

ACTION INFORMATION SHEET

How to Choose the Best Public School Option for Your Child

Families living in Minnesota enjoy a variety of public education choices for their children. But which of these school choices is the best choice for your child? In this newsletter, you will learn about the public school options you have, as well as questions to ask when making your decision. This information, along with what you know about your child, will help you make the best choice.

Public School Choices

In addition to your neighborhood public school, you may choose from several other options for public education in Minnesota. These free educational alternatives are open enrollment and magnet, charter, and online schools.

Open enrollment means children can apply to attend any public school within or outside their district. This allows your child to take part in classes and programs that are different from those at your neighborhood school. All Minnesota students may use this open enrollment, but schools are obligated to accept students only until their classes are filled, and families must transport their children themselves. For many Minnesota districts, you must apply by January 15 to take part in open enrollment for the following year. Call a school's district office to learn about its specific application deadlines and procedures.

A **magnet school** is a public school that offers a special focus or theme in its classes, yet the classes are still tied to state standards. The classes and the way they are taught focus on real-world practice and application. For example, a magnet school may focus on science, fine arts, language immersion, or the Montessori method, which is a child-centered, hands-on approach to learning. Magnet schools accept students living outside district boundaries, and are overseen by a larger public school district and its school board.

Some schools or districts may have **magnet programs**. These programs offer a special focus or theme for students living within that school district. For example, a magnet program may focus on language immersion, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), or the International Baccalaureate program, which offers high-quality, internationally-based standards in its classes. Other magnet programs exist through a collaboration of several school districts. These programs allow students from several districts to attend a magnet school or program within or outside of their home district.

Free transportation is usually provided to attending students, but this can depend upon where a student lives. Students apply to a school based on their interests, although some magnet schools may have admission requirements. Contact the district in which the magnet school is located if you are interested in a specific program. To learn about magnet schools and programs near you, visit the MN Department of Education at: education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/School_Choice/Public_School_Choice/Magnet_Schools.

A **charter school** is an independent public school that is not part of a traditional school district. Charter schools are managed by a board that is elected by the parents, teachers, and staff of the school. The school operates under contract with a local school district or organization. Like a traditional public school, a charter school is responsible for making sure students meet state graduation requirements. The class offerings at charter schools are chosen by the school itself, and the school community determines what will best suit its students.

Charter schools employ licensed teachers and offer services to students with special needs. They require students to take state and national tests to assure academic accountability. Students must show academic progress from year to year, or the school will be closed. They do not charge tuition or have admission requirements, and transportation is provided. To learn about the charter schools in your community, visit the MN Department of Education at: education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/School_Choice/Public_School_Choice/Charter_Schools

Online learning, also known as distance learning, is another public school option in Minnesota. All classes offered by approved online learning programs are taught by Minnesota licensed teachers and meet or exceed state academic standards. Credits transfer to other public school districts and apply to high school graduation. Online learning students who live and are enrolled in a school district are able to participate in a district's extracurricular programs like sports or band. School districts can help families with financial need obtain the computers and software used in online learning. To learn more, contact your school district or visit education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/School_Choice/Public_School_Choice/Online_Learning

Things to Consider

Minnesota offers many public school choices. Now that you know what the options are, ask yourself these questions as you visit or consider a school. You can combine your knowledge of your child and the answers to these questions to help you make the best school decision for your child and family.

- What kind of environment does your child need?
 - An atmosphere that fosters creative or challenging work?
 - A more or less structured environment?
 - Special or adapted class work?
- How does your child learn best?
 - Listening to teachers or having hands-on experience?
 - Being told how things work or seeing how things work?
 - Working alone or in groups?
- Where does the school need to be?
 - Close to home or close to work?
 - On a public transportation or walking route?
- What academic features do you want?
 - Does the school support reading? How?
 - How does the program prepare and support students in math, reading, writing, and science?
 - Is time given for creative learning and physical activity?
 - How does the school support and prepare students for life after high school?
- What is the school's first impression?
 - Does the school appear to be welcoming and friendly?
 - Is student work on display?
- How does the school encourage children to be courteous, happy, and disciplined?
 - What is the school's reputation with other parents? In other schools? In the community?

- Do the school's policies support its culture and practices?
- Are parents encouraged to be involved in their child's education?
 - Are staff members available to talk with parents? How do they communicate with families?
 - How are parents supported with learning-at-home activities and homework?
 - How is volunteering encouraged?
 - What kinds of parent events are held at school?
 - Is there a strong parent-teacher organization?
 - How do parents participate in developing school policies and plans?

Options Available to Title I Students: School Choice & Free Tutoring (SES)

Students attending a Title I school that has been identified as "in need of improvement" for two consecutive years have the right to transfer to a different, better-performing school within their district. This is called school choice. How is school choice different from open enrollment? With school choice, the school must be located within the same district, and the district must provide transportation.

Some students may also be eligible for free tutoring in math and reading. The tutoring is offered after school or on weekends by state-approved providers. This tutoring is also called Supplemental Educational Service (SES). School districts must offer SES to students if their school is "in need of improvement" for three straight years. Your child's school must send you a letter telling you if your child qualifies for this service. Call the school principal to learn more.

Frequently Asked Questions

A parent asks: "I'm not sure what the best program is for my child. What should I do?"

You know your child best, and that's a great place to start. First, think about your child's needs, interests, and how he or she learns best, and then relate those facts to the different options. Next, think about your family's practical considerations, what you value, as well as your hopes and dreams for your child. Is there one type of program that seems to match up more fully with all of these issues? Once you identify the kind of program you think would work, find out what's available in your location. Talk to people connected to it, and visit, too. Use the questions outlined in this newsletter to get a more detailed picture of the school you're considering. By putting all of this information together, you'll be able to make the right decision for your child and your family.