

~~12~~¹³ Questions to Ask
When Considering
a Private School



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Introduction



Thank you for downloading this guide of 12 Questions to Ask When Considering a Private School. If you have reached this point, you likely have decided that private schooling may be a better fit for your child, and are exploring your options.

We understand, however, that the decision to enroll your children in private schools is not always an easy one. There are many factors that want to drag us back to the status quo. Cost. Convenience. Transportation. We applaud you, therefore, on placing the priority on your child and taking this proactive step towards change, there is nothing more important than the future of our children, and they deserve the very best we can give them!

You have probably realized when exploring private schools that there are a lot of options. Having options is fantastic, but it also means you need to do your homework before committing. Every child is different and every family has unique needs. Taking time to reflect on those needs before casting a broad net in search for the best educational fit is vital. Once options are narrowed, start asking the tough questions! Use these questions to help shape your discussion points when interviewing a school to see if it's the best fit for your family.

We wish you the best in your school search, and earnestly pray that you find the school that is the best fit for your child, one that will allow them not just to learn, but to SOAR! If we can help at any time, do not hesitate to contact our admissions department at admissions@williamsburgchristian.org.

Be sure to connect with WCA on Social Media.



1. What is the schools mission and vision?

A school's mission statement is where anyone looking at a private school should start. If your family values don't align with a school's mission (what they are now) and vision (where they want to be), it's probably not the school for you. Always start here. Also if a school you are visiting doesn't have a cohesive mission statement at all, or they cannot explain what their mission statement represents in the every day life of a student, these should serve as warning flags.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Our mission statement is that we provide college preparatory education in a culture of grace through personalized learning in academics, arts and athletics, while building relationships that inspire students to serve their community and become Christ-centered leaders. This mission statement is everywhere: it's on our internal letterhead, it's on our website, it's at the bottom of every school-wide newsletter, even on the back of our school musical programs.

Vision and Core Values

A school's vision statement explains what their forward goal is as a school. This should also align with where you want your student to be by the time they graduate. Part and parcel with this is the school's core values. These are the non-negotiable foundations on which the school bases all decisions and actions.



TIP: Check the admissions materials you receive. Not only should the mission statement, vision and core values be clearly listed, their theme should run through all the other materials as well.



A school's vision connects to their strategic plan to paint a picture of what direction they are heading, while the mission statement and core values tell you who they are now, and where the foundation lies for everything they do.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Personalization is a very fundamental part of what we offer at WCA. We believe that God has created each of us with a unique set of gifts and that we are not all the same person, and do not learn the same. You will find the word personalization or variations of it scattered throughout all of our promotional and admissions materials.

2. What is your school's approach to learning?

A key advantage of private schools is the benefit of a low student to teacher ratio. The smaller the group, the more attention a teacher can give to individual students. However, not all private schools make individualized learning a priority. The way in which schools view their use of low teacher-student ratios to enhance learning is the key differentiator.



TIP: Ask about the specific tactics they use to provide a unique educational experience for your child at their school, which focuses on their particular strengths, and enacts specific strategies to mitigate their weaknesses.

When choosing a private school, we recommend parents zero in on how a school differentiates its learning processes from those of other schools.

What truly makes a private school stand out is how they create a learning environment that enables different types of students to succeed. At WCA, personalized learning means meeting students where they are currently in their understanding of a given concept and developing this understanding further without concern for limitations.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Students are recognized as having particular gifts that God has given them, and that this means that not all students learn the same. As a result, WCA places a high value on personalization in an attempt to ensure that all students are able move along at the same pace of study, or faster. WCA also wants to create lifelong learners, so our focus is on just that: rich learning experiences, not teaching to a test.



Sample questions you might ask:



What would stand out to me as being different from the other private schools I've visited if I were to step into a classroom at your school?



What unique educational practices are less obvious to a casual visitor, but have a big impact on your students' success?



What types of students and learning styles have the best success at your school?



3. How does your school address your students' safety and security?

This is really two questions wrapped into one. First is the concept of actual physical security. These would be barriers to violence, abuse and abduction attempts against the student body. The onset of mass casualty events at public schools in the past decade is shining a bright lamp on the lack of proper training and planning for active shooter events. And many of us have also received amber alerts on our phones that remind us that abduction is still a threat to our youth. Also in this category are preparation for natural disasters such as fire and weather.



TIP: A school that takes security seriously should be able to show you the the three vital aspects of their facilities security: area monitoring (interior and exterior security cameras and someone who actually monitors them), access (all doors are secured and access limited to one monitored entry/exit point), and response (drills and written plans for reacting and communicating through an emergency).

Some questions to ask:

How does the school manage visitors?

How does the school communicate with parents in the event of an emergency?

