

EDUCATION/MIDDLE SCHOOL

Demystify the Process of Selecting a Middle School

Tips and advice for selecting the best school for your child

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

PUBLISHED ON: OCTOBER 04, 2023



PHOTO: Photo credit Epiphany School

Editor's note: This article was sponsored by [Epiphany School \(https://www.epiphany-school.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content\)](https://www.epiphany-school.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content).

Thinking about the transition to middle school can be daunting, especially if you're considering applying to an independent middle school. Even if your child attended an independent elementary school, applying for middle school at the same time as your child is settling into the fifth grade can feel like trying to jump onto a moving train. And if you're new to independent schools, it might seem like you missed the train years ago, and it's too late to enter a prestige pipeline that runs from pre-K to the Ivy League. But the truth is a little different.

"It feels high stakes. A lot of well-known schools are pretty competitive," says Alexis Ortega, middle school placement coordinator at [Epiphany School \(https://www.epiphany-school.org/\)](https://www.epiphany-school.org/), an independent pre-K through fifth-grade school in Seattle. "But there is no one school that is great for every student, and there are a lot of schools that could be great for your student."

Allisen Haworth, upper elementary division head at Epiphany School adds, "In the same way that there are many different colleges where a student can be successful, there are many wonderful independent and public school options in this city."

Basing your choice on your family's values and educational priorities instead of rankings or reputation gives your child the best chance to thrive in middle school.

The application process

Haworth recommends that families start researching middle schools towards the end of fourth grade. But if your child is in fifth grade and you're just starting now, there's no need to panic. The application process starts in fall of fifth grade.

The [Puget Sound Independent Schools \(http://pugetsoundindependentschools.org/\)](http://pugetsoundindependentschools.org/) website is a great resource for learning about local independent schools. PSIS also coordinates the admissions process so that most independent schools in the area share the same deadlines and decision release dates. However, parochial and specialized public-school programs will not have the same process, and financial aid deadlines and requirements will also vary by school. You will need a system to keep track of application requirements and deadlines for each school you are considering.

Middle school visits and open house days occur in October and November. Standardized admissions tests and interviews also take place late in the fall, with final application deadlines in mid-January. Families receive admissions decisions and confirm enrollment in March.

Ortega recommends applying to three to five schools. “Don’t just zero in on one in particular. Sometimes there just isn’t space for everybody who is qualified.”

Choosing a school

Parents may think of their middle school choice as a way to get a jump on high school admission. But Anthony McGrann, fifth grade teacher at Epiphany School, says that’s not the best strategy. “I recommend thinking of the middle school choice as a three-year commitment. Parents should be thinking about what is going to be a good fit for their child now.”

To find your child’s best fit, consider their strengths and interests, as well as their special needs. Parents should not think of students’ special needs or accommodation requirements as an admissions risk, and should be open about them in their application.

“You want to know that a school is committed to helping your child succeed; that they’ve got what it takes to support them,” says Ortega.

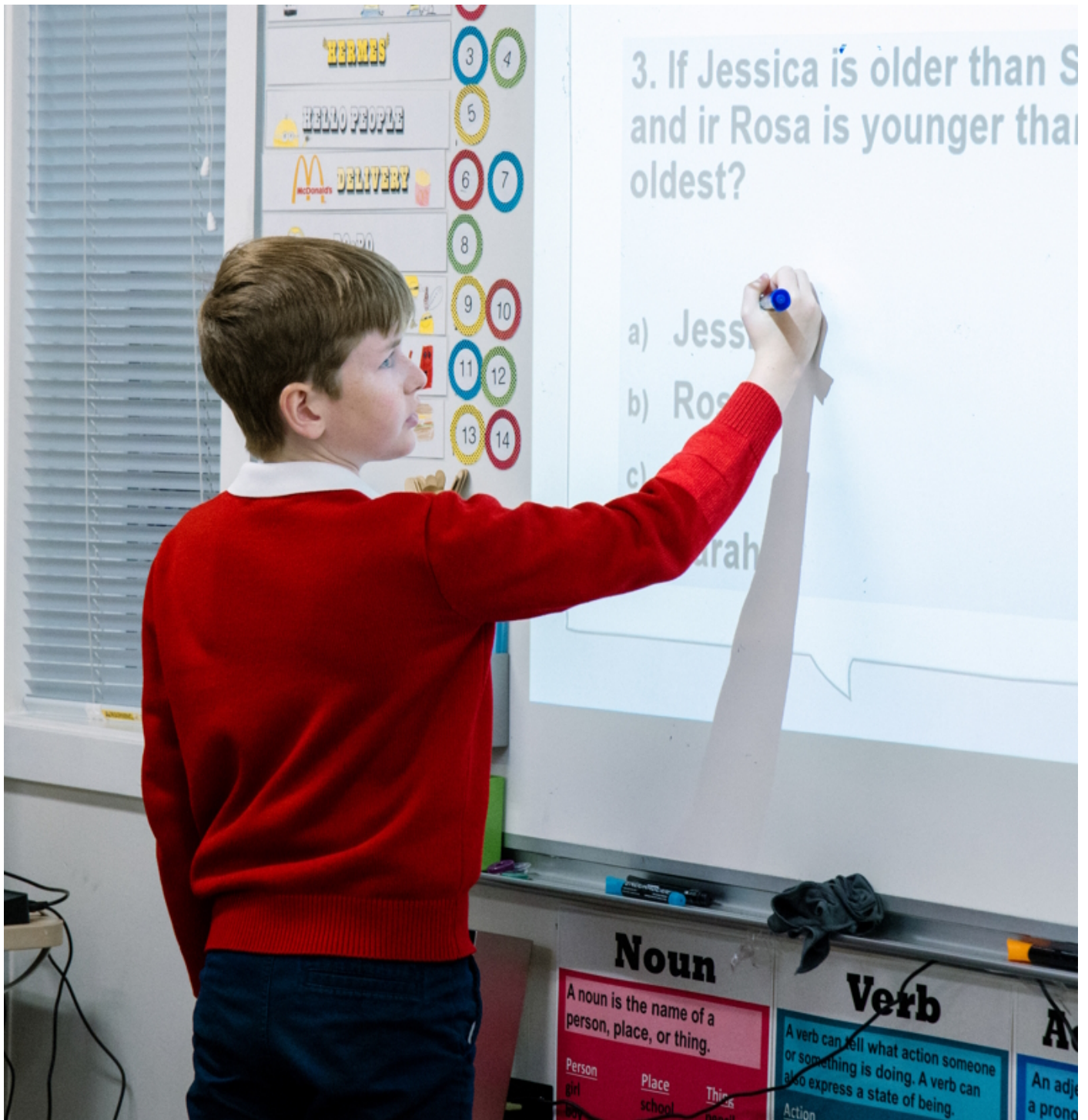
Pay attention to each school’s culture and how well the school’s values fit your own.

