



CHESTERTON ACADEMY

A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right High School

Choosing a high school can be a difficult process. Chesterton Academy of Milwaukee is pleased to assist parents by outlining vital benchmarks of successful schools. We sincerely hope it will help you as a parent discern the best environment and curriculum for your child. May God bless your journey and know that we are here to help.¹

The mission of Chesterton Academy *is to assist parents* in the vocation of raising up joyful leaders and saints who are educated in the truths of the faith.

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¹ The guide is compiled from a variety of sources, including Archbishop J. Michael Miller's 5 Marks of a Catholic School (<https://www.catholicparents.org/essential-marks-catholic-schools-archbishop-j-michael-miller-csb/>), extensive educational research, typical parent questions, and information from the Chesterton School Network.



CHESTERTON ACADEMY

Top 10 Criteria for Choosing the Right High School

1. "I want my child to be a saint."
(A School Inspired by a Supernatural Vision)
2. "I want my child to find his vocation."
(A Model that Forms the Whole Person)
3. "I don't want my child to fall away from the faith."
(A Truly Catholic Community)
4. "I want my child to find friends who share our values."
(Families You Want to Be With).
5. "I want my child to be taught that truth exists."
(A Curriculum with a Catholic Worldview)
6. "I want my child to be surrounded by good role models."
(A Faculty of Witnesses to the Gospel)
7. "I want my child to be a lifelong learner."
(Students that Seek Wisdom)
8. "I want my child to be prepared for his future."
(A Curriculum that Avoids Early Specialization)
9. "I want my child to think critically."
(Coursework with Integrated Connections)
10. "I want my child to be able to articulate his ideas."
(Connected and Engaged Students)

BONUS "I wish they had this when I was a kid"
(A School Parents Wish They Could Attend)



CHESTERTON ACADEMY

Top 10 Criteria for Choosing the Right High School

1. "I want my child to be a saint."
(A School Inspired by a Supernatural Vision)

"Take away the supernatural," says Chesterton, "and what remains is the unnatural." The mission of a school, and how it is lived out, should be inspired by the truths of the Catholic faith. High school students in particular have a predisposition to know the truth. A school climate should encourage students to ask life's "big questions" so that students can "discover" the truths of the faith. A high school that points students on this trajectory in life is a great gift, for there is no higher vision than "*the reality of God and of the world to become the measure and standard for one's own desire and action.*"² A student who knows this can live with purpose and change the world.

2. "I want my child to find his vocation."
(A Model that Forms the Whole Person)

"An emphasis on the inalienable dignity of the human person – above all on his or her spiritual dimension – is especially necessary today. Unfortunately, far too many ...perceive education to be merely an instrument for the acquisition of information that will improve the chances of worldly success and a more comfortable standard of living. Such an impoverished vision of education is not Catholic." Education must seek to form children "to fulfilling their destiny to become saints."³ A student's direction and purpose flow from knowing what we were created for. An excellent school starts with the view of the student as *Capex Dei*, or being capable of receiving God. A school's view of the human person is to reflect the needs of the student as both body(mind) and soul. With Christ as the true model, students may be led to develop their intellect and moral virtue to find true fulfillment and joy. Christ helps us define our purpose and path in life, that is, what we are *made for*. As Vatican II states, "...only in the mystery of the incarnate Word, does the mystery of man take on light."⁴ Students need an environment to discover their unique talents and vocations to be at the service of Christ and his Church. An excellent school will educate and attend to both the temporal needs that one might fulfill one's particular vocation and *most importantly* to provide preparation for one's eternal end.

² Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*, trans. Paul C. Duggan (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 20.

³ Archbishop J. Michael Miller, "Five Essential Marks of Catholic Schools," Catholic Parents Online.

⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* §22.



CHESTERTON ACADEMY

3. “I don’t want my child to fall away from the faith.” (A Truly Catholic Community)

A school living out its proper mission, provides access to the sacraments for students. In particular, the Mass, as the Eucharist is the most effective means of growth in the spiritual life by way of its effects. It is *the* source; the real presence of our Lord, and it is *the* summit, the supreme way to holiness (CCC 1377). The school and community rely on the supernatural help from the sacraments in order to live out their mission. Teachers, parents and staff, reflect the living out the sacramental life. The sacramental life is joyfully embraced and lived out with Mass, prayers, rosary, lives of the saints, and celebratory feasts. School is a part of a much greater lived experience that merely study. For as G.K. Chesterton said, “*Education is not a subject...It is instead a transfer of a way of life.*” When students see the faith as a way of life, and the joy of the ordered life, it becomes much more difficult to leave.

4. “I want my child to find friends who share our values.” (Families You Want to Be With).

Friends in high school are one of the most formative influences on a teenager—for good or ill. It is important that parents find a school community where they can trust the other students with whom their son or daughter will spend roughly 8 hours per day with—that’s over 5,500 hours in the course of a high school career. As parents know, friends can lead children down a path of happiness or down a path of destruction. Thus, parents should also seek a community where they can form meaningful relationships with other parents and families, and where their children can find lifelong friends who will challenge them to live virtuously and encourage them to follow the Lord.

