Private School Advice from the Experts:  
What Admission Directors Look For

Adapted from the book

*A Guide to Private Schools: The Washington DC, Northern Virginia, Maryland Edition*

2013

By Ann Dolin M.Ed.  
www.ectutoring.com

Just what exactly are admission boards looking for in the first place? Is it the same at every school? What should I emphasize on the application? These seemingly simple questions are on every parent’s mind, but the answers are more complicated. What one admission committee values in an applicant may not be important to another school’s committee. On the following pages, you will find inside information from some of the well-respected professionals in the area. I’m confident that their experience and words of wisdom will help guide your search and final selection.

Choosing the Right Students Is More a Work of Art than a Science

Brian Gilbert, Dean of Admission at Georgetown Preparatory School in North Bethesda, relies on his school’s mission statement to guide decisions his office makes. “Our mission is really central to everything we do here. We are trying to form men of confidence, compassion, competence, and courage. Academically, they have to be really driven young men that have shown academic success.” As you can see from Prep’s mission statement, it is not just about academics: “Along with this, we’re looking for contributors. We want young men who will contribute in athletics, extracurriculars, and as leaders. At the end of the day, they have to be interested in our Catholic mission. We are the oldest Catholic school in the nation for boys. Students here don’t have to be Catholic, but they do have to be open to being involved in what that mission entails—going to mass with us, being in service to others, joining in on the retreat.” Outside of the mission, Brian says that it’s important that potential students fit into the school’s culture.

Brian is quick to point out that “Test scores and grades get you in the conversation,” but that there are many other factors they consider. “Someone who has done really great service work always stands out. We get the typical student who has worked through their church or has done a canned food drive, but something that is above and beyond always makes a student stand out. So does a student who is multi-talented in terms of athletics and music or the arts.”

At Georgetown Prep, a student’s essays and interview are vitally important. “If you can make your essay or your interview stand out, that certainly helps push some over the top. For the interviews, you have to have done some research on the school and certainly show a desire to want to attend the school and enroll if you’re accepted. We’re really looking for honesty. The canned responses don’t really fly
that well. I think that being prepared, in that you know the school and you know yourself, can help you
do well.”

According to Brian and other admission directors, positive teacher recommendations are a must.
“Teacher recommendations play a big part. It’s always difficult when a great student has rough
recommendations because, from a confidentiality standpoint, it isn’t something that we can share with
families.”

There are many different types of students who do well at Prep. “If there were just one type of
student, we wouldn’t really be true to our mission. Consistently, the students who are driven and
hardworking do really well. We do work our guys. We often hear when students return from college that
college is easier than our high school. This is not a school where the kids leave at 2:45. Many of them are
here for 12 hours and many live here (the school has a small boarding population). It’s kind of a second
home for many of our students.”

Brian has some good advice for parents who are new to the admission process. “I think you need to
start a little early. By seventh grade you should have gone to some open houses and narrowed down
your list. I think the most important thing is that you want to be at the point where, by the time
acceptance letters come out, you know where you want to go. It saves families a lot of headaches. In
addition, financial aid can be pretty daunting to families, so you want to make sure that you get all your
information and documentation in early.”

He also recommends that parents visit schools outside of planned tours and other events. “Go to
the schools when they’re not expecting you. Go to sporting events, go to plays, and try to get a sense of
the students and the environment at each school. You want to see what the students are like when they
don’t know you’re watching. I think that can reveal a lot about a school.”

Although Brian feels that students should be part of the decision-making process, he believes that
parents need to take the lead. “A kid has to be happy, but at the same time, parents have to help the
student decide what is best and guide him through the process. It can’t just be about where a young
man’s friends are going or how happy they were at lunch and how good the food was, which is often
what drives a 14-year-old boy.

“Parents can help their student learn to make a wise decision. Parents are often surprised to find
that their son’s decision may be driven by social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Suddenly, the boy
sees on a posting that 15 of his friends are going to one school and his natural reaction is to jump on the
bandwagon. I think that parents need to be involved in the whole process with their sons and daughters
as they make these decisions.”

Brian points out that there are many great options in our area and in some ways you can’t lose. “So
many families think these decisions are the be-all-end-all. I think that taking a step back and realizing
that, at the end of the day, these kids are going to be okay is important. Just having a little bit of
perspective about this process is a good thing—staying off the blogs, not listening to what the neighbors
are saying or the chatter about who got in where or what this young man’s SSAT scores are. Comparing
your child to other children just drives everyone insane.”
Scott Conklin is the director of admission at Episcopal High School on a 130-acre campus in the heart of Alexandria. Episcopal is a unique place because it’s the only all-boarding school inside the Beltway where students live on campus, as does most of the faculty.