“Look at the teaching style, what is the classroom experience like, what does the school have to offer outside of the classroom,” suggests Ortega. Don’t discount the importance of how a school makes you and your child feel when you are visiting.

“Really, academic and personal success has a lot to do with whether they are in a place where they can shine and feel comfortable,” says Haworth.

Epiphany is the only local elementary school with a dedicated middle school placement coordinator, but parents at other schools can talk to their child’s teacher for insight into what helps them thrive in school.

“Bringing an openness to hearing how their child is at school can be really helpful,” said Haworth. “And it doesn’t hurt for families to call up a prospective school and say, ‘I have some questions,’ when they get to the point where they’re serious about applying to that school.”



Finding the school that is the right fit for your child will help them thrive

Your child's role

"In terms of the application, things like having your child's voice really come through in the admissions essay, and having them think about how they want to present themselves on visit days, are key," says Ortega.

You can prepare your child for school visits by helping them think about what questions they want to ask and what they want to learn from the visit. For the application essay, you might let them write something silly just to get started, then see if there are any ideas in that rough draft that are worth expanding.

Students may have to take a standardized admission test, and it helps if they're prepared. At Epiphany, all fifth graders take practice tests and learn some test-taking strategies. But McGrann emphasizes that test prep should never be high-pressure. Instead, it should make kids more comfortable with testing.

"Part of my job is trying to keep that anxiety down and making sure that the students have a normal fifth-grade year, and that they're focused on their learning and not as much on the process of middle school," said McGrann.

Once the admissions results come out, the final decision ultimately rests with the parents. But students who have some input in the choice may be more invested in their middle school success. Kids don't always care about the same factors as their parents do, but they can provide valuable insights when you include them in the conversation.

"Kids do a great job of thinking about what feels right to them," said Haworth. If your child isn't very enthusiastic about contributing to the decision, try to engage them in considering the pros and cons of each school. Talk about unique resources like a makerspace or great soccer team that are relevant to your child's school experience.

"There might be something there that hooks them in," said Ortega. If they are still resistant, it might be a sign of anxiety. "Kids also pick up on what we're feeling, so think about what emotional tone you're setting."

Preparing for middle school

At Epiphany School, a robust social-emotional learning program helps students learn how to make new friends (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/teaching-kids-skills-they-need-make-and-keep-friends>) (a major source of middle school anxiety) and build leadership skills (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/how-foster-leadership-skills-your-child>) in preparation for middle school. They work to help students become self-advocates at school by giving them agency and choice in their own learning.

Parents can reassure children by reminding them how much they have already grown and accomplished. Granting them more independence in fifth grade will help develop agency. Try letting them organize their own homework and make more decisions about how they spend their time. If they

struggle, partner with their teacher to develop scaffolding strategies so that you can gradually step back.

“Thinking about leaving elementary school and going off to some bigger, new school can be daunting,” said Haworth. But choosing a middle school can also be exciting.

“Middle school is such a formative time. It’s the stage in life where kids are really exploring their own identity and starting to do that more outside of the family context,” said Ortega.

Remember, the admissions process is not about judging your family. It is an opportunity to find an environment where your child can thrive and grow. “Trust the process,” Ortega advises. “Even if you end up at a different school from what you hoped or expected, families usually land in just the right place.”

Sponsored by:



STAY CONNECTED!

Get the best of ParentMap delivered right to your inbox.

SUBMIT

RELATED TOPICS

SPONSORED (/TAXONOMY/TERM/1458)

Share this resource with your friends!



(/#facebook/twint/pin/est)https://www.addtoany.com/share?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.parentmap.com%2Fselecting-middle-school&title=Demystify%20the%20Process%20of%20Selecting%20a%20Middle%20School)

middle-

About the Author

school&title=Demystify%20the%20Process%20of%20Selecting%20a%20Middle%20School)