



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. Living in Pasadena, Altadena or Sierra Madre only complicates that decision because for many years the oft-repeated message is that the public schools are failing our students, and parents should send their children to private school, no matter what the cost. But things have been changing in our public schools, and families need to consider many factors when looking at their school options.

Parents have many options when it comes to choosing a school. Of course you want to be sure your child's school offers them a strong academic program, but that's not the only factor influencing your decision. Consider the other values that are important to your family. 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.

Family Values

The first thing that should guide a school decision is your family values. For example, is a strong arts program important to you? Is it important to attend a school in your neighborhood? What about ethnic and economic diversity? Are you looking for special education inclusion classes or an opportunity for your child to begin learning another language? What balance do you want to strike between school and extra-curricular or family activities? How do long-term plans (college, travel, retirement) affect your family's current spending plans? It's important to discuss these values explicitly, rather than assume that you and your spouse or co-parent is on the same page.

Once you've established what is important to you and your family, consider your child's learning needs. Does your child learn best in a structured environment? Does he or she have special learning needs? What is the best environment where your child will thrive?

Teaching and Learning

Whether you are considering public or private school, the culture and teaching style may vary from school to school, so prior to visiting a campus think about what type of environment might best meet the academic needs of your student. 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. What works best for your child?

All PUSD schools are now implementing the new Common Core Standards, with an emphasis on project-based learning and development of the four “C’s”: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication. For some schools, this is a departure from a more structured approach to covering academic standards, while for others the emphasis on student inquiry-driven learning is not new. You may want to ask for some examples of how a school is implementing the Common Core, and how the needs of students with different learning styles are addressed.

Data

Then it’s time to get data about the schools. PEN’s Fact Sheets provide quantitative information about enrollment and student demographics, test scores, and discipline-related statistics, as well as information about the school’s mission, programs, and parent involvement. While it may be tempting to latch on to a school’s test scores as the “best” indicator of how “good” a school is, keep in mind two things: 1) values come first (see above); and 2) California has adopted new academic standards and is introducing new methods of assessment. The old scoring system is no longer current, and the new system is not yet established enough to generate comparable scores.

For many years, the cornerstone of the state’s accountability system was the California Standards Testing (CST), which evaluated student mastery of English Language Arts, Math, and other subjects depending on grade level. Schools received Academic Performance Index (API) scores based largely on what percentage of their students scored advanced, proficient, basic, below basic and far below basic on the annual CSTs. The goal was for all California Schools to achieve a score of 800 on a scale of 200-1000. In addition, the Federal “No Child Left Behind” Act mandated that all schools achieve proficiency for all students. Schools were evaluated according to their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) towards the goal of universal proficiency, with progress measured not just for the school as a whole, but for each demographic sub-group.

PEN’s Fact Sheets include API & proficiency scores from 2013, the last year that CSTs were administered for English and Math. In 2013, ten PUSD schools had scores of 800 or higher, and all 18 elementary schools scored above 700, which means that they are all worth considering. The district’s overall 2013 API was 751, a 45-point increase over a five-year period.

Consider the data of the schools you are interested in, but remember that’s not the only measure of a good school. While current year test scores are one indicator of success, so is growth from one year to the next. Quantitative data which includes tests scores are important, but the way you feel about a school when you walk on the campus is equally, if not more important.

Special Programs

After evaluating the data, and determining which schools are showing growth, it's time to look at special programs. This includes enrichment opportunities, after-school programs and electives that are important to you and your family. Although Pasadena is an Arts for All District, meaning it is committed to arts education for all students, some schools have additional opportunities in the arts. Some schools place a greater emphasis on science or technology or foreign language. It's important that families identify which programs they value.

Students may need to have a school with a comprehensive after school program like PasadenaLEARNS, which operates after school programs on most PUSD campuses until 6 pm. If your family will need to use this program, you may want to ask parents how they feel about the LEARNs program at their school.

There are a number of District-wide programs such as a Spelling Bee, Science Fair, and Math Field Day, as well as arts programs such as Instrumental Music or the My Masterpieces program which partners schools with local museums and cultural institutions. But schools may also choose to participate in certain programs – such as the Rose Bowl's 3-week swimming program for 3rd graders – that other schools do not. 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.

PEN Fact Sheets can help parents identify which schools offer what programs. The PUSD website also has each school's School Accountability Report Card (SARC) available. These will provide families with additional information.

Visiting Schools

After you've selected some schools, check the PEN calendar to find out when tours are scheduled. (Some schools schedule tours on request rather than on a regular schedule; call the school directly, or contact PEN if you are having trouble getting tour information.) We encourage you to visit your neighborhood school in addition to a few other campuses. While on a tour, 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?

Ask the principal about the strengths and challenges at the school. Indeed, come to a tour prepared to ask some questions. 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 feels like a "good fit" for you.

No amount of data and research will take the place of your feelings about the overall environment, and quality of the teaching and learning. Additional observations can give you an indication of the teaching style. For example, if students are sitting at desks working silently or working collaboratively on the floor, this will give you an idea of the philosophy of education at that school. Which learning environment is best for your child? 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 parents actively involved in organizations like PTA and School Site Council? How is the communication between the school and parents? Do parents volunteer on campus? Are parents involved in decision-making? The better the partnership between the parents and the school, the higher the academic achievement will be for all students.

Enrollment

If you are happy with your neighborhood school, which is happening more frequently with PUSD families, you can enroll at the school site. You will need to bring your child's birth certificate, two forms of proof of address and your child's immunization record to the school to register. Schools typically start registering new students in March.

If you would prefer to send your student to a school that is not your neighborhood school, you will need to participate in the Open Enrollment process. To learn more about the Open Enrollment process and timelines, come to PEN's "Navigating Open Enrollment Process" information program or check the drop-down menu under "Enrollment" at www.pusd.us. Deadlines are not flexible, so if you want to participate, you must adhere to all the procedures.

Join PEN!

PEN membership is free, and includes a subscription to our weekly e-bulletin, "PEN News" – a great source of up-to-date information about tours, information programs, and enrollment dates and deadlines. **Visit www.penfamilies.org and join Pasadena Education Network today!**