



Back to Basics

Parents, schools and community provide the key to educational stability

by Ladan Nekoomaram

The education of a child is a three-pronged process that involves parents, schools and the community.

Parents are considered the gateway to every child's education. Through the school choices they make, their initial involvement in teaching their children ABCs and 123s, and their participation in schools, parents provide the foundation for the child's education.

The schools take over some formal parts of the child's education, and the community augments the school's resources with financial and program support.

For a second year in a row, Indiana ranked first nationally for its high academic, testing and accountability standards in *Education Week's* Quality Counts report. According to the Indiana Department of Education, parent and community involvement is a common characteristic in high performance schools.

The search for a student's ideal learning environment should begin the year before he or she starts school because magnet programs, charter schools and private schools accept applications a semester or two in advance.

Here are some of the many options for schools:

Traditional public schools: Public schools are funded by state tax dollars and are governed by state officials. All public schools, including IPS, the remaining 10 township and municipal districts and suburban county schools, operate under the same legislation. Often, public schools, like Brownsburg's Cardinal Elementary School, Speedway Junior High School and Hamilton Southeastern High School in Fishers, perform just as highly as private schools on standardized tests and offer similar courses.

Public school magnet programs: Indianapolis Public Schools operates 34 different magnet programs geared toward hard-working students interested in a particular school's focus. Magnet programs emphasize a specific instructional approach, like the TEACH Academy at Emmerich Manual High School, the Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School, the Spanish language immersion program at Theodore Potter School 74 or special all-level programs like the Key Learning Community.

Charter schools: These public schools, which include Christel House Academy, Flanner House Elementary School and Herron High School, are prohibited by law to limit admissions but are free of some restrictions placed on traditional public schools. A lottery system often determines

enrollment because of the small student/teacher ratios, so students should apply in early spring. "Parents should know that charter schools are all different from one another and are not right for everybody," says Molly Chamberlin, director of the Division of Educational Options. Some focus on literacy or technology, while others focus on projects, internships, discovery learning or problem solving.

Alternative schools: Most public school districts operate alternative programs like IPS' Pacers Academy, the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township's KIND School and Washington Township's QUEST program. These programs strive to make school relevant for students facing obstacles like academic failure, pregnancy, financial troubles, physiological imbalances, discipline issues or early entry into the workforce.

Private schools: These, including The International School of Indiana, Sycamore School and The Orchard School, offer rigorous classes, high test scores and personal attention from faculty. Each operates under its own governing body and charges tuition, which can reach \$20,000 a year. Many offer scholarships to defray the cost.

College preparatory schools: These schools, which include Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School and Park Tudor School, offer curricula intended to allow graduates access to the college or university of their choice, with the goal of 100 percent graduation rate and college attendance.

Faith-based schools: More than 35 schools in the Indianapolis area, including the Hasten Hebrew Academy, Heritage Christian School and Theodore Guerin Catholic High School, offer faith-based education, stressing religion, service and moral values.

Special needs: Indianapolis is home to a variety of public and private schools that service students with special needs, including the Indiana School for the Blind, the School for the Deaf, and the Verbal Behavior Center for Autism.

Online high schools: Students have access to public and private virtual high schools, including Indiana University High

School and Indiana Virtual Academy, where they are offered personal access to counselors, teachers and tutors. In fact, students often aren't limited to virtual high schools in Indiana. Online public high schools often are free, and many lend books or computers at no cost.

Home school: Parents also have the option of providing an equal education of their choice through home school. Those with children in school must formally withdraw them, notifying the principal in writing and register their home school with the Indiana Department of Education, which can be done online. As with other schools, students must receive 180 days of instruction and parents must keep attendance records. The state requires equal curriculum to that of public schools but does not define what that means. Indiana does not provide books or curricula for home school or for home school students to take the ISTEP. ■

Helpful Resources

The Indiana Department of Education:
www.doe.state.in.us/

Nonpublic school options:
www.doe.state.in.us/htmls/privschr.html

Indianapolis Public Schools:
www.ips.k12.in.us/

Archdiocese of Indianapolis (Catholic-based schools):
www.archindy.org/occe/index.asp

IPS Magnet Programs:
www.magnet.ips.k12.in.us/

Division of Educational Options (alternative and charter schools):
www.doe.state.in.us/alted/welcome.html

On the tip of your tongue

Molly Chamberlin, director of the Division of Educational Options, says parents, regardless whether the student will be enrolled in a public or private school program, should ask the right questions. Among the things parents should consider when weighing educational options:

- > Focus on the details, like class size, atmosphere, the feeling you get from the teachers, disciplinary procedures and policies, and the yearly schedule.
- > School officials should communicate what is expected of each student and what will be required to succeed. Uniforms, religious traditions in faith-based schools and program requirements each are factors. Parents then should express those expectations to their children before they start.
- > Parents should ask other parents what is unique about that particular school.
- > Parents are encouraged to ask about special programs and activities, including gifted programs, additional learning opportunities and charter schools.
- > Get to know the different strengths and specialties of surrounding charter schools or special programs.
- > Think about your own schedule. Some places have extended school days or longer school years. If students attend a charter school outside the district, they might need to provide their own transportation. For private schools, a carpool system may be available.
- > Look at the Indiana Department of Education's Web site to see the state's standards, graduation requirements, ISTEP information and any information about particular schools.
- > Research your school's parent programs and service opportunities. Don't be afraid to call.