Does the school keep formal and easily accesible records of individuals approved to pick up students?



Emergency preparedness should include:

Lockdown Drills

Access Limitations

Tornado and Fire Drills

Written Crisis Response Plans

When we think about safety and security, our minds automatically center on physical safety. But what about emotional safety? Does the school foster a climate that allows students to learn without anxiety and fear throughout the school day? Students can be exposed to physical threats (physical bullying, theft) and emotional stressors (verbal bullying, peer pressure, feeling different or left out). A school with a great culture that places emphasis on character building in every day class life will have the footprints of that culture all through the student body.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

WCA has created an atmosphere in which trust exists between the students regarding physical security of their belongings..so much so that none of our students feel the need to keep locks on their lockers. In terms of physical security to protect our students, WCA recently underwent a \$100,000 security upgrade, improving everything from key fob-only access to all entry points, to installation of a state of the art camera monitoring system.

4. What are your school's technology programs and policies?

Technology is in every nook and cranny of our existence in this day and age, and students need to be keyed-in to technology uses. Technology can be an amazing tool to facilitate learning objectives, but the use of technology tools in school can have quite a few downsides as well. The unbridled use of technology tools, such as mobile devices in the classroom, can lead to distracted attention, exposure to inappropriate material, and cyber bullying.



It is important that the school have set policies and procedures in place that allow for the benefits of the use of technology for educational purposes, while mitigating the negative impacts it can have on focused learning. Some schools permit mobile devices in the classroom, while others completely ban them. Still others allow their use in certain situations and/or employ other digital devices to accomplish technology objectives that do not use personal devices.



TIP: Ask for a copy of the Student/Parent Handbook at the school which lays out policies and procedures. There should be a section that clearly describes when technology is and is not allowed in the classroom and restriction on use when allowed.



Several studies have compared students who texted during class versus those who did not. Those who texted frequently took lower quality notes, retained less information, and did worse on tests about the material. In one survey, 80% of students agreed that using a mobile phone in class decreases their ability to pay attention.



FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Mobile devices are collected at the beginning of each day and are retrieved upon dismissal. High school students are able to check them out for lunch. Teachers still use digital tools, such as Google Docs, email and other programs to teach digital stewardship, and a few dozen Google Chromebooks are available for use by students to integrate digital aspects to their work, in addition to the computer lab. In 2019, WCA was named a Common Sense School for their commitment to implementation of a digital citizenship curriculum.

5. How does your school prepare students for college or careers?

This question may not sound appropriate for someone who is considering private school for a second-grader, but the answer to this question should reveal a definite plan for what the school does every step of the way to prepare students to eventually be ready for the milestone of matriculation to the best college or university possible, or for entry directly into the workforce with a strong set of skills to help them succeed.

That last part may have struck a chord with some of you...isn't the whole goal of private school to get to college? For some that is certainly the goal, but for some, their gifts and abilities set them up better for the workforce. And a school's counseling department should be prepared for that, instead of forcing a one-size-fits-all approach on every student.

Key Elements of a College Preparatory Track

If you are hoping that your child will attend college, the private school you are touring should be able to provide details on the following:

-  Testing: a schedule of preparatory exams and the SAT and ACT as well as preparation strategies.
-  Guidance: is there someone that you can talk to regularly to ensure that you are hitting all the wickets enroute to the college application period?
-  College Visits: the school should have routine college visits, and identified off-campus college fairs that students should consider attending.
-  Curriculum: the school should have a curriculum and course selection review process that ensures all minimum requirements for colleges (and the NCAA if applicable) are met.

Did You Know?

Lucrative Career paths that do not require a degree are expanding substantially.

Job site CareerCast analyzed data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to determine the 10 best jobs for people who do not have a college degree. After considering variables such as annual median salary and hiring outlook, they found that the health-care industry is offering millions of high-paying and high-quality jobs.

In fact, four of the 15 fastest-growing occupations are in the health-care industry and do not require any kind of postsecondary degree.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Williamsburg Christian Academy not only has a special consultant on staff to help high school students plan for college acceptance and career exploration as early as freshman year, we also have a special College and Career Counseling Web Resource Center, which allows parents and students to go online and get up to date and helpful information on applying to college, researching careers and colleges, testing practice links, and scholarship data.

6. Is your school accredited?

Accreditation equals accountability in the areas of curriculum, instruction, financials, teacher qualifications, policies and procedures and the list goes on. A school that commits the resources and time to go through the rigorous process of accreditation every five to seven years is a school that cares about self-reflection and continuous improvement.