The college prep curriculum is a rigorous one; therefore, strong report card grades and standardized test scores are essential. “The first thing we look for is academic readiness. To evaluate that, we look at a student’s transcripts from the past few years. We also require standardized testing. The average GPA for an incoming freshman student is a 3.5, so we’re looking for A/B students. The average standardized testing is around the 70th percentile. We want to be sure that students can handle the work load academically.”

At Episcopal, there’s more to an applicant than grades and test scores. “We’re also looking for really good kids with character and integrity. In a 100% boarding environment, we need kids who can get along with each other and who will also be engaged in the community. To assess that, we look at their recommendations from their school principal or counselor and English and math teachers. We look for work ethic but also for character and integrity. We evaluate that through the interview, which is a required part of the application process. Because we ask our students to participate in afternoon options such as athletics, the arts, or community service, we’re really looking for kids with either special talents or the desire to try different things.”

The most successful students have to be able to be hardworking and willing to advocate for themselves. “At Episcopal, 90% of the faculty lives on campus, so there are many opportunities to find time to meet with your teachers. Kids are successful here if they recognize that they need help and take advantage of the opportunities available to them.”

Scott encourages parents to be proactive and visit all types of different schools. “There is so much to a school that you can discover on your visit. Our tours are student led, so you really get to engage the students, talk to them about their experiences, see classrooms in action, and observe the teachers teaching. Go visit campuses, meet the people, see the school in action—I think that’s critical.

“Look at various types of schools. See what feels right. Early in the process you can narrow down your list to schools that you feel are appropriate fits. I think that looking in the spring of seventh grade or early eighth is helpful. Start the process early, identify which schools you’re really passionate about, and tour the campus and meet the people. If you complete those by Thanksgiving break, that puts you in a great position to avoid some of the stressors when you’re trying to complete applications in December or January, when the deadline is right around the corner.”

Tania Ryan is an expert in the field of early childhood education. For the last 12 years, she’s been the director at the highly sought-after Meeting House Cooperative Preschool in Old Towne Alexandria. “When I started here 12 years ago, 90% of the kids went on to kindergarten at independent schools. Then I saw a shift as the public schools started getting better and better and the economy started getting worse. Parents were entertaining the thought of going to their public school. Now, more than
half go to public and the remaining go to independent schools. Of those, some travel as far as Beauvoir, Maret, and St. Patrick’s. Some go to St. Stephen’s and St. Agnes, St. Mary’s, Potomac, and Burgundy Farm Country Day.”

Tania says that choosing a school after preschool is a very difficult decision for most parents. Some will choose their local public school, but others are committed to an independent education. “What I like to say to them is, ‘Forget about what your neighbor is doing. Forget about what your mother-in-law is saying to you. Sit down and think about the core of your own family, what you believe in, and what your goals for your child are. And then think about the reality of what an independent school will cost you. Will that tax you in a way that will create such a strain on your family and ultimately your marriage?’ Get a hold of that first, and then understand where you land. Explore independent schools with open eyes.”

She encourages parents to look at many options, including their local elementary school. “Go to PTA meetings at your public school. The funny thing is that people don’t realize that they can learn so much about the local public school just by attending PTA meetings. You get to know about the issues bubbling up at any school. You get to hear from the principal, from the PTA president, from the active parent population. It’s an hour and a half well spent.”

Although Meeting House does not require the WPPSI IQ test for young children, Tania recommends it to all parents, whether their child is headed to an independent or public school. “This information starts your benchmark of understanding where your child is cognitively, without being something that you have to share with everyone outside your family. It can serve as a good guide for understanding your child’s ability now and as he or she gets older.”

Getting in Early is Key

St. Patrick’s Episcopal Day School in Northwest DC enrolls approximately 500 students from nursery school to eighth grade. Once students come to St. Pat’s they typically stay through middle school, so applying and getting in early is key. In fact, the school’s largest entry points are at ages three and four. Jennifer Danish, the assistant head of school for enrollment, communications, and marketing, states that St. Pat’s looks for several criteria. “We’re looking for general school readiness in very young children. We have students come to our campus for play dates and oftentimes these play dates can be stressful, particularly for parents. We work very hard to make it a warm and accommodating process for a young child.”