5. “I want my child to be taught that truth exists.” (A Curriculum with a Catholic Worldview)

There is no such thing as a neutral school, every school imparts a worldview. As G.K. Chesterton writes, “*every education teaches a philosophy; if not by dogma then by suggestion, by implication, by atmosphere.*” The school must impart the worldview that there is truth, and truth can be known. There is coherence in the world and in learning. All truth is God’s truth and therefore cannot be found in just theology but in all subjects. Faith and reason should be intertwined in every course each student under takes. It is imperative that students find truth in all subjects and that they do not give rise to contradiction. High school students are quick to recognize and discredit hypocrisy. In each subject, Catholic values and beliefs are passed on to the students. This integration and consistency give further witness to the truth. As G.K. Chesterton writes, “The one thing that is never taught by any chance in the atmosphere of public schools is this: that there is a whole truth of things, and that in knowing it and speaking it we are happy.”



CHESTERTON ACADEMY

6. “I want my child to be surrounded by good role models.” (A Faculty of Witnesses to the Gospel)

“Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (Pope Paul VI). The importance of teacher on a student’s life cannot be overstated. Research has demonstrated the necessity for children to have other adults in their lives that hold the same values and beliefs as parents. This grows in importance in high school as students seek independence apart from parents. If parents do not trust the teachers to be imitators of Jesus Christ, they cannot trust the school. Additionally, smaller schools provide greater opportunities for individual mentorship and healthy faculty-student relationships.

7. “I want my child to be a lifelong learner.” (Students that Seek Wisdom)

Students spend a lot of time in high school immersed in reading and study. The content should thus be worthy and valuable. A high school should supply parents with the main reading list for *all* the courses for *all* the high school years. The main course of study should not be teacher-dependent, standardized-test-dependent, or subject to fads, but rather should be the most beneficial for developing habits and fostering wisdom. Parents shouldn’t accept the low bar of what is “not harmful,” but should demand that students’ minds and hearts receive the *best that has ever been thought and said*. Parents want the best for their children. Students seeped in the great intellectual tradition become themselves great minds and problem solvers. Parents should seek a school that highlights time-tested and beautiful texts, which students will find both enjoyable and challenging.

8. “I want my child to be prepared for his future.” (A Curriculum that Avoids Early Specialization)

“A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a live thing can go against it.” (G.K. Chesterton). While the trend in education is specialization, a liberal arts curriculum will develop skill sets and appreciation for a wide range of coursework. It is difficult for students to think longer term and discern what is best for them. Students can miss out by not challenging themselves or by not discovering a talent in an area not previously considered. A generalist course of study provides the necessary competencies and avoids the pitfalls of early specialization. Only 27% of college graduates go into the field in their course of study,⁵ and in the workforce, employees often hold several different positions throughout their career. A broad curriculum with few electives in high school leads to greater student knowledge and discernment and therefore to more focus in college and beyond.

⁵ Brad Plumer, “Only 27 Percent of College Grads Have a Job Related to Their Major,” *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2013.



CHESTERTON ACADEMY

9. “I want my child to think critically.” (Coursework with Integrated Connections)

“...The modern academy has literally disintegrated itself into a plethora of fragmented particles, none of which is in communication with the other parts.”⁶ High schools that provide content and integration among disciplines will give students the opportunity to synthesize information and develop problem solving skills. Interdisciplinary connections via *integrated learning* or combined subject coursework, help students develop these creative and higher-level thinking skills. Development and innovation in the world often come from problem solving ability of synthesis of disciplines. Finally, it is a beneficial career skill to appreciate and work with people from different disciplines within an organization.

10. “I want my child to be able to articulate his ideas.” (Connected and Engaged Students)

Seek schools that encourage conversation in the classroom. Interconnectedness with teachers increases not only a student’s sense of community, but it leads to greater engagement and satisfaction with school satisfaction. It’s no secret students learn more when engaged. Class engagement can happen from a variety of sources but usually it is often a result of teaching methodology. A critical pedagogy of historical significance, that was forgotten in the 20th century is making a comeback, it is the *Socratic method*. Questions and class discussion naturally engage students. The Socratic method engages students, develops the ability to think on one’s feet, and provides practice to share and articulate one’s ideas. Students feel more connected and this yields greater student success. As stated in an educational study by John Hopkins, “During class, minimize ‘teacher talk’ time and increase ‘student talk’ time...”⁷ A dialogue is always better than a monologue.

BONUS “I wish they had this when I was a kid” (A School Parents Wish They Could Attend)

Upon review of the overall formation and culture of the high school, parents should *wish that this education had been made available to them*. And if they do, they should make this opportunity available to their child. Parents know best, and they should choose a high school that they think provides the best formation for their child, even if the child is unsure. In most cases, when parents stick with their gut, children end up being grateful to their parents for making the right decision for them.

⁶ Joseph Pearce, “Chesterton and the Meaning of Education,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, February 27, 2014.

⁷ John Hopkins Urban Health Institute, “Best Practices for Effective Schools,” *The Triad of Engagement*, 2, https://urbanhealth.jhu.edu/_PDFs/media/best_practices/effective_schools.pdf