PRIVATE EDUCATION

BENEFITS

STUDENTS

AND FAMILIES

For many families in the Washington, D.C. area, private schools offer the best possible educational opportunities. Smaller class sizes, teacher flexibility and a sense of community are key to a student’s academic success, according to both parents and school officials.

“We’ve got some great schools in the D.C. area that change people’s lives,” says Dick Ewing, Head of School at the Norwood School in Bethesda and past president of Independent Education, an association of independent private schools in the D.C. region.

The prospect of shaping a child’s future through excellence in academics, athletics, the arts and community service is what motivates some parents to travel beyond the boundaries of their neighborhood for a particular school.

“I’m a product of private education myself,” says Berkley Shervin, parent of a student at St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes School in Alexandria, Va. “My wife and I found that an independent school education is far more robust. We live in the District, but feel that the experience at St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes is worth it to cross the river every day.”
Small Class Sizes Mean Individual Attention

It all starts with a small classroom environment, where students are able to get more individual attention or “face time” with their teachers. This, parents say, is one of the most attractive features of private schooling.

“My family chose a private education for our children because we believe in the value provided by the smaller classroom environment,” says Dr. Jill McCabe, a parent and trustee at Loudoun Country Day School in Leesburg, Va.

Class sizes and student-to-teacher ratios vary among schools, but tend to be much smaller than the class sizes at public schools in the area. This central feature of private schooling is one of the most advertised and talked about benefits during the tours that are given to prospective parents and students.

Student-teacher ratios are emphasized at many local private schools, including the McLean School of Maryland in Potomac, which offers a very small student-to-teacher ratio of 5 to 1 in the lower school, and only 330 students in the entire K-12 program.

“The thing that sets this school apart is class sizes,” says Cathy Patterson, Director of Admission at the McLean School of Maryland and a McLean School parent. “It dictates so much of what each teacher can accomplish with students.”

Research from the past couple of decades seems to bear this out. Comprehensive studies on the benefits of classroom size, including Tennessee’s Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) and Wisconsin’s Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE), support the case for lower student-teacher ratios. These and other survey results and statistics across the U.S. have shown that smaller class sizes, especially at the K-8 level, help improve student focus and academic performance and benefit students over the long term.

Among some small classroom studies, however, there is at least one caveat — a low student-teacher ratio by itself may not create the maximum benefit. Teachers may also need to adapt their teaching methods and styles to accommodate smaller groups of students, something that has been incorporated into the overall educational approach at D.C.-area private schools.

“There is no ‘back row’ for students in our classrooms to get lost in; students always know that the teachers care about their well-being and academic success,” says Marcia Miller, Director of Admissions at The Nora School in Silver Spring. She adds that students who need extra help can also meet with an adviser or stay after school for Homework Club.

The benefits of small class sizes are not just relevant to parents who are considering private education for their children. Teachers are also enthusiastic about developing relationships with students and concentrating on the specialized interests, needs and personalities of the children they see every day.

Working with smaller groups allows teachers to get to know their students and become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of each child. They can monitor student progress and provide a challenging but supportive classroom environment and a hand up to those who might need a little more help.

“What I see is that teachers know all of their students,” says David Sheridan, seventh and eighth grade math teacher and student adviser at Green Acres School in North Bethesda. “I talk to them outside of class. I get to see them as a whole person. I can also see where their strengths are and what they’re ready for, when they need extra help to succeed, and what they need to get there.”

Administrators are also enthusiastic about the advantages of small class sizes and getting to know the student body at their schools. The way that small classrooms foster a beneficial relationship between students and teachers is a factor that school administrators often point to as a cornerstone of what makes private education successful for many students.

“Because of the class size, these teachers have the opportunity to get to know these students well, their hobbies, what they do outside the classroom, their personalities,” says Dr. Randy Hollister, Headmaster at Loudoun Country Day School. “We have kids involved in everything — dance, tae kwon do, music, soccer, hockey, theater. Getting to know our kids, knowing them as persons, knowing the whole person is huge. Because of our class size, our teachers know their students well and it is an enormous benefit to the education process.”
The Freedom to Teach What Matters

Small class sizes help to bolster another important feature of private education: an increased amount of flexibility in the development of the curriculum. While private schools are bound by state and federally mandated standards, they are not stifled by the test preparation and annual testing cycles that exist in many public schools.

“We can be a little more flexible because we’re not obligated to No Child Left Behind and things like that,” says David Mullen, Head of School at The Nora School. “For example, diverse reading allows our students to have different perspectives on the curriculum because it is not driven by testing. We can teach in ways that explore subjects rather than training the answers. It is a much richer way to learn.”