For some youngsters, separating from their parents when they arrive at St. Patrick’s can be a scary experience since they’re going to a new place filled with many new faces. So often, when children become visibly upset, their parents worry that their behavior will negatively impact their child’s chances of getting into the school. Fortunately, that’s not the case. “We make it clear to parents that the separation moment is not a make-or-break moment for us as a school and our decision making. It’s important for parents to stay calm and be themselves, to be as forthcoming and honest as they can about their child and what kind of fit they’re looking for.”

Beyond preschool, St. Patrick’s has some available slots. “We often have more than a few spots available for fourth grade and sometimes seventh grade, usually due to attrition. And when we do,
we’re looking for kids who can fit into our program and successfully make a transition into a new school setting.”

Jennifer recommends being geographically flexible. “If you live in Virginia, don’t rule out schools in DC; if you live in DC, same thing. Give yourself a pretty broad reach. Look at the websites, look at the educational philosophy. Is there a plan that the school employs to teach? Be a savvy consumer; use some of that internet research and get an initial feel. In the end, you’ve got to go on school tours. You’ve got to be in the school, in the buildings. If you can get a chance to hear from the head of the school, that’s a really important part because he or she can speak to the strengths of the program. Make sure you plan for fall open houses or individual tours that the school offers.”

Although Jennifer encourages parents to consider many different schools, she doesn’t believe that parents need to apply to more than a few. “Parents have gotten to the point where they are applying to six, seven, eight schools and I think that’s a little too much. Internet research and touring can help pare down a really good list for families. Parents know their children and they have to trust their instincts about what is needed in a school setting.”

**Intuitive Factors Are Just as Important as Tangible Data**

As director of admission at St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes (SSSAS) in Alexandria, Diane Dunning has worked with hundreds of families throughout the years. She believes that one unexpected factor is equally important for admission personnel and parents alike—intuition.

When Diane and her committee review an applicant’s file, they consider the expected criteria such as test scores, grades, teacher recommendations, and outside interests, but they look for something more than that. “There are intangibles that we look at. We want students who are intellectually curious, who are excited about learning. What often sets a child apart is that intellectual spark. That’s the only way I can describe it, since its intangible. You see it in a shy child as much as you see it in the highly extroverted one.”

Another factor that can make or break an applicant’s chances is the way the student interacts with others. “We want to see that children will get along with each other and that they are respectful of their peers as well as adults.” Diane said that they look for children who can be kind to other people, not because they feel the microscope is on them but because it is in their innate personality. Diane elaborated, “Sometimes I am working with a family with a child who has extraordinary test scores across the various disciplines, and they are surprised if the student isn’t accepted. But it may be that the other area, the character area, was a challenge for that child. Both areas are important to us.”

Diane did not wish to downplay the role of tangible data. “I’d be dishonest if I said test scores weren’t important, but we also know that character and intuitive factors allow students to have success both morally and academically.”

This expectation is directly in line with SSSAS’s mission statement. “It is vital that families understand and agree with a school’s mission statement. The mission is more than just words on the school’s website. It’s something you feel the moment you step foot on the campus.” This mission statement should be reflected in everything the school does, and “once you get the whole tour [of the
school], you will probably have this emotional connection or disconnect with that particular school. I think what you’re feeling is the reflection of the mission. So as much as you need a lot of data, I think you need to combine your data with your parental instinct.”

Ultimately, Diane believes that if both the family and the school present themselves honestly and both parties trust their instincts, the child will be placed in the best environment. “I wish I could provide families with an exact algorithm on how to figure all of this out, but the truth is there is no proven formula in choosing the right school for your child. It’s not an exact science, it’s more like an art. The decision doesn’t lie in the prestige that you hear about the school, or standardized test results, but again back to that right match, between the child’s strengths and needs and the school’s expectations and offerings. It’s important to never make a child feel that only one school is successful because if it’s not the right match, the child is going to pay the price both academically and emotionally. We know that parents see us [the admission department] as gatekeepers, but we really want to be the people who open doors to as many families as we can.”

**Every Parent’s List Should Contain at Least One Same-Sex School**

Madeira School is an independent all-girls boarding and day school in McLean. The school serves approximately 320 students from 20 different states. About half of the students live on campus and the other half are day students. For the last nine years, Ann Miller has been the director of admission at Madeira and, as you can imagine, she is passionate about all-girls education. “Every parent who is looking for an independent school for their child should have at least one single-sex school on their list. I don’t think parents are doing due diligence in a search without that. These schools are such unique institutions.”

