

# Is a Faith-Based School Right for Your Child and Family?

By Gemma Alexander

**Editor's note:** This article was sponsored by the [The Bear Creek School](#).

“I’m an educator, and I personally thought for sure I would be in the public schools. But being in a space where I can articulate the why behind the learning has been such a blessing,” says Kristen Gephart, division head at the lower school at [The Bear Creek School](#). For Gephart, the advantage to a faith-based education is “being explicit about our worldview and the faith perspective from which we are teaching. Everybody views the world from a perspective, and there is a huge benefit to families in knowing where we are coming from.”

“Sometimes parents want their children to have a certain perspective,” says Anoo Padte, whose business, [Art of Education](#), helps families with school choice. But she says it’s [not the only reason](#) that parents choose a faith-based school. Regardless of their own faith or secularism, families may be drawn to a school’s academic rigor, small class size or special programs. Or, they may be motivated by more practical reasons, such as location or, for families committed to private schooling, affordability.

Regardless of whether a family’s faith aligns with the school’s, Padte recommends that every prospective family ask five questions to decide if a faith-based school is right for their child and family. She emphasizes that there is no right answer to these questions. Instead, they give parents valuable information that they can measure against their own priorities and values.

## 1. How does faith affiliation define the curriculum?

Parents should never overlook a school’s approach to academics. Regardless of affiliation, religious schools should meet the same standards for hours of classroom instruction, testing and requisite credits for high school graduation. This question can reveal the school’s approach to hot-button topics such as Creationism, as well as how the school integrates faith and academics. Approaches to religious education can vary a lot.

“We stick to primary doctrine at our school — a set of beliefs we hold as true and that different Christian denominations would agree are true,” explains Gephart.

Some schools may teach doctrine as truth. But others may present a [variety](#) of religious teachings, or stick to common values that don’t vary much across doctrines. Padte notes that religious studies classes at some secondary schools can be intellectually rigorous courses where students are encouraged to inspect their own faith and the application of their values to real-world issues.

## 2. How does the school handle questioning?

“As children come of age, it is developmentally appropriate for them to ask questions and begin to sort out [beliefs] for themselves,” says Padte. “Ask about opportunities for voicing and developing their own faith. Different families have different expectations for navigating faith. Find out how your expectations fit with the school.”

Gephart strongly favors flexibility and openness. “We encourage children to ask questions. As kids get older, we teach them that there are different perspectives, even among Christians,” says Gephart. “We want to shape kids as thinkers and world-changers. We want them to go out in the world and dialogue with those who may have different perspectives.”

### **3. How does faith affiliation affect routines?**

It is common for faith-based schools to require a dedicated religious studies class alongside core subjects such as math and literacy. Many high school students will find they have less room for electives in their schedules because one period is dedicated to a mandatory Bible or religious studies class. It is also common for faith-based schools to incorporate mandatory religious services into the schedule, such as a monthly all-school mass, or as at The Bear Creek School, weekly chapel. For religious families, this is part of the draw. But unless parents are specifically opposed to their child attending religious services, it is not necessarily a drawback for nonreligious families. Many public schools also hold weekly assemblies for community-building and social-emotional learning.

“It’s not ‘lost instruction time,’” explains Gephart. “The faith component is woven throughout and enhances the academics.”

### **What are the demographics of faith?**

Two questions about demographics can also reveal a lot to parents. First is what percent of student families practice the faith with which the school is affiliated. Around the Puget Sound, Padte says, the answer can range from barely over 60 percent to 90 percent.

“A lot of faith-based schools are very inclusive and community-minded,” says Padte. Families from different faiths may be relieved by a lower percentage, while families seeking the community of their own faith might prefer a higher one.

The second question asks the same about the teachers and staff. This relates to Gephart’s point about making the perspective explicit.

“How kids learn depends on who the teachers are,” says Padte. Messages of faith will come through more strongly when the teachers themselves subscribe to the faith.

### **Finding the right community for your family**

The answers to Padte’s five questions will give parents valuable information about how the school’s foundation in faith will influence the type of education the school offers and the culture of its community. Ideally, the answers will help you find the community in which your child and your family will feel at home.

“It is a privilege to be in a community of parents who choose the intentionality of the integrated faith-learning we offer here,” says Gephart. Padte notes that families —

especially those that are not actively religious — may not automatically find a sense of belonging in a community whose members may already share a connection from religious services. But she agrees that a sense of belonging can be among the primary advantages of faith-based schooling.

“The goal of education, especially in the early years, is strong social and emotional development. We know that academic achievement relies on a solid, deep sense of belonging and safety. Faith-based schools provide a ready opportunity for finding that sense,” says Padte.

For her part, Gephart notes, “I would hope our students know their teachers truly care about them, and that they feel equipped to go out and love the world because they have experienced love — obviously from their family, but also from their teachers and coaches; that they’ll feel supported to take risks ... and be stronger because they know God loves them.”