A flexible curriculum appeals to students and parents as well. The ability to turn current events and breaking news into teachable moments, and to adopt and explore new ideas and new technology, are benefits that parents find to be an invaluable part of their child’s private school experience. For some parents, it is yet another reason to choose private education for their family.

“Teachers are free to be responsive if the class has a great interest in something,” says Alisa Klein, a Green Acres School parent. “If the government shuts down, or something else happens that affects the class and interests them, they can be focused on that.”

This flexibility also leaves private schools free to embrace technology and keep up with the latest trends, including an emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (or “STEM”), to help students compete on the global stage now and in the future when they’re ready to enter the workforce.

Many private schools use advanced technology with more frequency than public schools, and because of that are able to offer more specialized training to students.

“We think technology is a component of creativity,” says Ken Nysmith, Head of School at The Nysmith School for the Gifted in Herndon, Va. “From kindergarten through ninth grade we have 45 minutes of science every day. It’s hands on, fun learning. We start programming classes in third grade.”

Beyond the core academics, the freedom to adapt curriculum on the fly also allows private schools to provide specialized learning experiences for their students. This benefits students with diverse learning styles and offers a more individualized and tailored education.

“At Siena, the top feature is our specialized education,” says Bekah Atkinson, Director of Admissions at The Siena School in Silver Spring. “We are a mission-specific private school, dedicated to serving students with language-based learning differences. Everything we do at Siena is geared toward the strengths and challenges our students face.”

Even in schools that are not specifically geared toward students with educational challenges, the flexibility offered to teachers helps kids learn. The freedom that teachers and administrators have in designing a more closely focused curriculum, along with the small size of each class, lets teachers use a variety of
Private Schools

Private school is an umbrella term,” says Myra McGovern, Senior Director of Public Information for the National Association of Independent Schools. “Independent schools are independently financed and governed. Parochial schools are not. The one thing that separates independent schools from other types of private schools is that they are mission driven.”

An independent school’s mission is what sets the foundation for its culture, community and educational approach, and helps parents choose the best possible learning environment for their children.

The mission statement might incorporate ideals like academic excellence, character development, leadership training or lifelong learning skills. At the Nora School, for example, the motto is “Think Differently,” and the school’s stated mission is about inspiring enthusiasm for learning, developing a sense of personal responsibility and encouraging students to find their own path in life.

“Every child has different interests, needs, challenges and enthusiasms, and understanding that is important in making the decision on which school to choose,” says The Nora School’s David Mullen. “It’s about finding a match. Sometimes there is this idea with education below the college level that one size fits all, but independent schools know that one size doesn’t fit all.”

This “one-size-does-not-fit-all” philosophy is a key component of independent education. Independent schools celebrate the individual character and ethos of the school through their particular mission, which is also reflected in how the campus is laid out and how classroom learning takes place in each school.

“One of the great things about independent schools is that we have the right to be ‘about something,’” says Norwood School’s Dick Ewing. “Parents and students looking at schools who are coming in here get a sense of that.”

Independent schools offer a wide variety of physical classroom environments, from traditional rows of desks to a more free-form or comfortable layout. The design and

---

Find out what a Friends Education can give to your child.

Friends Community School
www.friendscommunityschool.org
College Park, MD, Grades K-8
Open Houses: 9 am-11 am on Nov. 2, Nov. 12, Dec. 6, Jan. 11, Jan. 16

Friends Meeting School
www.friendsmeetingschool.org
Jenksville, MD, Age 3 - Grade 12
Open Houses: Nov. 21, Dec. 19, Jan. 18, Feb. 22, Mar. 20, Apr. 24, May 15

Sandy Spring Friends School
www.ssfs.org
Sandy Spring, MD, Grades PK-12
“Discover SSFS” Events: 8:15-11:00 am on Nov. 15, Dec. 13, Jan. 10.

Sidwell Friends School
www.sidwell.edu
Bethesda, MD (PK-4) and Washington, DC (5-12), Grades PK-12
Open House for MS/US: 9 am-noon on Nov. 16

A WORLD of OPPORTUNITY begins with CONGRESSIONAL

After talking with many of my friends in high school, I realize how fortunate I am to have attended a wonderful school with excellent teachers and amazing friends.

www.congressionalschools.org
703.533.9711

An independent PS - Grade B School in Falls Church, VA
structure of each school is unique and based on the school philosophy and the teaching style that are expressed in that school’s mission.

“There are a wide variety of private schools in terms of mission,” says David Mullen. “Our focus is working with kids who are bright but have been frustrated with school. Independent schools each have different missions, and it really comes down to each kid needing something unique. The ability to define our mission is what is important to us. We’ve structured our building to be more like a living room than an institution.”