Over the years, Ann has found that parents and their children will rule out single-sex schools without even visiting them. “You owe it to your child to understand this concept better and the best way to understand is to visit. Girls have preconceived notions about what single-sex schools will be like and they are not anything like that. Our current students tell us that all the time. There are many girls here who say, ‘Never in a million years did I think I’d end up at an all-girls school. But when I came to Madeira and saw the opportunities available here, it overruled my concerns about the single-sex piece. I realized I really liked it.’ If you don’t consider a single-sex school because of preconceived notions, you’re cutting out important schools.”

Ann states that a girl’s success after high school and college begins in the classroom. “We know that when teenage girls are upset, stressed, or socially self-conscious, the ability to learn diminishes. The concept is that if you have all this social stimuli you’re processing while you’re also trying to study chemistry, for example, it’s very difficult to accomplish both. We know that experientially and from what has been published in the research. When you put girls in a single-sex academic setting, the social pressure is so low that they can learn freely in an unfettered way. I can recommend a great book by JoAnn Deak called *How Girls Thrive*, which explores the science behind girls’ learning.”

When Ann and her admission team review applications, they look for specific elements that help determine a girl’s readiness. “We at Madeira are very concerned about an academic fit because the program is a challenging one. We are providing a rigorous academic program in four days with the fifth day dedicated to the internship program where girls are off campus. Our goal is to make sure the girl
coming in can be successful in our academic program. We want her to be able to thrive here in the classroom, on the stage, on the athletic fields, in making friendships, and in taking leadership roles.

“We have a fairly narrow set of assessments. One is the SSAT test. But for girls coming from the Washington, DC area, we actually pay more attention to the transcript and teacher recommendations. We know these schools and we know these teachers. For example, for a girl coming from the DC area, we’re looking for As and Bs on her report card, and an English and a math teacher recommendation that speaks about her resiliency and her ability to work hard and be prepared in class. At the next level, we look at SSAT scores. We also factor in the interview and other pieces of information we’ve gathered.”

When asked about how she compares applicants’ grades, especially when an A from one school may be a B at another school, Ann said, “All of what we gather serves as information—one of it is in a vacuum. If a girl has a B from school X, but has very strong verbal and reading SSAT scores, and if the teacher talks about her ability to dissect complicated text, that girl is a very strong candidate for us. Similarly, a girl with an A from another school, but with moderate SSAT scores and an English teacher recommendation that’s not extraordinary, is not somebody who’s going to go to the top of our list. There is no hard-and-fast rule. We have about 400 applications that we read every year and we admit about half of those girls.”

Like other upper schools in our region, Madeira serves high school students in grades nine to twelve. As can be expected, ninth grade is the largest entry year at Madeira, but interestingly, Ann and her staff receive many applications for tenth grade. “The sophomore year is a big entry year for us now. There’s a whole group of families in Fairfax County who say, ‘Let’s give the ninth grade a try in our public high school,’ and then come spring, they get the report card and realize that the school didn’t meet their goal.” In the end, Ann encourages parents to broaden their horizons to consider an all-girls school, whether it’s for the freshman or sophomore year.

**Finding a School You Can Buy Into**

Burgundy Farm Country Day School educates almost 300 children from junior kindergarten through eighth grade. The school’s primary 25-acre Alexandria campus is complemented by a 500-acre site in West Virginia. For the past two years, Lori Adams has served as director of admission. Because of the uniqueness of Burgundy, she feels that it’s important that parents appreciate the school’s philosophy. “We want parents who understand our mission and have complete buy-in to our program. For instance, we send our children to our West Virginia campus, starting in the first grade, on an overnight trip and subsequently twice a year from second grade on. We want parents to know in advance the kind of experience their kids will have.”

Lori and her team are looking for students who are inquisitive and have a love for nature. “We are looking for bright children who are creative and enthusiastic about learning. Burgundy provides a very collaborative learning experience, very hands-on, and project-oriented. We want kids who aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty since they go outdoors a lot. Our campus includes a barnyard and barnyard animals, a pond, and a garden area. In addition, the students take a number of ‘specials’ classes, including music, art, drama, P.E., library, and computer. We expose them to French and Spanish from the very beginning, when they’re four years old. We’re looking for the families who want this very enriched experience for their children.”
Burgundy is in demand. Lori receives hundreds of applications each year, but there are things families can do to stand out. “I know a family is really excited about what we have to offer if they make an effort not only to come to an open house, which many families do, but also do an independent tour with me as well. That really shows me that they feel a connection. I know many people are applying to a number of schools, but I can see from the schools to which they’re applying whether we are the kind of environment that they believe would best serve them. Let’s say we are the only progressive school they’re considering and they’re looking at five other schools that are very traditional in nature. I will ask a lot of questions to get a sense of their comfort level with our progressive program.”

