood school, which is happening more frequently with PUSD families, then you will need to take your child's birth certificate, two forms of proof of address and your child's immunization record to the school to register or [register online](#) on the PUSD website. Schools typically start registering new students in March for the following school year. If you would prefer to send your student to a school that is not your neighborhood school, you will need to participate in the district's school choice, or Open Enrollment process. Information about next year's [Open Enrollment process](#) should be available on PEN's website by the end of October.

To find out more about selecting schools or to attend one of our programs, visit www.penfamilies.org. To receive PEN's weekly e-newsletter, and for the most up-to-date information about tours, informational programs, and enrollment dates and deadlines, [sign up for a free PEN membership](#).