

School Is a Big Deal. And You Get a Voice In It.

A Kid's Guide to the Different Kinds of Schools — and How to Think About Which One Fits You

A sixteen-page guide written directly for kids: what the four kinds of schools actually are (public, private, charter, homeschool), what they're like day to day, and how to have a real conversation with your family about which one fits you. Two parts — middle school and high school — read whichever applies.

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Hey — This One’s for You

Most stuff written about “school choice” is written for adults: long, dense, full of policy words. This isn’t that. This is for you, the actual person who has to spend six or seven hours a day in whatever school your family picks.

Here’s the thing nobody tells you: there isn’t just one kind of school. There are at least four kinds, plus a bunch of mix-and-match options. And the school that’s best for one kid isn’t always best for another — even within the same family. Knowing what’s out there lets you actually have a real conversation with your parents about what would work for you.

You don’t make the final call. Your parents do, because that’s their job. But you’re not a passenger either. You can pay attention, ask questions, and tell them honestly what’s working and what isn’t. The kids who do that almost always end up in better situations than the ones who just keep their head down.

This guide is split into two parts. Part One is for middle schoolers (roughly 6th–8th grade). Part Two is for high schoolers (9th–12th). The high school part assumes you’ve read the middle school part, or that you already know the basics. Skip ahead if you’re older.

One last thing before we start: there’s no school in the world that’s perfect. Every kind has tradeoffs. The goal isn’t to find a perfect school. It’s to find one where you can grow up well — learn things, make real friends, become someone you’re proud of.

Part One — The Four Kinds of Schools

For Middle Schoolers · Roughly grades 6–8.

Almost every American kid goes to one of four kinds of schools. Here they are, in normal language.

1. Public school

This is the school the government runs in your neighborhood. About 85 out of every 100 American kids go to one. It's free — your family doesn't pay tuition. You usually go to whichever one is closest to your house. There are tons of public schools, and they're all really different. Some are excellent. Some are struggling. Most are somewhere in between.

2. Private school

This is a school that families pay tuition to attend. About 8 or 9 out of every 100 kids go to one. Most private schools are religious — Catholic schools are the biggest group, but there are also Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and other faith-based schools. Some are not religious at all (people sometimes call those “independent” schools). Tuition can be anywhere from a few thousand dollars a year to over \$50,000 a year, depending on the school. Many offer financial aid, which means they help families pay if they can't afford the full price.

3. Charter school

A charter school is a public school — free to attend — but it's run differently from a regular public school. About 7 out of every 100 kids go to one. Charters can do their own thing more: pick their own curriculum, have a longer school day, focus on a specific theme like science or the arts or classical books. If more kids want to go than there are seats, you usually get in by a random lottery. Some charters are amazing. Some aren't. The variety is huge.

4. Homeschool

This is when families teach their kids at home instead of sending them to a building called a school. About 5 to 7 out of every 100 kids do this. It used to be associated mostly with religious families, but now lots of different kinds of families homeschool — for academic reasons, because of bullying, because a kid is really into a sport or instrument, or just because the family likes the flexibility. Most homeschoolers also do co-ops, which means meeting up with other homeschool families regularly for classes, field trips, and friends.

There's no “normal” and no “weird.” All four are real and millions of American kids do each of them. The right one depends on you, your family, and where you live.

What's It Actually Like Day to Day?

Brochures are bad at telling you this. Here's a more honest version.

Public school

You ride a bus or get dropped off, go to seven or so classes a day, change rooms a lot, eat in a big cafeteria, and probably have several hundred or even a few thousand classmates. There's a lot of people, which means more friend options but also more drama. Sports, clubs, band, theater, art — most public schools have a ton of activities. Discipline rules vary; some schools are tight, some are loose. The teachers usually have official teaching credentials and have been trained for the job.

Private school

Probably smaller — some private schools have just a few hundred kids in the whole school. Class sizes are often smaller too, which means the teachers know your name and notice if you're struggling. Religious schools usually have a religion class and might start the day with a prayer or chapel. Uniforms are common. There's often more homework, and the work can be harder. Sports and activities exist but are often smaller scale than at big public schools.

Charter school

Depends a lot on the type. Some charters — sometimes called “no-excuses” charters — are super structured: silent hallways, strict uniforms, walking in lines, very clear rules about behavior. Other charters are way more relaxed and project-based, where you might spend weeks building one big thing instead of taking traditional tests. Some charters have a theme like science, or the arts, or classical books and Latin. Read about the specific charter before deciding what it'll feel like.