The mission and philosophy of a school resonates with families making the choice between public and private education. Each private school, whether independent or parochial, has a different ethos that is based in a life philosophy, a teaching method or a religious foundation. These missions are often the first thing parents look at when considering the benefits of a private or independent school for their child.

“What we were drawn to is the Episcopal ethos which is an ethos of acceptance,” says Eleanor Long, parent of a child who attends St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes School. “Every kid there is celebrated as a child of God and is celebrated for their own strengths.”

The mission of the school is not just a benefit for parents and students, it is the reason why many private school teachers and administrators are passionate about their jobs and work environments. The philosophy of the school and the freedom to structure curriculum around the execution of a philosophy or teaching style helps teachers give kids a positive learning experience every day.

“We are a progressive school,” says Nan Shapiro, lower school music teacher at Green Acres School. “We believe that the best learning occurs when students are actively engaged in hands-on learning, developmentally ready, challenged and encouraged to take risks. We value respectful, close relationships between teachers and students, and we provide time for reflection. We want our students to act with compassion, and to take on constructive roles in their school and society.”

Community Support for Every Child and Family

Independent and private schools also offer what’s known as a “triangle” or community-based approach to education: Relationships among teachers, parents and students create a sense of community in independent schools. Parents are valued as an integral part of their child’s education, which is demonstrated through open communication with teachers and staff, and the encouragement of active participation within the school community.

It’s yet another desirable feature of the private school experience for many families exploring private education. The strength and vibrancy of a school community is a motivating factor in helping parents make their decision — a school’s community is seen as not only as part of a child's education, but also an extension of family life.

“There is a very strong and close community at Potomac Crescent,” says Joan Goldfarb, parent of a child at Potomac Crescent Waldorf School in Arlington, Va. “Families help each
other, organize meal deliveries for families facing illness or caring for a newborn, and are in many other ways extremely supportive of the students, their families and the faculty. The Parent Association facilitates some of this closeness by bringing families together and organizing school events as well as initiatives to provide support to the school and the members of the community.”

The sense of community that is found in private schools is also reflected in the options that are available to students. Even the smallest private schools offer extracurricular activities such as drama and soccer. The small size of the school and importance of maintaining a strong school community means that kids get to try every activity, even ones that might not have initially appealed to them.

“In big schools, kids can find their niche in the drama club or the soccer team, and not try anything else,” says David Mullen. “In our school, kids get to try something they might not take a chance on normally, and that flows...
There are 50 NAIS member schools within about 30 miles of Washington, D.C.

30 percent of all enrolled students were students of color in 2012-13.

The median day school tuition among these schools was $26,465 for 2012-2013.

23 percent of students in these schools received need-based financial aid in 2012-2013.


into a sense of community.

A sense of community in a private school benefits parents as well. The smaller size of the school means they can communicate more effectively with teachers and administrators. Parents also appreciate the fact that a close-knit community at a private school means that their child is not falling through the cracks.

“There’s no bureaucracy,” says Green Acres parent Alisa Klein. “It’s so small. It’s not just my child’s teacher who knows my child, everyone in the school knows my child. The community matters in the sense that these are people I like who share similar values, and the kids feel like they are a part of the school.”

The sense of community that is created by a close working relationship among parents, educators and administrators at an independent school helps set the atmosphere. Parents are encouraged to be involved, and they’re reassured by the supportive environment that they’re choosing for their kids.

“There is an atmosphere of love, encouragement and acceptance but yet the discipline to encourage kids to be their very best,” says Wanda Jones Yeatman, parent of a child at The Nora School. “That was what I was looking for but wasn’t going to find in a public school.”

Administrators are also aware that the well-being of students is key to maintaining a healthy community. They see the closeness of the school community as an important feature that attracts parents to private education, and this gets reflected in the school’s mission and approach to the learning environment.

“The greatest benefit is the way a number of factors work in cooperation to create a total effect, a total philosophy,” says Loudoun Country Day’s Dr. Hollister. “We have a really clear mission to offer a strong and rigorous academic program that celebrates achievement and athletics in a supportive environment.”

The features and benefits of a private school education make up the character of the school. These factors all play a part in the decision-making process as parents search for the right environment and fit for their family. Small class size, individual attention, flexible curriculum, community involvement and a caring atmosphere are just some of the factors that come together in a private school environment to enhance a child’s learning experience. All of these features combine to create a learning experience that offers many families lasting benefit.

Call us at 301.576.2800 to arrange a campus visit or join us for our All-School Open House Mon., Nov. 11. 9-11:00am www.barrie.org


Coed. Age 18-months through Grade 12
Beautiful 45-acre campus, daily bus service, free Metro shuttle, and just minutes from the ICC

301.576.2800 | barrie.org | 13500 Layhill Road | Silver Spring, MD