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How to find the right kindergarten for your child

Lots of places in Massachusetts let parents pick schools, but finding the right one takes some homework

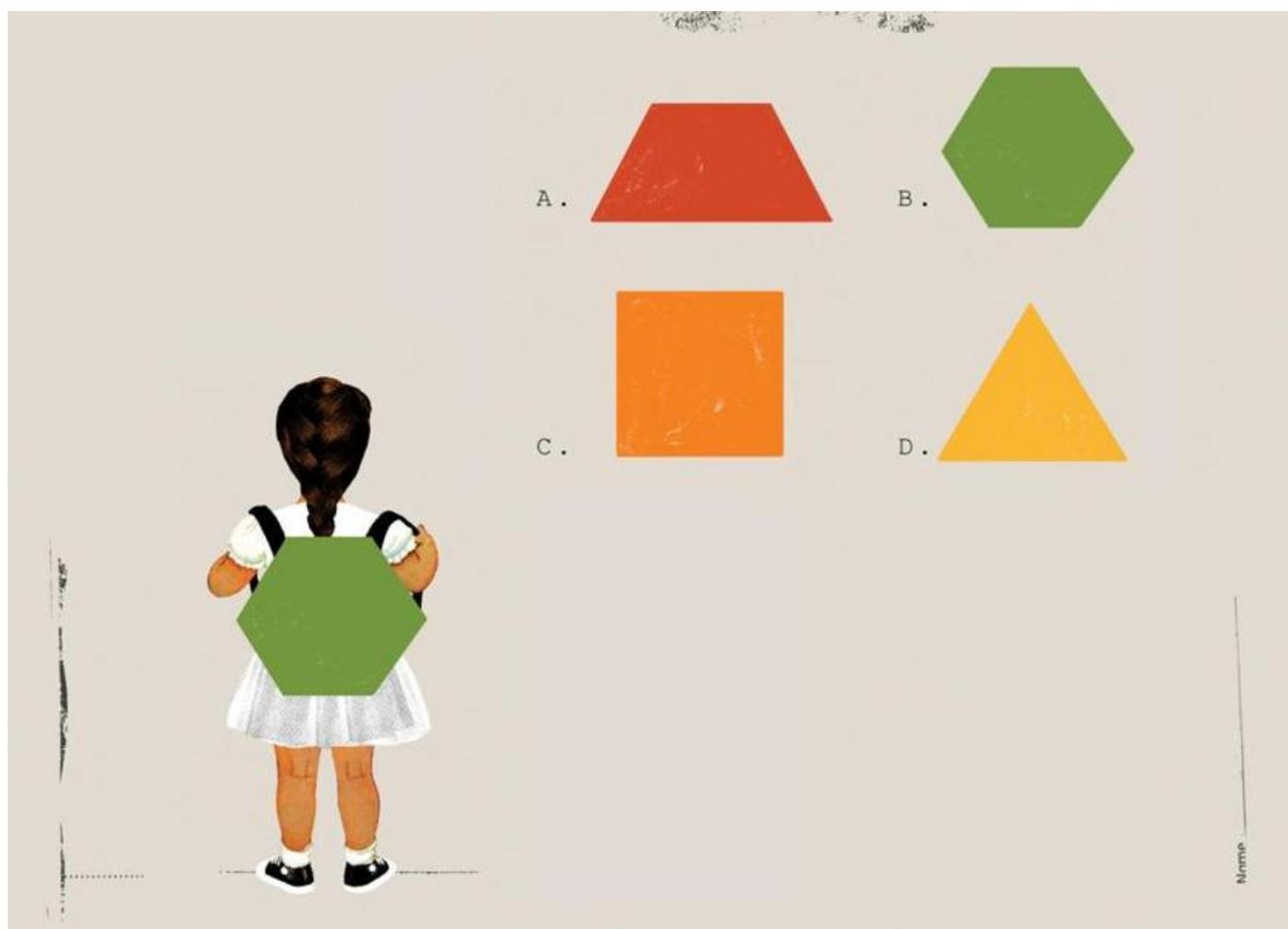


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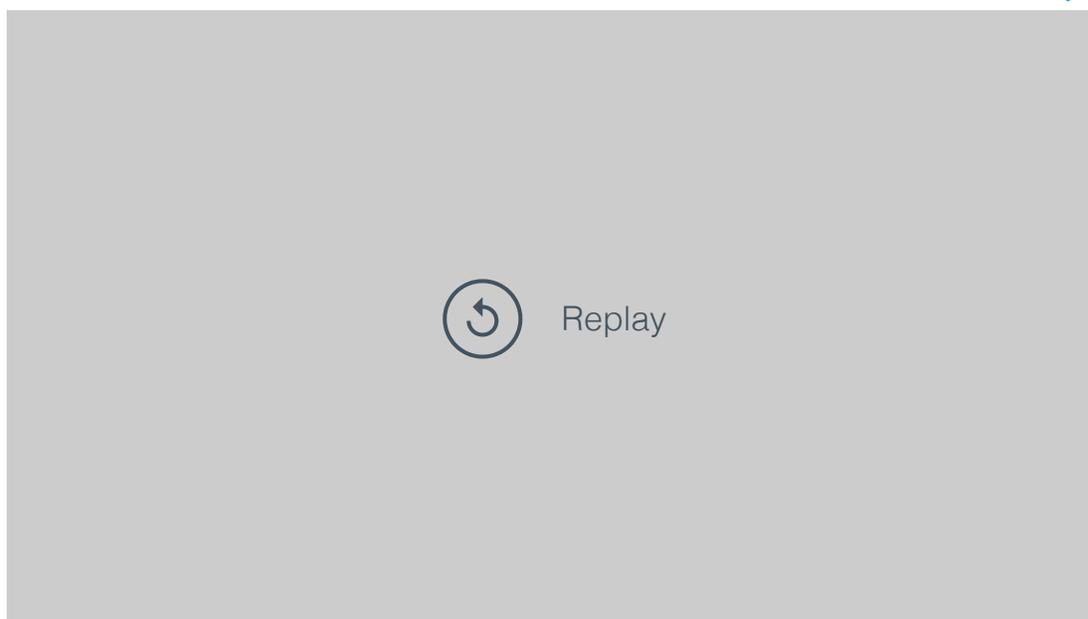
By Kara Baskin

