

Written by Written by Darcy Jo Gaugler

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When faced with the overwhelming task of choosing a high school for your amazing budding citizen, the options can be downright dizzying. There are large and small options, parochial and nonparochial, traditional and not-so-traditional—the key is to evaluate what is best for your individual teenager and family.

Considering the generally poor scores garnered by Arizona public education, concerned guardians understandably opt for alternatives. Wooed by small class sizes and other seductive statistics—nearly every private high school in the Valley boasts a college attendance rate between 90 and 100 percent—families speed past the local public schools and drop the teens off at the nearest prestigious prep school. Yet not all private schools are created equal. What's best for one student might not be the best for another. In the search for the perfect private school, it's important to embark on your research early (most apps are due in the winter preceding the school year).

(It is important to note that Valley residents need not completely discount public school; depending on the district and the school, some public school education offerings can be excellent. See sidebar on P. TK for more details.)

Private Types

The decision to forgo public schools for private ones is often made for religious reasons. "One of the greatest benefits [to private school] is that you can have a religious environment," says Paula Petrowski, director of admissions at Xavier College Preparatory, a Catholic all-girls school. "Most private schools are faith-based, and that's probably the greatest reason that most students are here—the fact that they can be in a religious environment and they can discuss faith, and they can have religion be a part of their lives."

But parents of teens who ascribe to a different religion (or none at all), should not rule out a great school because of its religious affiliation, as long as they're comfortable. For example, nearly 20 percent of the students who attend Xavier are not Catholic.

For those parents who are uncomfortable with an integrated religious education but still desire the benefits of a rigorous college-prep program, the Valley has two highly regarded non-parochial options at the high school level. The independent school of choice has long been the renowned Phoenix Country Day School in Paradise Valley. But as of fall 2008, Tesseract Upper School will begin teaching its first freshman class at its brand-new campus in Phoenix. By 2011, the school will be a full house—educating students in ninth through twelfth grades.

The Big Picture

When deciding which private school to attend, other considerations should factor into your ultimate decision—like location, for one. You may be partial to one particular school, but what if that school is 45 minute drive away from your house? Or from the school your other children attend.

Also, how does your child feel about wearing a uniform? Some find the idea confining; others find it liberating. Traditionally, most parochial schools in the Valley require uniforms or at least enforce strict dress codes, whereas independent schools do not.

Another factor is cost. Private school tuition in our area ranges from \$9,000 to \$21,000 per year, though parents can look to mitigate costs with scholarships and financial aid. Kristie Berg, assistant director of admissions at Phoenix Country Day School, says, "We spend more than 1.3 million dollars in financial aid. We have over 100 students that receive financial aid—some a significant amount of financial aid, and some just a little bit to help them bridge the gap."

For some, though, the cost is worth it. Private school devotees feel their child receives more individualized attention in that environment, and generally (although not always), they're right. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), teachers in traditional public secondary schools average approximately 23 students per class; in private secondary schools, this figure hovers closer to 20. Phoenix Country Day School has the lowest student-to-teacher ratio in the Valley (9 to 1), half the national private school rate.

Nigel Taplin, the head of school at Tesseract, says that parents, in addition to reading a school's mission statement, should first and foremost, visit a prospective school. "They need to take a long hard look at the energy level—you know, the happiness of the children. If they're walking into a school where the students are smiling, they're interacting, they're collaborating with each other and openly and freely with the educators, those are telltale signs. So if that is going on in a school, it means that you've probably got a pretty good institution."

A Tradition of Choice

Consider the caliber of academics and extra-curricular activities at your top choices. Are they traditional or nontraditional? Are fine arts offered; and if so, to what extent? What level of sports does the school compete at? Budding Michelangelos might thrive in a more creative, less structured atmosphere, whereas the Harvard-bound might benefit from a more disciplined environment.

Petrowski says, "We like to see students who indicate that they want to come [to Xavier] and be part of this community, participate in activities, be a contributing member—a student who would not be uncomfortable in a traditional environment, with a uniform and with rules and regulations about behavior."

Tesseract prides itself on taking a less traditional approach to learning by advocating a more "guide on the side" method that focuses on each student as an individual. "These are all areas that we feel differentiate us," Taplin says. "Our program: yes, it's a very academic program; yes, it's a college-prep program, but it's more of a life-prep program within the context of the 21st-century environment."

Building its new high school campus to be as "green" as possible, Tesseract also integrates sustainability teachings into the curriculum. "So not only do we live the sustainability within the curriculum, we also live it in our environment," Taplin says.

Although some of the more traditional college prep schools scored low points on their arts offerings in the past, that is changing. Greg Mastin, a

School Smarts

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1996 graduate of Brophy College Preparatory, says, "I graduated with an art degree in college, and I didn't get to take a single art class while at Brophy. The only one they had at the time I think was at Xavier [the Catholic all-girls school is located next door]. But now, I went over there not too long ago, and they [had] built like two or three big buildings [for art]."

Brophy now requires its students to take 2.5 semesters of art, and the school added a 50,000-sq.-ft. fine arts complex including a theater, music practice rooms and a video production room. Xavier mandates two years of art credit and even offers four-year programs for those interested in dance, theater, painting and drawing. At PCDS and Tesseract, some form of fine arts credit is mandatory all four years.

And don't forget sports. At larger schools like Brophy, the sports teams compete at a higher division than smaller schools like Valley Lutheran. So if your high schooler desires to play college or professional sports in the future, it may be advisable to choose a school where they can hone their skills at a more competitive level. For the teenager who simply loves to play, but doesn't have NBA aspirations, a smaller school might provide more ample playing time.

The Exit Exam

"The biggest thing for parents is just to get as much information as they possibly can get about all the different choices," Petrowski says. "And to be realistic about your own child, to really study all the options to make the decision about what's going to be the right fit for your family and for your child."

Ultimately, success doesn't depend on whether you enroll your kid in the most prestigious school in the Valley, but rather, whether you enroll them in the most excellent school for your kid.