Independent schools can come with a steep price tag, but that should not be a limiting factor. “Don’t assume that independent schools aren’t possible because of tuition costs. There are many schools that can help support a child’s enrollment with financial assistance. I am not saying every school can enroll every child or will be able to provide all the financial aid it takes, but many do provide assistance to enroll a socioeconomically and multiculturally diverse student population and students who will contribute to their schools’ communities.

“When considering schools, it’s important to be introspective. Do parents want their children to go to the most competitive high schools and, subsequently, colleges and universities in the country? Do they want their children to come out of the learning experience with a natural curiosity that’s been nurtured so that they can continue to be lifelong learners? What kind of learning environment is the best match for my child? Those are the kind of questions parents should think about as they explore school options.

“And if the parent feels stressed and outwardly shows stress about the child’s required visits to schools to which they’re applying, that might rub off on the child. So make the visit a fun experience for a child to see what another school is like. How a child responds can be modeled by a parent. It’s better when a parent says, ‘This is going to be fun; we are going to let you visit this school to see what it’s like,’ rather than, ‘You will be going to this school and you’re not going to be seeing your friends anymore.’ Let the children explore the possibilities for their own education. Make it fun and exciting as opposed to scary and difficult.”

**Rank Your Priorities**

Nora Webb is the middle school director at Nysmith School for the Gifted, located in Herndon. The school, which specializes in providing an education to the gifted population of Northern Virginia, has students taking classes up to four years above grade level. For example, some eighth-grade students with a propensity for math can take pre-calculus, which is way beyond the traditional eighth-grade math course.

The school is highly regarded in the area for having a very advanced math and science program, though Nora states that only about one-third of the Nysmith student body would identify themselves as being oriented towards math, science, and technology over liberal arts. Additionally, many parents seek enrollment at Nysmith due to its high TJ acceptance rate. More than 50% of all eighth-grade students from Nysmith are accepted to the nationally-recognized, public magnet school.
In the classroom, instruction is accelerated, but to different degrees. According to Nora, “The most obvious differentiation will be math. All of our fifth and sixth graders have math at the same hour and each child goes to whatever math course they need. Most of our students are one to four grade levels above in math. Within the classroom, the teachers are really trying to work with every child based on their strengths. So for example, in language arts class, you will see students writing essays at slightly above grade level to what you would expect from three levels above. But the teacher isn’t grading everyone to the standards of three levels above.”

Although students are capable of working at an advanced level, teachers are very well aware that the students are still youngsters. “For example, our fourth graders start dissecting fish and frogs in biology and they are meticulous about keeping lab journals following the scientific method. But then they build a construction paper frog to take home, because they’re just nine years old. So they’re doing very advanced conceptual work, but we do it in ways that are very child-friendly methods.”

Nysmith certainly has a distinguished reputation among DC-area independent schools, and those students who don’t go on to TJ often attend some of the most prestigious independent high schools in the area. However, Nora sees a growing trend of increased stress over applying to independent schools, especially when Type A parents are raising Type B students. “Part of the stress comes from the parent’s commitment to trying to find the very best fit. No one place is going to answer all concerns. It is important for parents to rank their priorities, but also to consider what they really think is best for their child.” While Nysmith begins enrollment in pre-kindergarten, Nora stressed that, even from an early age, it’s important to balance the family values and priorities along with the best environment for the student. “The most important question a parent can ask is, ‘Where will my child learn best and how does it align with our family priorities?’”

Consider the International Perspective

Anna Ellenbogen is the director of admissions at the British School of Washington (BSW), located in picturesque Georgetown. The school offers families in the DC area an entirely international experience, culminating with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in high school.

Since students from all over the world attend the British School, no specific standardized testing is required. Anna says, “Almost two-thirds of students applying are from international families and we’ve found that standardized tests have a cultural bias.” Instead of relying on standardized admission testing, entrance assessments are based on strong teacher recommendations, a pattern of progressively more challenging coursework, and solid grades.

Anna and her staff want to be sure students can handle a heavy workload and have the capacity to develop strong writing skills. Along with these abilities, BSW is looking for an open mind and a willingness to accept an international perspective. “It is no longer a cliché to say the world is getting smaller, that’s the reality. Therefore, our students here are very aware of becoming global thinkers. Because we are an international school, cultural and racial diversity happens almost by default.

