



# Choosing the Right School

Deciding on your child's early schooling is one of your highest responsibilities as a parent.

*The word “good” has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of 500 yards, I would call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.*

—G.K. Chesterton, 1935

The phrase good school has similar limitations. Good schools are not merely places where students learn, for learning is a neutral term. Students can learn things of value in a school, but they can also learn to be disrespectful to teachers, uninterested in the tasks required of them and disengaged from the joy of learning. Learning in school will always occur; directing it toward desirable attitudes and outcomes is the major purpose and challenge of formal education.

American schools have historically sought a balance between devoting energy and resources to support those student achievements considered to be the primary goals of education (i.e. the accumulation of information: knowledge, facts, skills and concepts) and those considered important, but ancillary (helping students to develop a positive disposition toward future learning, expanding children's interest in the world around them, sustaining their natural curiosity and inspiring each new generation with a sense of responsibility to others, both in the school and in the larger community).

Not long ago, the phrase “educating the whole child” was prominent in the mission statements and in the behavior of all schools: pub-

lic, private, religious. “Educating the whole child” rests on the belief that the value of the school experience is far broader than achieving competence in basic literacy and numeracy skills that can be quickly and inexpensively measured by machine-scored tests. Educating the whole child assigns equal worth to both left-brain cognitive skills and right-brain creative and affective abilities.

It is interesting to note that until recently educators knew far less about how the human brain learns, stores and recalls information and experiences. Today we have compelling evidence that the brain in childhood and adolescence is an emotional organ. When the adult brain recalls information and experiences learned in school, the information is retrieved with the attitude or emotional code that accompanied its intake. Math anxiety and public-speaking phobia are two common examples of the emotional residue of unsuccessful school experiences.

We also have compelling evidence that success in college, careers and citizenship in the 21st century will rely less on school achievements previously considered primary and more on those considered ancillary. Our definition of what constitutes a good education may need revision. If we maintain the view that intelligence is synonymous with information, then the member of a graduating class who has the most concrete knowledge committed to memory is the most intelligent. However, if we define intelligence as the possessing of superior imagination, ingenuity, resourcefulness and motivation, a better candidate would be a cheeky, tenacious young learner who can think creatively, can work collaboratively and is able to both stimulate and evaluate his/her own effort.

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by Douglas J. Lyons, Ed. D., Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Independent Schools

## Independent Schools

32 ► Emerging research from education, business and industry suggests that students in school today will need programs and activities that foster the development of superior communication skills (both oral and written), effective collaboration strategies, the ability to think creatively and analytically, independence and global awareness. As writer and futurist Alvin Toffler points out, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

Parents choosing a school in Connecticut for their child(ren) can be assured that educating the whole child remains the central purpose of independent schools. Unencumbered by the curricular demands of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, independent-school faculties have the freedom to create programs that teach basic skills and complex ideas simultaneously. Connecticut’s independent-school leaders believe (and are supported by research) that higher-level activities, projects and learning tasks that many public schools reserve for students in “gifted” classes are appropriate for all students and can be adapted for students with different abilities.

Connecticut’s independent schools also question the belief that extracurricular experiences are secondary influences in the development of children and adolescents. Athletics, the arts and community service all provide authentic opportunities for practice in 21st-century skills and are requirements in independent schools.

Studies of independent-school graduates in college reveal the broader effects of growing up in an independent-school community. These alumni lead the nation in college graduation rates, graduate-school matriculation, career satisfaction, personal health and fitness, civic involvement and community service.

Isaac Stern, the famous violinist, was once asked how it happened that all professional musicians would play the same correct notes in the same correct order—yet some achieved greatness, while most did not. Stern replied casually, “That’s because the important thing is not in the notes but in the silences in between.”

Learning to play correct notes in music is an intellectual skill, an achievement of the left brain. Learning to appreciate the phrasing of music, the power and grace of silence, is an emotional skill, an achievement of the right brain. In an era that future historians may refer to as the “educating the whole test-taker” years, independent schools remain steadfast in their commitment to “the head, the hand and the heart”—believing that anything less is an incomplete education.

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