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Selecting the Best Educational Match and
Advocating for Your Child's Academic Needs

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Selecting the Best Educational Match and Advocating for Your Child's Academic Needs: What Questions Should You be Asking?

All children are unique and have the right to learn at their own pace. In order for children to develop a love for learning and reach their full potential, they must be adequately challenged and supported. Contacting a few potential schools before enrolling your child is a proactive step that can benefit your whole family. This document provides some questions to ask that can help you find the best match for your children's educational needs.

If you have already selected your child's school, asking these questions gives you a heads up on what to expect going into a new school, and identifies where you may need to support your child at home, and/or advocate for your child at school. It's best to be proactive to avoid being in a situation where a school lacks the resources or qualified teachers to adequately support your child.

When advocating for your child, the first step is to schedule a meeting to bring up your concerns to the teacher. Provide adequate time (a few weeks) for your child's teacher to adjust his/her lesson plans and instructional approach. Kindly request that he/she provide you with updates. If you still have questions, you may want to contact the resource support specialist for your child's grade level (if they have one), and if you still have concerns, email the administrator. If you are still not satisfied, email the superintendent or director of the school.

The set of answers provided are based on my own experience teaching in both NV and VA, as well as what I learned while earning my M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction and endorsement in Gifted Education. Please take note that education in the U.S. is in a constant state of change, and each county and individual school has different policies and requirements, therefore not all of these answers may be applicable.

1. What is the student to teacher ratio?

In the U.S., depending on the state, it is about 20 to 1 for 1st, and 30 to 1 for 3rd and up. At international schools, you can find much more favorable numbers, around 15 to 1 plus an instructional assistant; while this is a pretty drastic change, knowing the numbers allows you to manage the attention your student will be getting and ensuring you are actively involved to balance out the ratio, if necessary.

2. What educational training is required to teach at your school?

To teach at public schools in the U.S., a B.A. is required in the grade level range or subject area you will be teaching, along with a one year practicum (internship) program. There are alternate routes to licensure that are faster, but they have a longer and much more closely monitored internship component. However, you do not have to have your teaching license to teach at many private schools in the U.S..



3. What type, and how much professional development are the teachers required to complete each year?

This varies state to state, but a teacher in VA would be required to take at least 2 professional development courses every year. In addition to that, the school would hold meetings every quarter to keep up with the best practices in education.

4. How does the school communicate with parents? Is there a weekly folder that goes home with information or a weekly email that goes out?

In most schools in the U.S., teachers typically send home a weekly folder with informational fliers and a weekly newsletter via email. Teachers communicate directly with parents via e-mail or phone for specific actions, if necessary.

5. When will schedules for classes and daily activities be sent home? Do the teachers provide a brief overview each week of what the students will be learning, and frequent feedback on students' assignments?

In the U.S., schedules are sent out either before school starts, or within the first week. Throughout the year, on either a weekly or bi-weekly basis, teachers provide a brief overview of what the students will be learning. Informing parents of what topics are being covered each week in school helps to foster a connection between school and home. Parents are encouraged to have a discussion each night with their children about what they learned.

Many schools require teachers to grade and return assignments within 3 days to a week. It should not take longer than one week to receive feedback for shorter assignments or 2 weeks for longer ones. If a teacher has a concern about an assignment or a topic where the child is falling behind, he or she should notify the parent. In addition, if a parent has a concern, he or she may notify the teacher.

6. What can I expect at the back to school orientation?

The amount of information you would receive varies from school to school, but at the very least you should get a chance to meet the teacher and receive a school schedule for your child.

7. When are parent teacher conferences? Should I expect the teacher to provide an update on how my child is doing prior to that? If this is not typical, may I please request that the teacher send me a brief email on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to let me know how my child is adapting socially, emotionally, and academically?

This varies school by school, but typically parents can request that teachers in grades K/1 email weekly to biweekly updates to parents for the first month. This can also be requested for new students. Formal parent-teacher conferences are typically offered in the Fall and the Spring, however, a conference may be scheduled at any time by either the parent or the teacher.



8. How do you support the emotional and social wellbeing of your students? How do you help ease students into their new educational and social environments?

In most schools in the U.S., teachers spend the first week or so using multiple strategies to build a close classroom community. The counselor also comes into the classrooms once a month throughout the school year to provide lessons on social and life skills. Assemblies may also be held to build the school community.

9. What measures are in place to prevent bullying, and what disciplinary steps take place if and when a bullying incident occurs? Have multiple parents at your school expressed concerns about bullying within the last few years?

In the U.S., most schools have a zero tolerance policy on bullying. Teachers spend the first week or so using multiple strategies to build a close classroom community. In addition, the classroom rules should support a foundation of mutual respect. The counselor also comes into the classrooms once a month throughout the school year to provide lessons on social and life skills. Assemblies are usually held to provide examples of respect and tolerance vs. bullying. The zero tolerance policy for bullying is explained to parents and students, and if and when there is an incident, students are encouraged to tell the teacher and their parents. If the teacher does not act, children are instructed to tell the counselor. Counselors all have mail boxes outside their office where students can place anonymous tips. Counselors become involved and may pull out small groups of students who are either identified as bullies or are prone to being victims. In all cases, the administration and the parents are notified. In cases that are more severe, or if a child repeatedly bullies, the administration will sit down with the student and parents of the student to discuss further consequences.