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In many Massachusetts cities and towns, finding an elementary school is simple: Where you live decides where your child goes. But in Boston, Cambridge, Melrose, Acton, Framingham, and Salem, among others, parents get a shot at selecting their child's school. Of course, plenty of people also move to a town for a school district they like.

But finding the right pick for your family can be overwhelming. While the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education publishes objective data like per-pupil spending on a district-wide basis and individual school data like MCAS scores, more subjective factors that can make for a good match are much harder to gauge.

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So how to choose the best school for your child?

The following cheat sheet is based on advice from Nancy Carlsson-Paige, senior adviser for the advocacy group Defending the Early Years, and Carolyn Orsini Nelson of consulting service McMillan Education.

- 1. START EARLY.** You need to begin your research at least six months before your child will be heading off to kindergarten, especially if you're planning to relocate to a specific district.
- 2. BUILD A NETWORK.** Get to know parents within your community, because word-of-mouth is invaluable. "Each school has a personality," says Orsini Nelson, and other parents

are a great resource. Local social organizations, pertinent listservs, and community groups are helpful, too.

3. GET PERSONAL. Make an appointment to meet with the principal at each school you're considering, and do so in person, through the school secretary. "Secretaries are bombarded with e-mails daily, so do it personally," Orsini Nelson advises. "Say, 'We're new to the system and we'd love to get to know you.' Frame it as warmly and as cordially as possible."

4. SIZE 'EM UP. Once you've scored a meeting, inquire about classroom teacher-student ratio. "In an early elementary school classroom, 1-to-20 or fewer is preferable," Orsini Nelson says. A school might tout a lower ratio if it employs classroom aides. If this is the case, ask about the aide's role. For instance, some aides might assist more generally; others might focus specifically on kids with special needs.

5. GO STRONG. Ask about the school's strengths. Some schools might have an outstanding theater program; others might focus on technology. Ask the principal what he or she sees as the school's calling card and how students are encouraged to take advantage.

6. TAKE A TOUR. Ask to visit a classroom, and don't be shy about it. You'll learn about student body diversity and teacher styles. "This is your right," says Carlsson-Paige. "A lot of parents feel intimidated, and I wish they wouldn't." She adds: "These are public schools, they belong to the community and to the parents, and they're paid for by public tax dollars. The principal works for you, and parents have more rights than they think they do." If your potential school doesn't encourage visits? Red flag.

7. ANALYZE THE CLASSROOM'S RESOURCES. "For young children, there should be activity centers based on science, math, literacy, building blocks, math materials like Unifix cubes, an art area, and ideally water tables or sand tables," says Carlsson-Paige. At this age, children should be actively engaged, not lectured to, she says, so parents should look for evidence of this.

8. PAY ATTENTION TO THE TEACHERS. Observe how teachers interact with kids. "A meaningful, trusting relationship is essential, and it's different from the parent relationship," Carlsson-Paige says. "We want to really find classrooms where we see that teachers are free

to connect meaningfully with kids. Pay attention to how the teacher talks to the children. Does he or she get at their level? Is there a visible connection?”

9. LEARN HOW THEY MEASURE PROGRESS. Determine how teachers will assess your child’s progress and whether they seem overly focused on test scores as a benchmark. “Ask: ‘Are you doing any standardized tests? Do you do assessments in kindergarten?’ ” Carlsson-Paige suggests. She recommends looking for environments where teachers gather student work in portfolios, which is less formal and more appropriate for younger kids.

10. KNOW THE SCHEDULE. Ask how much time children get for free play or group activities like singing and reading together, and how much of the day includes direct instruction, led by a teacher in front of the class. In Carlsson-Paige’s opinion, drill-based direct instruction shouldn’t be part of a kindergarten curriculum. An ideal schedule should incorporate plenty of hands-on and project-based learning, play, and active engagement.

11. VALUE CONSISTENCY. Inquire about consistency from grade to grade regarding behavioral expectations, grading policies, and daily transitions. Ideally, these should be uniform across levels. “Some principals might say that ‘each classroom has its own culture,’ ” says Orsini Nelson. But “standards should be predictable,” she says.

12. GET A SENSE OF TEACHER TURNOVER. This can be done in a diplomatic way when framed positively. “Ask, ‘How do you support your teachers’ longevity and growth in general?’ ” Orsini Nelson suggests.

13. ANTICIPATE BUMPS. Maybe your child will have a personality conflict with a teacher. Maybe something will happen at home. Determine how the school identifies and supports kids with emotional challenges. Parents need to know how quickly schools respond when children are struggling.

14. TRUST YOUR GUT. With the school’s permission, “walk around the campus. Go at lunch or recess. Are the kids happy and smiling?” Orsini Nelson asks. After all, kids have nothing to prove. The behavior of the children themselves is often the best benchmark.

15. CONSIDER THE WHOLE DAY. Evaluate your family’s practical child-care needs. Do schools offer before- and/or after-school programs or a school breakfast? While it’s tempting

to think only about curriculum or fit, don't underestimate these logistical aspects, Orsini Nelson says.

Kara Baskin is a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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