“A concern families may have when considering an international school is the preconceived notion that because the school is international, there will be a high turnover rate among students.” Interestingly enough, Anna states, “Our attrition is about the same as other schools. Once an international family is here, they are likely going to stay as long as possible. Our American families tend
to stay because they are looking for an international education, specifically the IB program. It really helps to set us apart.”

Understand That the Admission Process is Just That—A Process

Vince Rowe has worked in independent school admissions for more than 18 years and is currently the director of admission and financial aid at Georgetown Day School (GDS) in Washington, DC. Coming from a public school background himself, Vince says that it doesn’t so much matter which school a student is coming from when they apply, but rather whether or not the student is “taking full advantage of the resources available to them at their current school.” Vince acknowledges that students coming from an independent school often have access to many more resources than those attending some public schools, but notes that GDS loves to see students going out to “advocate and create opportunities” for themselves.

In regards to standardized test scores, Vince says that the weight they carry varies depending on who you’re talking to. He notes that the school goes through the selection process as a committee, “so you have me as the admission chair, along with principals, learning specialists, teachers, as well as the head of the school. So I think if you ask that question, you’re going to get a different answer from different people—as it should be.”

In Vince’s view, the admission process is a juggling act of making sure that the student is both academically and socially a good fit for the school culture. When asked how the school can ensure that a student is socially a good fit, Vince replied, “You would be surprised what you can learn when you ask the right questions in the right context to a young person or a family.” In terms of how a student approaches the school admission process, he says it varies depending on the entry year, since GDS is a K-12 school. “When students are young, the parents are doing the decision making, but in middle school, it’s more of a partnership between the parents and the student. Certainly by high school, I would say that most of our highly motivated and fully engaged students drive the entire process—everything from finding what schools they want to apply to, to coming in, and doing their own interviews.”

Due to the school’s 97-98% retention rate, it has a waitlist in place. However, Vince is quick to highlight that “it’s not really a waitlist, it’s a wait pool. We just call it a waitlist to be consistent,” but in reality, there is no ranking for students as to who is offered admission from this wait pool. Interestingly, the decision changes year by year and day by day. Vince added, “The decision is usually driven by criteria as specific as race/ethnicity, just to balance socioeconomic diversity and ability.” Vince elaborated, “If there’s a class, for example, where there were more boys than girls, then clearly the girls are going to come out with a leg up in terms of chances of getting in. We try to factor that in while also keeping in mind that we want to find the best match.”

Vince provided a metaphor that admission is a lot like a merry-go-round, “where you bring people in and then they leave. We want people to come in and stay until they graduate, but sometimes an acceptance or rejection results simply due to the time you got on the ride.”
Delivering a Traditional Curriculum in Non-Traditional Ways

The McLean School of Maryland is well known for its ability to offer a traditional curriculum in a non-traditional way to bright students with a learning disability or ADHD. According to Judy Jankowski, the former director of admission, McLean looks for students with “solid cognitive scores who are in the average-to-above-average range on a WISC, but we realize that despite high scores in some areas, a student may have a weakness in processing speed or working memory and that’s okay. We’re also looking for motivation, perseverance, and a willingness to try new strategies. Aside from test scores and report card grades, the students who stand out are the ones who are enthusiastic and active participants.”

Judy encourages parents to spend as much time as possible at the school and to talk to members of the school community outside of the admission office. McLean frequently puts prospective families with current families, but Judy also recommends talking to outside professionals as well. “Look at all your options, and keep an open mind. There are times when people say, ‘I went to X type of school and I turned out well, so that’s where my child is going to go, too.’ Parochial schools, for example, are great for kids that are right in the middle of things, but exceptional kids on either side are not always going to be best placed there. Going in with preconceived notions about how your child will learn doesn’t necessarily serve him or her well.”

The admission staff and teachers keep detailed notes on each candidate’s shadow visit. “During the shadow visit, we want to see how comfortable they are in the environment. Every teacher receives a form that evaluates the students academically and socially so that we get feedback from multiple teachers in multiple environments.”

The instructional approach is unique. “McLean seeks to create a balance between oral presentation, visual learning, and hands-on instruction. In math, for example, students utilize manipulatives and games frequently. The other day I observed a science class in which the teacher was explaining the structure of a cell. She had all the students standing up and a group of them were in a circle on the outside and they were the cell wall. There were individual students inside the cell wall who were acting as the various organs within the cell.” She also gave an example of fifth-grade students studying World War I. “A teacher had the students turn their desks sideways to simulate bunkers and used Nerf balls to simulate and better understand trench warfare. This type of teaching causes students to really internalize the material actively, as opposed to simply being passive observers in a classroom.” Whether your child needs an alternative approach to learning or not, the key is to look for student engagement as you observe classes.

