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PS Independent Schools

## THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL experience



Students enjoy the playground equipment at Loudon Country Day School.

Rayna Tyson grew up just 15 minutes from the Bullis School ([bullis.org](http://bullis.org)) in Potomac, Maryland, but admits that she was “too stubborn” to visit because she was accustomed to the school she was already attending. But after a chance visit to campus, Rayna fell in love with the independent coed school that was founded in 1930 by Commander William “Joey” F. Bullis as a preparatory school for the United States Naval Academy. Shortly thereafter, both she and her brother Amir, who is now a junior, transferred. This is Rayna’s second and final year at Bullis before going on to college, and she has made the most of every minute of her time there. ■



### Keeping it Balanced at Bullis

"I love that balance matters at Bullis," says Rayna. "I can take really great classes but still do dance and theater and be a member of Diversity Club and the Gay Straight Alliance. It is a really supportive place. It also has a great sense of community."

Rayna's previous school was much larger than Bullis. "It was a good school but there were times when I felt like more of a number than an individual, and it was a lot more intimidating when I would try to become involved in other things in the school," she says.

The opportunities Rayna has enjoyed — to be engaged in a variety of classes and activities — is just what the school has in mind for all its students. "Balance is key here," says Assistant Head of School Timothy Simpson. "We're very mindful of balancing a rigorous and challenging academic program with the rest of our students' lives." To that end, Bullis continually looks at how it handles the issue of homework, what new and different ways of teaching will foster that school-life balance, and how the faculty and staff can best empower the 745 second through 12th-graders who attend.

Small classes are also important at Bullis, with the average classroom numbering 15 students. "In large classes, kids can feel anonymous," says Simpson. "We have the opportunity to really get to know our students."

Barry and Pam Bass have sent all three of their children to Bullis. Jeff is now a sophomore at Dartmouth College, Carly is currently a senior, and Allison a freshman. All three of the kids started out in public school but, for different reasons, all transferred to Bullis.

"Montgomery County schools have an excellent academic reputation," says Barry Bass, "but the learning environments there (high teacher turnover, for example) weren't the best for our kids. The smaller classes and breadth of activities make more sense for us."

### Independent School Options Abound

The Washington metropolitan area has a long tradition of independent schools (often also referred to as private schools, though there is a subtle difference in legal structure) and Bullis is just one of

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## PS Independent Schools

the many options available. In fact, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS; [nais.org](http://nais.org)) numbers 50 member schools in the DC-area; in 2012-13 these schools served almost 25,000 students.

"Any family can find an independent school that's a good fit," says Myra McGovern, NAIS Senior Director of Public Information, "with schools ranging from progressive to traditional, day to boarding, same-gender to co-ed, pre-K/12th grade to just high school, and more."

Parents choose independent schools for their children for a variety of reasons, according to Jan Lacina, Editor in Chief for the Journal of Research in Childhood Education (JRCE), who is also a professor in Texas Christian University's College of Education. Among them, she says: children with special needs can be better served by teachers who are specially trained; there is more individualized testing as opposed to ongoing standardized testing; and there is often a wider variety of types of schools, students, programs, and activities.

"But there are benefits to public school education as well," Lacina says, and advises parents to investigate a number of schools to see which works best for their children and the family overall.

### For Girls Only at Madeira

That's what Judith Warner and Max Berley did when choosing independent schools for their daughters, Julia, 16, and Emilie, 13. Julia is now a junior at the all-girls Madeira School ([madeira.org](http://madeira.org)) in McLean, Virginia, and Emilie is in the 8th grade at Sheridan School in the District.

According to Associate Director of Communications Ashley Smith, much research is available on the benefits of all-girls schools: that girls who attend an all-girls school at one point in their academic career are more likely to complete college in four years, are more likely to go on to acquire a Ph.D. in a field of study, and are more likely to have a strong affiliation with their school after graduation.

"But what I see personally as one of the greatest benefits of an all-



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girls setting," says Smith, "is that a girl can be the smartest girl in the classroom without having to worry about the social implication of that. Our environment allows students to spread their academic wings without regards as to if it is 'cool.'"

Though Julia Warner started out in public school, says her mother, it wasn't a good fit. "She needed a smaller setting and more individual attention," says Warner. When she and Julia visited Madeira, "we both fell in love with it," Warner says, adding that as a parent, she was looking for a school that offered a traditional sense of curriculum and a deep caring for the students, while Julia was looking for a school in which she felt she could belong. "There are so many types of girls at Madeira," says Warner, explaining why Julia felt that Madeira was the right choice for her. "That's not something you can take for granted."

Indeed, one of the knocks against independent schools is that they're only for the elite. Not so, say administrators, parents, and students themselves. According to the NAIS, 30 percent of those attending independent schools last year were students of color, and 23 percent of students in DC-area independent schools received need-based financial aid in 2012-13.

"In order for a school to be a member of NAIS, it has to be nondiscriminatory," says McGovern, "and we are committed to attracting diversity in every aspect."

"Independent schools are actively committed to ensuring diversity in their community – including socioeconomic diversity," echoes Ashley Smith. "To that end Madeira offers 2.6 million dollars in financial aid so that we can bring in a diverse group of girls whose commonality is their passion for learning. Where public schools only draw from a certain geographic area, independent schools, and boarding schools in particular, can have an extremely diverse community with students from every walk of life."

