



Head Start

Now is the time to consider education options for the coming school year

by Ladan Nekoomaram

The search for a student's ideal learning environment should begin the year before she/he 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 Saint Louis Public Schools, and 24 city/county school districts operate under the same legislation. Often, public schools such as Metro Academic Classical High School, Bristol Elementary School and Robert H. Sperrung Middle School, perform just as highly as private schools on standardized tests.

Public school magnet programs: St. Louis Public Schools operates 24 different magnet programs geared towards hard-working students interested in a particular school's focus. Magnet programs emphasize a specific instructional approach, like the McKinley Classical Junior Academy, Ames Visual/Performing Arts Elementary School, the international program at Soldan International Studies High School or the math and technology focus at The Gateway Institute of Technology.

Charter schools: These public schools, which include Imagine Academy of Environmental Science and Math, Ethel Hedgeman Lyle Middle/High School and

Lift for Life Academy, 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. Charter schools are all different from one another and certain programs are better suited for students with special talents or goals. 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 the East St. Louis District #189 Alternative High School, Ronald E. McNair School and Kottmeyer Early Childhood Center. They 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 Wilson School, Rohan Woods School and Thomas Jefferson 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 Chaminade College Prep School and Crossroads College Preparatory 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: There are several faith-based St. Louis schools, including H.F. Epstein Hebrew Academy, Trinity Catholic High School and Westminster Christian Academy, that offer faith-based education, stressing religion, service, and moral values.

Special needs: St. Louis is home to a variety of public and private schools that serve students with special needs, including The Missouri School for the Blind, Central Institute for the Deaf and The Churchill Center and School for Learning Disabilities.

Online high schools: Students have access to public and private virtual high schools, including St. Louis Public Schools Virtual School, where school is meant to complement rather than consume daily life, making it more convenient for anyone to earn their high school diploma. In fact, students often aren't limited to virtual high schools in Missouri.

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 Missouri Department of Education, which can be done online. As with other schools, students must receive

1,000 hours per year of instruction with 600 of those hours dedicated to reading, math, social studies, language arts, and sciences. Parents must keep attendance records, a log of activities and examples of the children's academic work. Missouri does not provide books or curricula for home school or require home school students to take statewide standardized tests. ■

On the tip of your tongue

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 such as 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.

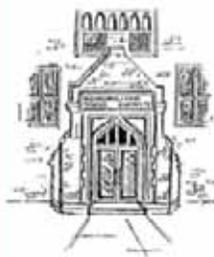
> Get to know the different strengths and specialties of surrounding charter schools or special programs.

> Think about your own schedule. Some places have extended school days or longer school years. If students attend a charter school out the district, they might need to provide their own transportation. For private schools, a carpool system may be available.

> Look at the St. Louis Department of Education's statistics page that talks about graduation rate, academic performance and discipline incidences.

> Research your school's parent programs and service opportunities. Don't be afraid to call.

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