

School Visit Questions and Checklist

Before you choose the right school for you, we **strongly encourage you to visit your top choices**. Reading about schools can help you learn the basics, but to really understand a school's culture and feel, you need to visit and talk to people who know the school well.

It can be hard to know what to look for when you visit. Below is a list of questions and a checklist that may be helpful. Many of the ideas below are from the book *Beyond Test Scores* by Jack Schneider. This book is an excellent tool to learn more about measures of school quality and fit, and we recommend it to anyone interested in learning more.

If you only have a short amount of time (~30 minutes) to visit, here are some questions to consider asking administrators, teachers, and/or parents at the school:

- What are the core values at your school? How does the school staff help students develop those core values?
- How do you foster a positive culture at your school? Do you have any specific events for students, staff, and/or families throughout the year?
- What stories can you tell me about how invested teachers are here? How does the school promote that kind of investment?
- How does the school as a whole communicate and collaborate with families? How do teachers communicate and collaborate with families? [How do they communicate and collaborate with families that speak limited or no English?]
- How do administrators handle student misbehavior? What is the discipline policy? How are teachers expected to handle misbehavior?
- How do you ensure students are physically and emotionally safe here?
- How do you know students are learning here? What are your sources of evidence?
- How should I interpret this school's test scores? What are they telling me? What are they not telling me?
- How does your school ensure the success of all students [particularly those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or English Language Learners (ELLs)]?
- Is there anything else you think I should know about your school?

Be sure to jot down any other questions you want to ask!

As you visit classrooms and walk around the school, ask yourself...

Do most students and staff seem joyful? Look for:

- Smiling
- Laughter
- Excitement

How do administrators/school staff work with parents? Look/listen for:

- Polite greeting/welcoming you when you walk in
- Staff/administrators eager to tell you about the school [not impatient or annoyed]

Do students seem emotionally and physically safe?

- Students are friendly and inclusive with one another
- No intentionally mean jokes, comments, or other behaviors [bullying]
- No student behavior that could cause physical harm to other students

Are most students engaged during class? Look for:

- More than one or two students answering questions and/or raising hands
- Students following directions or guidance from the teacher
- Students working together
- Students staying focused on their task

Do teachers ensure that students understand the material? Look/listen for:

- Clear explanations of concepts [or questioning]
- Check-ins with students [whole class, small group, and individuals]
- Personalized [individualized] questions, explanations, and/or tasks for students
- Written and/or verbal feedback to students

Do teachers/staff have positive relationships with students? Look/listen for:

- Support and praise [positive reinforcement]
- Calling students by name
- Speaking respectfully to students
- Consistent, even-tempered, and effective responses to student misbehavior

Do teachers utilize their classroom time well? Look/listen for:

- A goal for the lesson [objective/standard for the day] on the board or clearly posted for students
- A clear plan/agenda for the lesson
- Quick transitions between activities
- Standard routines [procedures] students follow

Is the school/classroom space well organized for student learning? Look for:

- Posters/displays on what students are learning and school/classroom events
- Generally neat and clean space
- Display(s) of student work

If you have more time (a few hours) to visit a school, below are detailed questions you may want to consider asking administrators, teachers, or parents at the school. These questions are split into five important categories of school quality:

1. Academic Learning
2. Teachers and the Teaching Environment
3. School Culture
4. Student Character and Well-Being
5. Resources.

All questions and categories of school quality below are from the book *Beyond Test Scores* by Jack Schneider.

Questions related to Academic Learning:

- *Consider asking the school's **principal or leaders**...*
 - How do you know students are learning here? What are your sources of evidence?
 - How should I interpret this school's test scores? What are they telling me? What are they not telling me?
 - What does student engagement here look like? How will I recognize it if I take a tour?
 - How often are students at this school able to solve problems and apply their knowledge?
 - How much do you know about how students fare when they leave this school? How does that shape your goals for the school?
- *Consider asking **teachers**...*
 - How should I interpret this school's test scores? What are they telling me and not telling me?
 - How engaged are students in a typical class? What does that engagement look like?
 - How much freedom do teachers have to engage students in authentic problem-solving tasks? Can you give me an example of one?
 - How much emphasis do your colleagues place on critical thinking? What kinds of things do they do to promote it?
 - What are teachers preparing students for, in terms of the future?
- *Consider asking **parents**...*
 - What kinds of projects and assignments do you remember your child completing? What was your impression of them? What was your child's impression?
 - How excited is your child about what he or she learns each day in school? Can you remember a time when he or she told you about what happened in class?
 - How important is school to families here? Why do you think that is?
 - How much of your child's learning involves memorizing, and how much involves other kinds of brainpower?
 - How confident are you that your child is growing academically? Why is that?