10. What types of assessments do you use for literacy and mathematics? How do these assessments inform instruction? When can I expect that my teacher will know, and report the results of those assessments to me?

All schools should formally assess students in reading and math by the end of the first or second month. That information should be shared in parent teacher conferences if they take place by the end of October, or if the conferences take place later, teachers should provide this information upon request. The teacher should explain what each test includes and the grade level at which the child tested. Areas of strength and weakness should also be noted. Reading assessments should include an independent and instructional level. The independent level is the level at which a child can read fluently and comprehend without teacher assistance. The instructional level is where a child needs instruction or support from a teacher to develop better fluency or reading comprehension skills.



11. How do your teachers differentiate instruction in the classroom to reach all levels of learners? Please provide a few examples.

To address the varying academic needs of students, both heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping should be used in every classroom, at every grade level. Science, social studies, and introductory lessons on a new topic or theme of study in language arts or math may be taught to the whole group. However, in math and literacy, students should be homogeneously grouped by ability level to ensure that each child makes progress at his or her own pace.

In addition, flexible grouping (reassessing students and allowing them to change levels every unit or every few months in math and reading) is necessary for maximizing student growth and achievement. Students in grades K-3, should have their reading levels assessed in the first month of school, and then reassessed every month to every few months to monitor progress. Students, especially those in grades 3 and above, should be preassessed before every math unit so that they are placed in a group working at their same level. Groups should be flexible, changing whenever a new assessment takes place, or when a new math topic has been introduced in order to ensure that students are both adequately supported and challenged.

12. What types of lessons that nurture creative and critical thinking skills are being taught at my child's grade level?

Creative and critical thinking lessons should be taught whole group at every grade level so that all levels of learners are exposed and have the chance to develop these skills. They are instrumental in identifying potentially gifted students. Check out the website below for the 9 different critical and creative thinking strategies that are taught in Fairfax County, VA <https://www.fcps.edu/index.php/academics/elementary-school-academics-k-6/advanced-academics/critical-and-creative-thinking>

13. At what point should I expect to hear from the teacher if my child is not meeting standards or working below grade level in any subject? Do teachers keep portfolios of work to monitor progress, provide examples of interventions used, and document evidence of potential signs of a learning disability? What are the next steps should a teacher not be able to adequately support the child's learning needs on their own? Do you have a resource specialist that is trained to work with or support special needs students?

State and school policy vary, but in most cases, you should receive word by no later than 4 weeks prior to the close of the first grading period if your child is struggling or not meeting standards in a subject area. Portfolios of work are usually kept for all students who exhibit signs of a potential learning disability, along with documentation of interventions used. If the child is not meeting grade level expectations, the parents and teachers would meet with the resource specialist to determine how to best support the student.



A 504 or an IEP (Individual Education Plan) may be drafted with the help of the classroom teacher, parents, and resource specialist to provide accommodations or modifications to help the student be more successful. The resource specialist and classroom teacher are required by law to meet all accommodations and modifications set forth by the IEP and keep a record of when they meet with the child for resource support. Parents should meet with the teacher and resource specialist to review the 504 or IEP at least once a year and make any necessary changes. Changes to an IEP, especially those which reduce the amount of support a child is given, should only be made after the child performs within an average range on a national norm-referenced assessment. Reducing the amount of support should NOT be an option based solely on the teachers' opinions or how well the child performs in his or her class.

[14. At what point should I expect to hear from the teacher if my child is surpassing grade level standards and expectations? What is the identification process like for gifted students? What specific resources or programs do you use when working with them?](#)

Again, state and school policy vary. Some teachers keep a portfolio of work for all students who show signs of potential giftedness. A parent can also simply request this at the beginning of the year.

Fairfax County is nationally recognized as one of the best counties for gifted education. Check out the following links and the levels of gifted education they provide. In terms of identification, there are numerous tests that schools use. It's very important to make sure that your child's school is NOT using achievement test scores as their ONLY means to identify gifted students. Achievement tests like those that are given every year from third grade on in the States, and the MAP tests that are given at international schools do NOT measure a child's potential, only their understanding of the content they were already taught. Many gifted students, especially those that also have a learning disability or who do not speak the native language actually underperform on achievement tests. Instead, a nonverbal intelligence test or cognitive abilities test should be used. While serving at an Embassy overseas, you may also email your regional education officer to request that your child be assessed for potential giftedness. The Office of Overseas Schools for State Department can send an assessment to be administered at post. If your child is academically advanced for his or her age, or has multiple identifying traits from this [list](#), consider checking out the following links from Fairfax County Public Schools Advanced Academic Program.

[1. Advanced Academics Family Resources](#)

[2. Overview of Gifted Education in Fairfax County, VA](#)

[3. Differentiated Lessons in Areas of Academic Strength, Grades K-6 \(Level II\)](#)

[4. Part-Time Advanced Academic Program, Grades 3-6 \(Level III\)](#)

[5. Full-Time Advanced Academic Program, Grades 3-8 \(Level IV\)](#)

