



What to consider before choosing a high school

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Are you trying to find the right high school for your child, but don't know where to start? This checklist can help you jump-start the process.

You may have an idea of what kind of high school would offer your child the perfect learning environment. But that doesn't mean you actually have a high school like that in your community. So how do you choose wisely based on what's available?

No matter your situation, it helps to step back and consider what's important to you and your child. Do you want a big high school with lots of electives, sports, and traditional experiences? Or do you want something smaller and more tailored? How about a school that specializes in the environment, arts, or STEM? What sort of values does your family hold that you want the school to reinforce? What do you want the school to provide that your family *doesn't* have? Perhaps most importantly, which high school can you trust to help your child navigate their journey to adulthood?

Below are four important facets of the high school experience that many parents never consider — and a range of practices and programs connected to them.

You can use this list to:

- Consider important aspects of the high school experience.
- Learn more about proven practices and programs in high school.
- Reflect on which practices and programs might benefit your child.
- Ask schools if they offer these practices and programs.
- Ask your child what matters to them at school.

Take the time to read a little bit about proven practices around equity and inclusion, student agency, college-bound rigor, and 21st century learning and teaching practices. See what speaks to you, and then read more about those practices. Both you and your child may find inspiration that shapes your high school search.

Equity and inclusion

Schools committed to equity and inclusion go out of their way to help all students succeed and feel like they belong. The learning approach and the school culture support all students, and the staff consciously works to identify and eliminate systemic racism and bias.

- [Accommodations for all](#) – All students have access to academic support and flexibility, such as tutoring, extra time on tests, the chance to redo assignments, and listening to audiobooks (instead of reading books).
- [Anti-racist school culture](#) – The school is committed to identifying and eliminating individual and institutional racism.
- [Culturally responsive teaching](#) – Teachers adjust their practices to include students from different backgrounds.
- [Equitable curriculum](#) – The school’s learning materials foster community by reflecting students’ backgrounds and cultures.
- [Equitable grading](#) – Grading policies are fair and transparent in measuring how well each individual student is advancing. The goal is to help all kids, including those from underserved communities, succeed.
- [Mastery-based pacing](#) – Students learn at their own pace until they “master” a concept or skill. Then they move on to the next skill.
- [Restorative justice](#) – Instead of strict discipline for students, this practice teaches students to resolve conflicts on their own and in small groups. The desired outcome is to foster community and build students’ skills in relationship-building and conflict resolution.
- [Trauma-informed teaching](#) – Recognizing that no student experiencing trauma can learn, every teacher and staff member commits to fostering safe, nurturing relationships.

Student agency

Schools that promote student agency empower students to follow their individual paths based on their interests and skills and to develop their sense of purpose.

- [Career pathways](#) – Specialized classes give students professional training to set them up for post-high-school careers, vocational training, and higher education. Pathways may focus on vocational, technical, and professional fields.
- [Internships](#) – Professional internships during school hours allow students to gain career experience in a field of their interest.
- [Peer tutoring](#) – A student-based tutoring system that reinforces learning for both the student tutor and student tutee.
- [Project-based learning](#) – Students engage in active, hands-on learning by working on real-world projects that interest them.
- [Robust exhibitions](#) – Public presentations in any subject (not just science fairs) help students learn deeply about a topic and demonstrate what they've learned.
- [Senior capstone projects](#) – A senior year presentation, product, or performance that shows a student's deep understanding of a subject of their own choosing.
- [Voice and choice](#) – Instead of having information delivered to them in a lecture, students get to choose projects and design their learning plans, giving them more agency over their education.

College-bound rigor

High schools focused on giving students a rigorous academic base offer challenging classes as well as support and programs that prepare students for college-level work.

- [AP classes](#) – Advanced placement courses are offered in a variety of subjects to give high school students experience taking college-level classes — and sometimes earn college credit.
- [Dual enrollment](#) – These college-level classes allow high school students to earn both high school and college credit. Dual-enrollment classes are sometimes offered at the high school. Otherwise, students attend classes at a local college or online.
- [Early college high school](#) – Students take multiple college classes while still in high school. Teens can earn up to two years of college credit all while simultaneously earning their high school diploma.
- [Intensive college counseling](#) – Support in all four years of high school that may include an individual college counselor, SAT tutoring, help with financial aid and scholarships, and guidance choosing where to apply and in completing college applications. Some schools even have classes dedicated to learning what’s needed for college acceptance and success.
- [International Baccalaureate \(IB\)](#) – The International Baccalaureate (IB) program is an academically challenging program practiced worldwide. Students learn college-level thinking, writing, research, collaboration, and presentation skills and may earn college credit for IB courses.
- [Strong curriculum](#) – Every class should have a clear curriculum — which is basically a learning road map — using everything from textbooks to at-home projects.

21st-century learning

Too many schools use outdated practices for teaching. Twenty-first century learning means teaching essential skills needed in the modern workplace, like critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity, using practices informed by the latest science of learning.

- [Advisory](#) – A small group of students meet regularly during one class period with the same teacher or staff member throughout the year, providing students with academic, social-emotional, and future-planning support.
- [Blended learning](#) – Combines in-person and online instruction to offer a more customized and flexible learning experience for each student.
- [Brain-based teaching](#) – These teaching practices use the most up-to-date research on how teens learn best.
- **Equity and inclusion** – Schools designed to support equity help all students learn important 21st-century skills, like collaboration, listening, and problem-solving. (See above.)
- [Later start times](#) – To support good sleep hygiene, this growing trend requires schools to start no earlier than 8:30 am.
- [Scheduling to support teen health](#) – Schools design their days (and after-school activities) to support teens' needs for sleep and downtime.
- [Student agency](#) – Gives teens more control over their learning. Based on research about how teens become motivated, giving students more agency leads to academic and future success. (See above.)