When parents initially tour McLean, some ask about how colleges view the school’s non-traditional approach to education. The staff believes that success in college actually starts in the elementary grades. “The lower school is about competence and confidence. It is very hands-on and the teachers use manipulatives and games to a large extent. In the middle school, the focus is on understanding who you are as a learner and what you need to become successful. Here, students get a lot of tools and strategies to keep themselves organized. Does the student need to use graph paper in math? Should they color-code their notes using highlighters? In the upper school, there are college guidance counselors who start working with students in the ninth grade. These students begin preparing for the SAT and ACT in the ninth grade. McLean also has a very traditional AP and honors track.”
Judy encourages parents who are interested in a school that addresses learning differences to think outside the box. “Just because you learned one way, doesn’t mean your child will do it the same way. Parents need to get information from a lot of sources, including a psycho-educational or neuro-psych evaluation to determine learning differences. Testing can indicate what a child’s stronger learning suit is going to be. Having hard data is really helpful.”

Consider the Catholic Option

Since its doors opened in 1957, Bishop O’Connell High School has grown into one of the largest Catholic high schools in the metropolitan area. As director of admission (and also an alumnus), Michael Cresson has the responsibility of reviewing hundreds of applications throughout the year. “We receive well over 500 applications and enroll about 300 students. One of the first things I look for is the teacher recommendation letter. Foremost, we want children with good character who are also good students.

“After reviewing the recommendation, I look at the student’s grades and test scores. Our students take the High School Placement Test (HSPT). The HSPT has five sections split between English and math. It’s a very hard test because each section is timed and students aren’t allowed to use a calculator. They just aren’t used to that type of test.” Because so much anxiety can go along with standardized testing, O’Connell has begun offering students a practice test that is taken at the end of the seventh-grade year. “It gives them a feeling for what the real test will be like in the fall. It’s the same amount of sections, just fewer questions. It’s designed for any seventh grader who is applying to Catholic school. Parents will get a report of their scores so they will know what their student needs to work on over the summer.”

Michael determines how a student’s test scores compare to his or her grades. “We do understand that kids may not have the best test day.” Some students have good grades, but weak test scores, “so we do have a couple of alternatives where students do a summer bridge program, if their scores aren’t quite what we’re looking for, to help them get adjusted to high school.”

Students do not have to be Catholic to attend O’Connell, and Michael encourages students of all religious backgrounds to consider the school. “During the admission process we look at all students equally. That includes religion as well.” Nonetheless, O’Connell’s population is heavily Catholic at 82%, yet it’s also quite diverse. “We have 90 international students enrolled on average every year, so we truly have this unique group coming into the school. We have local students who travel great distances, from as far north as Bowie to as far south as Fredericksburg.”

Although O’Connell’s athletic program is at the top of any list, academics take center stage. “We offer 26 AP classes and more than 50 honors and elective courses. So the strength of our academic program is something that’s of interest to parents, but this is also a welcoming and enjoyable school. There’s a community atmosphere.” Michael believes that a sense of community is just as important as the number of honors and AP classes. He encourages parents to evaluate these two factors equally.

O’Connell encourages families to begin looking at high schools in the spring of the child’s seventh grade. “I would definitely suggest a head start. I think most parents will go to the open houses, but on a tour, they get to see what it’s like on a normal school day. At an open house, you aren’t going to get to see the kids in the rooms and get their true feeling of what the school is like. So I always recommend doing the tour in the spring or the fall the year before—the earlier, the better. If the school allows a
shadow visit, consider it. Here, they shadow as seventh graders so they get to see what it’s like to be an O’Connell student for a day.”

**Coming to Terms with LD or ADHD and Finding a School to Match**

Commonwealth Academy is a college preparatory school in Alexandria for students who benefit from small classes and instruction designed to address various learning styles. Most students who attend Commonwealth have a diagnosed learning disability or ADHD.

As the director of admission, Josh Gwilliam is on the lookout for the “average-to-superior student with a mild-to-moderate learning disability or ADHD. Being a smaller school—about 150 students total in grades three through twelve— I need to make sure that the student is going to be able to fit into the culture and the community of the school.”

Learning how to learn is a focus at Commonwealth, but in the end, they want students to be fully prepared for college. “Because we are a college prep school, everything leads up to that place. That actually starts in our lower school—grades three, four, and five. Our students become very aware of who they are as learners, and then they get to this acceptance place where they say, ‘I learn a little bit differently, I require a different environment, and I need to be okay with that.’”