Homeschool

This is the most different one. You're home a lot. School might take 2–4 hours a day instead of 7, which means you have more time for everything else. You probably do co-op once or twice a week, where you go somewhere with other homeschool families for classes you can't easily do at home (like science labs or group theater). You make most of your friends through co-op, sports leagues, church or temple, or neighborhood. The flexibility is huge — you can travel, go deep into things you love, work ahead in subjects you're good at. The downside is you spend less time around big peer groups, which is a bigger deal for some kids than others.

Why Different Families Pick Different Schools

Some reasons families end up where they do:

- Public school: It's the default. It's free. The local school is good, or good enough. The family doesn't want to deal with applications and tuition.
- Private school: The family wants a religious education that public schools can't legally provide. Or they want smaller classes, more academic challenge, or a specific kind of community. Or the local public option isn't working.
- Charter school: The family wants something different from the local public school but can't afford private — and there's a charter nearby that fits what they're looking for.
- Homeschool: A kid has needs that schools aren't meeting. Or the family travels a lot, or one parent really wants to teach. Or a kid is way ahead or way behind in school. Or things at school have gotten hard in a way the family wants to step in on.

None of these reasons is better or worse than the others. They're just different. The kid down the street might have a totally different situation from yours, and that's normal.

What about money?

This is real and worth knowing about. Public schools and charter schools are free. Private schools cost money — sometimes a little, sometimes a lot — though many offer financial aid. Homeschooling is mostly free in terms of tuition, but it usually means one parent gives up a job or works less to teach, which is its own kind of cost.

In a lot of states now, there are programs called ESAs (Education Savings Accounts) or vouchers that give families money to use for private school or homeschool stuff. Your parents will know if your state has one of these.

Money is part of the conversation, not all of it. A free school that's a great fit beats an expensive school that isn't. And an expensive school that's a great fit beats a free one that's making you miserable.

Thinking About What Fits You

Here's the part most kids don't get asked. Different schools fit different kids. The questions below aren't a quiz with right answers — they're just ways to notice what you actually like.

Do you do better with structure or freedom?

Some kids love clear rules, set schedules, and knowing exactly what's expected. Others feel boxed in by that and do better when they have more freedom to choose. Both are normal. “No-excuses” charter schools and traditional Catholic schools are very structured. Progressive schools, Montessori, and homeschool tend to be more flexible. Regular public schools are in the middle.

Big crowds or smaller groups?

Some kids feel energized in a big school with thousands of classmates. Others feel lost or anxious. Big public schools have hundreds of kids per grade. Some charters and most private schools have closer to 30–80 per grade. Homeschool means small to no daily peer group, with bigger groups happening at co-op and activities.

Are you bored, just right, or struggling in school?

If you're always bored — you finish your work fast and stare out the window — you might be a kid who needs more challenge or a faster pace. If you're always behind and frustrated, you might need different help. Tell your parents. There are options for both situations: gifted programs, magnet schools, faster-paced charters, or homeschooling that goes at your real pace.

Is anything making school hard right now?

Bullying. Friend drama that's gotten serious. A teacher you don't click with. Anxiety about going. A class you're lost in. None of those mean you have to switch schools, and most of them can be fixed without switching. But your parents can't help with what they don't know about. Tell them. Saying it out loud is the first step.

Do you have a thing you really love?

Music. Art. A sport. Coding. Building things. Animals. A specific subject. If you have something you're really into, mention it when your family talks about school. Some schools have great programs for specific interests; some don't. A school with a great band program is a different experience for a kid who plays trombone than a kid who doesn't. Same with sports, theater, robotics, and everything else.

How to Talk to Your Family About School

This is the most underrated skill of being a kid. The kids who can talk honestly to their parents about school almost always end up in better situations — not because they get to pick whatever they want, but because they're part of the conversation.

Some lines that actually work

- “Can we talk about school later? I want to tell you something but it’s long.” (Picking the time matters. Don’t do it 30 seconds before bed.)
- “I like a lot of things about my school, but there’s something I want to tell you about.” (Naming the good first makes parents listen better. They’re not weird about this; everyone is.)
- “I’m not asking you to fix it. I just want to tell you what’s happening.” (Sometimes you don’t want them to call the school. Saying that up front saves a lot of fights.)
- “Can we look into [a different school] together? I’m not saying I want to switch, but I want to know what it would be like.” (Asking to learn is way easier for parents to say yes to than asking to switch.)