Questions related to teachers and the teaching environment:

- *Consider asking the school's **principal or leaders**...*
 - What grade levels and subject areas have you had to hire for in the past two years?
 - What does it typically look like here when teachers try to engage students?
 - What stories can you tell me about how invested teachers are here? How does the school promote that kind of investment?
 - How much turnover has there been in the teaching staff over the past two years? What explains it?
 - What is your top priority as the person responsible for helping teachers grow?
- *Consider asking **teachers**...*
 - How many of your colleagues are teaching the children and the subjects that they're best qualified to teach?
 - How much are teachers encouraged to use different kinds of teaching strategies to engage students in class?
 - To what extent are your colleagues personally interested in the students and invested in their futures?
 - How much do your colleagues trust the principal here?
 - How much has your principal helped teachers improve? What kinds of things has s/he done?
- *Consider asking **parents**...*
 - What does your child say about his or her teachers?
 - Do you get the sense that teachers use different kinds of teaching techniques here?
 - Is it your impression that teachers at this school are invested in the kids?
 - How much turnover is there in the teaching staff from year to year?
 - Do you get the sense that teachers here enjoy working with each other? What does that look like?

Questions related to school culture:

- *Consider asking the school's **principal or leaders**...*
 - Can you describe a safety challenge here and how the school responds to it?
 - What does the school do to build trust among community members? Can you provide specific examples?
 - How does the school help students feel at home here?
 - How much effort does it take to get students focused on learning here? What kinds of schoolwide efforts are in place?
 - How does the school encourage students to meet high expectations? Who sets those expectations?
- *Consider asking **teachers**...*
 - How safe are students in the hallways, bathrooms, and playgrounds here?
 - How much bullying do you think goes on here? What accounts for it?
 - How connected are students to this school? Can you tell me any stories?
 - How strong are relationships between teachers and students here? Why are things that way?

- How much do your colleagues focus on challenging students? Can you describe a particular example?
- *Consider asking **parents...***
 - How safe does your child feel at school?
 - Has your child ever talked about being bullied or about observing students being unkind to each other at school?
 - How close are your child's relationships with adults at school? What is his/her closest adult relationship there?
 - What is your child's attitude toward school? What do you think accounts for it?
 - How challenged does your child feel at school? Can you tell me any stories?

Questions related to student character and well-being:

- *Consider asking the school's **principal or leaders...***
 - What does the school do to help students understand people who aren't like them? What kinds of consistent and ongoing efforts does the school make?
 - How is diversity a strength of this school? How is it not?
 - How does the school get students to work hard? What does hard work look like?
 - How much of a priority are the arts here? What does the school do to promote them?
 - What does the school do to promote emotional health? How do you know if what you're doing is working?
- *Consider asking **teachers...***
 - How does the school's diversity play out in the classroom?
 - How much do teachers here help students focus on growing as learners? What else do they focus on?
 - How much do students at this school get to work on artistic or creative pursuits?
 - How well does the school foster emotional health for its students? What makes you say that?
 - How often do students engage in physical activity here? Is that enough?
- *Consider asking **parents...***
 - How diverse is the school, and how does that play out for students?
 - How much do you think your child's work ethic has been fostered by the school?
 - How often does your child get to work on artistic or creative projects?
 - How happy is your child? How has the school played a role in that?
 - How much does your child get to move around at school? How much does he or she need to move around?

Questions related to resources at a school:

- *Consider asking the school's **principal or leaders...***
 - What are the biggest resource challenges the school faces? What are your strategies for dealing with those?
 - What kinds of support do students typically receive from non-teaching staff, such as counselors?
 - How much curricular diversity is there here? What's your dream for the curriculum? Where would you like to see it five years from now?
 - How involved are parents at this school? What forms does their involvement take?
 - How involved is the community? What is the impact of that involvement on students?
- *Consider asking **teachers...***
 - To what extent do you have access to the resources you need to be successful?
 - Does the school have enough specialists and support staff? How do they support you?
 - How well rounded is the curriculum that you and your colleagues teach? What makes it the way it is?
 - What is the average class size here? How does that shape your teaching?
 - How much do parents support your work as a teacher? What does their support look like?
- *Consider asking **parents...***
 - Are the school's facilities adequate? Has there ever been an obvious issue that parents were concerned about?
 - Does your child have an art teacher, a music teacher, and a physical education teacher? What can you tell me about them?
 - How much time is spent on test prep? How much does your child talk about testing?
 - How involved are parents in supporting the school? How does that support affect student experiences?
 - How often does your child have an opportunity to engage with the community outside of school? Is that important at all?