At Commonwealth, students learn how to develop their executive functioning skills in order to get better organized, plan ahead, and focus. “Learning executive functioning skills is a key benefit for our students, even our twice exceptional students or our students coming out of GT (Gifted and Talented) programs. For example, we have a matching notebook system. From grades three to twelve, each student has an assigned color-coded binder to stay organized. In addition, every student has an advisor. The advisor meets with the student in the middle school twice a day, and in the high school once a day; they look at the notebooks one day, the lockers the next day, and the backpacks the next day.” When visiting schools, Josh encourages parents to ask how teachers help students stay organized, plan ahead, and develop good study habits.

For some parents, realizing that their child may need a different kind of academic setting isn’t always easy. “What we’re really looking for are parents who are coming to grips with an understanding of who their child is. I can tell you that I’ve had parents in my office who have found it extremely difficult to accept that their child needs a different learning environment. But once they take that leap of faith and trust the school, and their child is happy, successful, and thriving, they come to understand exactly who their child is and what they need to learn. It really gets back to the question of does your child feel safe and secure. Is she happy, thriving, and finding academic success? These are all key components. Especially within DC we have a lot of Type A personalities, parents who are very successful, very well educated, who all of a sudden have a student who has a learning disability or ADHD. So, it’s not an easy process, but it definitely is a good process and a healthy process for the child.”
Opportunities for Leadership Are the Name of the Game

Just off of River Road in Bethesda you will find Norwood School, a popular choice among parents seeking a K-8 education for their child. Maralyn Marsteller’s own children attended Norwood and now she serves as the school’s assistant director of admission. She and the other administrators believe that there are many important benefits to a school whose primary focus is educating students from kindergarten to eighth grade. “When you have a young child, it’s hard to know if the school you’re considering now is also going to be the best one years from now when your child is, say, 14 years old, because children change and grow. I firmly believe—having done it twice with my own children—that it’s best to choose for the now rather than the maybe based on what you think they might become.

“Like other K-8 schools, our seventh and eighth graders are really like juniors and seniors. They become the leaders at the school and are the buddies to the younger children. The third and fourth graders are the leaders at the lower school. We want children to try everything and this is a safe place to do it. Our middle schoolers aren’t constantly looking over their shoulder saying, ‘Gee, I wish I was a high schooler.’ When you don’t have the influence of the older children, I think it’s a little bit easier. Kids are more willing to try new things and take on leadership roles.”

Getting into Norwood is competitive. “The first step is for the family to visit, either on a tour or at an open house. We like to take our tours into the classroom so families can see the kids in action and see how the classroom works. It’s usually just a gut feeling if they can envision their child here. That’s what happened to me. I’m a fourth-generation Washingtonian and I went to very different schools from Norwood as a child, but when I came to Norwood as a prospective parent, I just felt at home. You want a place that feels warm and inviting and a place where your child will be happy.”

Whether parents are considering a K-8 school or one which progresses through high school, Maralyn believes that “the great thing about independent schools is that there isn’t a ‘you have to do it this way’ belief system.” At Norwood, “every year is different. For example, this year we had one math group that was going to be almost all boys with two girls, so we made it all boys. We would describe ourselves as traditional and innovative combined. I think we have a lot of the structure of a traditional school, but we do try to think outside the box.”

Besides flexibility being a key component in any good school, Maralyn believes that finding a place where students have close ties with teachers is vital. On a personal level, she has experienced how small class sizes and student/teacher relationships can make all the difference. “My son was a quiet guy. In seventh and eighth grade we had advisory groups instead of homerooms. He had a great advisor who is a science teacher here.

“The students were doing A Midsummer Night’s Dream for the seventh and eighth-grade play. My son would never have tried out for a play, but his advisor told the play director, ‘You should really try to get Wylie to audition for the part of Bottom, because he’s so funny.’ Once he heard that from the director, Wylie thought, ‘Oh, well, maybe I can.’ So he went home and worked on it, got the part, and he had leads in every play all the way through high school. Now he’s in an all-male a cappella group at college. What I love about that is, if someone notices you, even if you’re a quiet little guy, you are more willing to take the risk. If you do, then you can find something that you end up loving. That’s a neat thing about independent schools. In a large place he would have just gone on in his own quiet world.”
Want more information on schools in your area? Check out my book which contains a step-by-step process for selecting and applying to the schools that are the right fit for your child. In addition, 94 schools are profiled in detail to provide you a toolkit at your fingertips. If you need additional help, feel free to peruse my website, www.anndolin.com, and the consultations I provide.