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**PS** *Independent Schools*



School ([www.cesjds.org](http://www.cesjds.org)) in Rockville, Maryland, that diversity extends to the students' academic abilities as well. "We have students from a wide range of backgrounds who represent every part of the Jewish community," says Rabbi Mitchell Malkus, Head of School. "Unlike some private schools, we don't have academic entrance requirements, so we admit students with a range of abilities. We have students who fall into the gifted range and students who need our education support services."

That in no way compromises the school's mission, says Malkus. CESJDS is unique compared to other independent schools because it offers students a rigorous dual curriculum of general and Jewish studies where values are openly taught in a pluralistic learning community.

"But, like other outstanding private schools, CESJDS has high academic standards, small class sizes, state-of-the-art facilities, and exceptional teachers who nurture their students socially and emotionally as well," Malkus continues. "CESJDS gives students all of that and more by fostering moral, ethical, and spiritual development. We feel that type of development is essential for our students."

### Learning Differences Honored at Siena

At The Siena School ([thesienaschool.org](http://thesienaschool.org)) in Silver Spring, Maryland, students not only benefit from the small class sizes and individual attention that are characteristic of



most independent schools, but also from an educational environment that takes into account their differences in learning styles.

According to Clay Kaufman, Head of School, Siena serves bright, college-bound students with mild to moderate language-based learning differences, such as dyslexia. Students are one to two grades below grade level in their reading and writing.

"Our philosophy is to teach these students through their strengths," says Kaufman. "They are bright, creative, very visual, and tend to learn well through experiential, hands-on learning, and multi-sensory teaching."

While memorizing a two-page poem, for example, might be difficult for almost anyone, Kaufman says, memorizing two pages of song lyrics is easy. "The music helps us all remember the words," he explains. "So rather than simply memorizing the quadratic formula in math, Siena students sing it to the tune of 'Pop Goes the Weasel,' and it becomes easy to remember."

Siena students also study the arts every day because its students are strong visual learners. Because Siena is college prep though, students still learn all the skills they will need for college — critical thinking, analytical writing, organization, and an understanding of their strengths and challenges.

Paige Orland, who transferred to Siena in her junior year because she found her larger classes at her former high school too "distracting," not only learned, for example, how to organize her thoughts when writing an essay and how to use apps that read to her, but how to advocate for herself. "I make a point now to put myself out there and get help," says Orland, a junior at Towson University majoring in graphic design. "I don't let myself get far behind. Because of the opportunities I had at Siena, I'm succeeding at college." In fact, Orland is even thinking about furthering her education once she graduates from Towson.

### Progressive Education Model at Burgundy Farm

With all the choices in independent schools in the Washington area, it helps to have some guidelines in mind



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## PS Independent Schools

when choosing a school. Jeff Sindler, Head of Burgundy Farm Country Day School ([burgundyfarm.org](http://burgundyfarm.org)) in Alexandria, Virginia, points to the "4 C's"— campus, curriculum, culture, and community.

At Burgundy Farm, says Sindler, those four components translate into a school that is "determined to preserve the genuine, innate joy in learning that children are born with — but that too many schools scare or worry or bore out of kids."

"We maintain a familial learning community in which all of our students feel welcomed to be who they are and engaged where they are," says Sindler, adding that some of the features that attract families to the school are its location on a former dairy farm; a hands-on curriculum; a collaborative rather than competitive culture; and a close-knit community. "We turn out kids who are comfortable with who they are, confident, and who become active citizens in their schools and communities," says Sindler.

For Tara and Jerry Casagrande, Burgundy Farm has become an important part not only of their children's (Baker, 14; Riley, 12; and Tae, 7) lives, but of theirs as well.

"My husband swore that our kids would never go to private school!" Casagrande laughs. "When Baker (our eldest) was five, I decided to tour a few local private schools with a friend. During the tour at Burgundy I called my husband and said, 'We are in trouble. I want to go to school here!'"

"I saw open airy classrooms, lots of trees, loads of space to run around, an outdoor pool, a nice diversity of kids, and a cute little barn with sheep and chickens and goats," Casagrande continues.

What her kids get at Burgundy, she says, is freedom. "Freedom to run around. Freedom from standardized testing. Freedom to express themselves. Freedom to be who they are. Freedom from grades until 6th grade."

"They also get to be a part of a beautiful, like-minded community," Casagrande adds. "We are not there to escape public education, we are there because we believe in diversity." ●



## CHOOSING AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

If you're looking at independent schools for your children, the National Association of Independent Schools suggests the following steps:

Call the schools you are interested in to request admissions literature, and examine their websites. Then, compare what you read there with what you're looking for in your ideal school. Among the questions you should ask yourself about each school:

### BASIC FACTS

- How many students does the school have?
- Where is it, and how does the location affect your transportation needs? Does the school provide any kind of transportation? How much does it cost?
- For high schools, what are the graduation requirements? What percentage of students enter college, and what kinds of colleges do they attend?
- Is the school accredited, and if so, by what accrediting agency?

### EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

- What is the school's mission, and does its philosophy appeal to you?
- Does it have a particular educational focus?
- Is the atmosphere competitive? Or more nurturing?

### BEYOND THE BASICS

- What types of learning experiences are available — in class, on the playing field, in extracurricular activities, and in community service?
- Does the school appear to have a diverse student body and faculty?
- Do the school materials discuss parental involvement?
- Do the kids in the pictures look like your child?

### COSTS

- What is the tuition?
- Are there extra charges, such as for books, lab fees, transportation and so on?
- What are the school's financing options?
- What is the financial aid application process? When are the deadlines?

### AND FINALLY,

- Does the school seem to meet your child's needs?

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