What to do if something is really wrong

If you’re being bullied, if a teacher or coach is acting in a way that doesn’t feel right, if you’re scared to go to school, or if you’re feeling really down a lot of the time — tell a parent or another trusted adult. Today, not later. You won’t get in trouble. You won’t make things worse. Adults who know what’s happening can actually help.

If your family can’t change schools right now

Sometimes the answer is, “Not this year.” Money, work schedules, where you live, and what’s actually available all matter. If switching schools isn’t in the cards, that’s okay — there’s usually still a lot you can do at the school you’re in. Joining one new activity, finding one good teacher who knows you, sitting with one different group at lunch — small changes inside a school can change a lot.

You won’t be at this school forever. Middle school is three years. High school is four. The friends you make, the things you learn, the way you treat people — those last way longer than any one school does.

One Last Thing for Middle Schoolers

Your school is a big part of your life right now, but it's not all of it. The most important things — the kind of person you're becoming, your friendships, your relationship with your family, the stuff you care about — you carry those between schools. They go where you go.

If you're in a school that fits you well, that's great. Lean into it. Get involved. Make it count.

If you're in one that doesn't fit, talk to your family. Maybe something can change. Maybe nothing can change right now, and that's information too — you find ways to make the year work. Either way, you're not stuck forever.

And whatever school you're in: be a kid other kids are glad to know. That part is always under your control, and it matters more than where you go.

Part Two — What Changes in High School

For High Schoolers · Roughly grades 9–12.

In high school, the school choice question gets sharper. Three reasons:

- What you do now actually shows up later. Your transcript starts counting. The classes you take, the grades you earn, the activities you commit to — colleges, employers, and trade programs look at that record.
- You're old enough to have a real say. You can articulate what you need. You can visit schools and form an honest opinion. Your parents can't see your daily life from the inside; you can.
- Your goals start to matter. What's next — college, trade, military, work, gap year — starts to shape what kind of high school works best for you. Not every path needs the same thing.

This part of the guide assumes you've read the middle school section, or that you already know the basic differences between public, private, charter, and homeschool. If not, flip back. The same four kinds of schools exist; what changes is how to think about them when you're older and the stakes are real.

You don't have to have a five-year plan figured out. Most adults don't. But thinking honestly about "what do I want this to lead to" — even just roughly — changes which high school options are worth a closer look.

The Four Options at This Age

Public high school

Public high schools are usually big — often a thousand students or more. The size has real upsides: more class options, AP courses, sports teams, clubs, electives, and chances to find your people. The downsides are also real: easier to get lost, harder to get individual attention from teachers, and the culture can vary wildly from one hallway to the next. The quality difference between public high schools in different neighborhoods or districts can be huge.

If your assigned public high school is good and offers what you need, this is often the strongest option — free, full-featured, and well-connected to colleges and the workforce.

Private high school

Smaller (often 200–800 students), usually more rigorous academically, and often with stronger college counseling than public schools. Religious schools (Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Islamic) integrate faith formation into the school day. Independent schools focus on academic preparation and a particular school culture. Tuition is real money — typically \$10,000–\$30,000 a year for day schools, more for elite ones — but financial aid is real too.

Worth considering if your family’s values align with a specific school, you want significantly more academic challenge, or your local public option isn’t working.

Public charter high school

Free like a public school, but often with a specific theme — STEM, classical, arts, college-prep, career-focused. Some are excellent and send strong shares of their graduates to college. Some aren’t. “No-excuses” charters are highly structured and college-prep focused; classical charters teach Latin, classical literature, and traditional subjects; STEM charters focus on science and engineering. Look at where graduates end up, not just the school’s marketing.

Homeschooling through high school

More common than people think, especially in the upper grades. The flexibility is the biggest benefit — you can take college classes early through dual enrollment, work seriously on a sport or art, work a job, or move at your own pace. The challenge is that high school requires more planning: a real transcript, standardized tests (SAT or ACT), AP exams or college courses for outside academic validation, and intentional college applications. Many homeschoolers do this brilliantly and end up at strong colleges. Some don’t — it depends on the planning.

Special Programs Worth Knowing About

These exist inside several of the school types above. If a regular high school path doesn't excite you, these can change the game.

AP (Advanced Placement)

College-level classes you can take in high school. If you score well on the AP exam in May, many colleges give you actual college credit — saving real money and time later. Almost every public and most private high schools offer at least some AP classes. Pick them strategically: take APs in subjects you're strong in or actually interested in, not just to pile up the count.

IB (International Baccalaureate)

A separate program offered at some high schools, with its own diploma. More structured and integrated than just taking a few APs — you commit to a full IB curriculum across two years (junior and senior). Strong for kids who want a writing-heavy, discussion-based, internationally-oriented program.

Dual enrollment

Taking actual college classes at a community college or university while still in high school. Free or cheap in many states. The credits often transfer to four-year colleges. A great option for advanced students, homeschoolers, and anyone who wants to test-drive college work. Talk to your guidance counselor or, if you homeschool, the local community college's admissions office.

Magnet and exam schools

Public high schools that draw students from across a city or county based on a specific theme or competitive admission. The most famous ones — Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech in New York; Boston Latin; Thomas Jefferson in Northern Virginia; Walter Payton in Chicago — are among the strongest high schools in the country, period. Lower-profile magnets in many cities are also excellent. Application deadlines are often in the fall of 8th grade, so you have to plan ahead.

CTE (Career and Technical Education)

Programs that combine regular academics with serious training in a specific career field: healthcare, IT, automotive, culinary, construction trades, agriculture, cosmetology, and more. Modern CTE has nothing in common with the dead-end “vocational ed” of past generations. Many programs include industry certifications, paid internships, and direct pathways to apprenticeships, two-year degrees, or four-year colleges. If you have a strong interest in a specific career, or you learn better by doing than by sitting, look at CTE seriously.

Gifted and accelerated programs

Some districts offer accelerated tracks. Skipping a grade or taking math several years ahead is a real option in some places. Ask specifically. Don't assume the answer is no until you've actually asked.

Thinking About What Comes Next

You don't have to know what you want to do for the rest of your life. (Most adults don't either.) But by the second half of high school, having a rough idea of what comes next helps you choose classes, programs, and — if it's on the table — schools.

If you're thinking college

Take a real load of academic classes — four years each of English and math, three or four of science and social studies, and at least two years of a foreign language. Take harder classes (AP, IB, honors, dual enrollment) when you can handle them. Build a transcript that shows you took school seriously. Take the SAT or ACT in junior year. Find at least a couple of activities you stick with for years — it doesn't matter what they are; consistency matters more than prestige.

If you're thinking trade or apprenticeship

CTE programs are gold here. Look into apprenticeship programs in your area — plumbing, electrical, HVAC, welding, manufacturing, and construction trades all have structured apprenticeships that pay you to learn. The pay for skilled trades is genuinely good, and demand is high. Don't let anyone tell you trades are a backup plan; for many people, they're the right plan.

If you're thinking military

ROTC programs, military academies (West Point, Annapolis, Air Force Academy, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine), and direct enlistment all have specific paths. Talk to a recruiter — several different recruiters, actually — and don't sign anything before talking with your family and ideally a veteran you trust. The ASVAB test is the entry point; take it seriously. Military service can also pay for college afterward through the GI Bill.

If you're not sure

That's normal. Build a high school career that keeps options open. Take real academic classes; pursue interests seriously; work a job in the summer; talk to adults in fields that sound interesting. By junior year, you'll have more information than you do now, and the picture will be clearer.

If you're thinking a year off

Gap years are a real and growing option. The best ones aren't "sit at home and play games" — they're structured: working, traveling, doing service, learning a language abroad, or a formal program like AmeriCorps or City Year. If this is on the table, plan it like you'd plan college. Talk to people who've done it. Don't drift into one by accident.

When Switching Schools Actually Makes Sense

Most kids who think about switching high schools don't end up doing it. That's not a bad thing — sometimes the right answer is to make the school you're in work better. But there are real situations where a switch is the right move. The honest signs:

Reasons that often justify a switch

- Sustained bullying or unsafe conditions that the school can't or won't address.
- Your school can't offer something major you need — like advanced math past calculus, a specific CTE program, or services for a learning difference.
- You've been miserable for a long time, not just a bad week or month. Real, sustained, you-can-feel-it-in-your-body unhappiness.
- A specific opportunity exists that's clearly better — a magnet program, a CTE program, a school with the program you actually want.
- Your family's situation has changed (move, finances, family circumstances) and the math is different now.

Reasons that usually aren't enough on their own

- One bad year or one rough teacher.
- A friend group falling apart.
- Wanting an easier school after a hard semester.
- A romantic interest at another school.
- A general feeling that things would be better somewhere else, without anything specific.

If you're thinking about it

Talk to your parents early, not the night before applications are due. Visit the alternative — actually go there during a school day, not just to a glossy open house. Talk to a current student or recent grad if you can find one. And be honest about what you'd be giving up: the friends you have, the activities you've built up, the teachers who already know you. Sometimes those tip the balance toward staying. Sometimes they don't.

Switching schools mid-high-school is harder socially than people admit. It can absolutely be the right call — but go in with eyes open about the rebuild involved. The reasons should be specific and real, not just “somewhere else might be better.”

How to Advocate for Yourself

In high school, most decisions about your education go better if you're part of them. "Advocating for yourself" sounds corporate, but really it just means — telling adults clearly what you need, asking for things directly, and following through. Here's what that actually looks like.

With your parents

- Bring solutions, not just complaints. "My school doesn't offer Calculus BC and I want to apply to engineering programs. The community college 15 minutes away does. Can we look at dual enrollment?" works way better than "My school is dumb."
- Pick your moments. Big school conversations work best on a weekend, not 10 minutes before they leave for work.
- Be honest about how things are going — grades, friends, mental health — even when it's uncomfortable. Parents can't help with what they don't know.

With teachers and counselors

- Email them yourself, with a real subject line and your actual name. Even if your parents need to be involved, sending a first email yourself shows you're serious.
- Ask for what you actually want: "Can I take a more advanced section of this class?" "Can we set up a meeting to talk about my college list?" "Can you tell me what's in this assignment that's costing me points?"
- Show up to office hours or extra help, especially in subjects you're struggling in. Teachers notice this and almost always respond positively.

If something's really wrong

If you're being harassed, threatened, treated badly by an adult, or feeling really down for an extended period — tell a trusted adult right away. A parent. A counselor. A teacher you trust. Coach. Pastor. School nurse. You won't get in trouble. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) is also there for any kind of crisis, not just thoughts of suicide. The hardest part is usually saying the first sentence; everything after gets easier.

Building the case for yourself

By junior year, you'll have a transcript, activities, recommendations, and a story about yourself. You shape that story by what you do every week between now and then. Show up. Try. Stick with things. Be useful. Be the kind of kid teachers and coaches want to write recommendations for. None of that requires being a perfect student or top athlete — it requires being someone who tries, in front of people who notice.

One Last Thing for High Schoolers

By the end of high school, you'll know more about yourself than you did at the start — what you're good at, what bores you, what fires you up, who you want to be around, what kind of work you might want to do. That self-knowledge is half the point of these four years. Possibly more than half.

Don't outsource the question of what kind of school fits you. Your parents will make the final call on big things, but you're the one in the building. Pay attention. Notice when you're thriving and when you're not. Tell your family the truth about it. Ask for things directly.

And remember the most important finding from decades of education research: the family that raises you shapes you more than any school does. Your day-to-day choices — what you read, who you spend time with, the work you put in, how you treat people — shape you more than any school name on a transcript will.

Where you go matters. What you do there matters more.

Resources

Places to learn more, get help, or check facts. Good for both middle and high schoolers.

If you're researching schools or programs

- Your state department of education website — official school report cards, magnet program info, and state-specific options.
- Your school's guidance counselor — yes, they actually exist for this. Ask for a meeting.
- GreatSchools.org — ratings and reviews of public schools.

For high schoolers thinking about what's next

- BigFuture (bigfuture.collegeboard.org) — free college search and planning from the College Board.
- Khan Academy — free, high-quality test prep for SAT and many subjects.
- Apprenticeship.gov — official federal site for finding registered apprenticeship programs.
- Today's Military (todaysmilitary.com) — official site for understanding military service options.
- MyNextMove (mynextmove.org) — a U.S. Department of Labor career exploration tool. Free.

If you need help, not info

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988. For any kind of crisis, not just thoughts of suicide. Free, 24/7.
- Crisis Text Line — text HOME to 741741.
- StopBullying.gov — federal resource on what to do about bullying, including cyberbullying.
- A trusted adult — parent, relative, teacher, counselor, coach, pastor. Not a hotline, but the most important resource on this list. Use them.

References

Citations follow Chicago Notes-Bibliography style. The information in this guide draws on the sources below.

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