TIP: *Accreditation is automatically a blanket assurance that a school meets acceptable standards. Be sure to research the accrediting entity and understand the standards that they are requiring for its members.*

Some Common Accreditation Agencies

These are some of the larger and more stringent accreditation agencies:



FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

WCA is dually accredited by the Association of Christian Schools Internationals (ACSI) and AdvancEd, and is also a member of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS).



Would you buy a home without a home inspection?

Even if a house looks perfect, that doesn't mean there can't be flaws, flaws that could become long term issues and endanger the entire structure if unaddressed.

The same hold true about a school. Without accreditation, the burden falls on you to investigate hundreds of standards that should be met for a school to be safe, successful and eventually deliver your child admission-worthy in the college application process, and indeed prepared for life itself.



7. How do you foster the concept of school community?

As the old saying goes, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” Students learn best when they are part of a learning community. Schools that effectively promote this sense of belonging or ‘connectedness’ have lower incidences of bullying and are more inclusive in day-to-day student life.

The sense of community also stretches to parents. Parents should feel welcome to be a part of a vibrant volunteer force that works collectively towards the betterment of the school, and effectively utilizes the vast gifts that each has been given.

Creating a tight knit community of parents, educators and students is the key to helping students succeed.

Ask the following questions in regards to how they involve parents in the school’s learning community:

- What opportunities are there for parents to get involved in supporting the school?
- Is there a Parents or Community Association? What does it do?
- What events take place during the school year to involve parents?
- Does the school publish periodic newsletters?
- How do educators communicate with parents?
- How do parents stay up-to-date on their children’s progress?

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

WCA fosters community from every possible angle. Our Upper School and Lower School students are paired off as ‘prayer buddies’ for special events. Our Upper School students also go on retreats and mission trips to develop tight bonds. Meanwhile, our parents share their talents and time in our robust WCA Community Association, which takes on many initiatives the staff cannot cover, and throws teacher appreciation events. And each teacher in the Lower School publishes a periodic newsletter to stay connected to parents.

Did You Know?

A growing body of research confirms the benefits of building a sense of community in school. Students in schools with a strong sense of community are more likely to be academically motivated, to act ethically and altruistically, to develop social and emotional competencies, and to avoid a number of problem behaviors...

-Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development



8. What kind of extracurricular and athletic activities does your school offer?



More and more emphasis is being placed by college admissions departments on students having well-rounded set of interests and involvement in extracurricular activities. For some this may be in the arts, such as in a school play, or a strings ensemble. For others, it may be participating on a sports team. And still others it may be taking the lead in a club, school government or an honor society. It's important that the school have the ability to offer all of these things to your student...and not have it cost an exorbitant amount extra on top of tuition.

Not only should the school have these types of programs, but it is also great if they have enough opportunities to participate. Large schools may have great sports teams, for example, but can everyone join the team, or are some that tryout cut from participation based on skill level?



TIP: *Be wary of smaller schools that offer an outlandish number of available extracurriculars. Although it may look impressive at first, if the school doesn't have the staff to man them all effectively, or there isn't enough student interest to support them, the overall experience will often fall short of expectations.*

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

WCA features eleven athletic sports, strings and drama ensembles, and approximately a dozen clubs and societies. Students who try out for sports teams are seldom cut, giving everyone who tries out a chance to be a part of a team, especially in individually-oriented team sports like cross-country, swim, and golf, which can focus on personal improvement. Clubs are also not fixed every year. Provided a student group finds a faculty sponsor, almost any club can be created on student demand. This year a pep group called the Big Blue Crew was formed, as well as a student segment of the school periodic newsletter, called the Eaglegram Student Publishing Division. There is even a senior student trying to establish a new tradition called the Pancake Club!

9. What are your facilities like?

If a school offers athletics and extracurricular activities, does the physical space support those programs? Check out the school's athletic fields, gymnasium, auditorium, music room and any other space where students might be found during or after school. Does the school also have dedicated lockers for storage of books while not in class?

In addition to extracurricular facilities, does the school have the appropriate facilities to execute a full curriculum, especially in the high school courses? It would be challenging to teach chemistry, biology, or physics without being able to integrate labs into the syllabus. The facilities for these courses have very extensive requirements (chemical storage, gas supply, powered lab tables) and not all private schools decide to make the investment in those areas, which can short change how dynamic your child's academic instruction is.

Programs that Use Off-site Facilities

There may be a few programs that require the use of off-site facilities. Be sure that you know what these are and how they may impact transportation and your schedule.

For example, most schools do not have a pool on the premises, or a golf course, so students in these sports may have to use an off-site pool or golf course for these programs.

Be sure if your child participates in any of these programs that there are no hefty extra fees for doing so.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Williamsburg Christian Academy has a gymnasium, multiple sports fields, a baseball diamond, library, computer lab and a performance stage. It also has a full chemistry and biology lab that are fully safety rated for lab experiments. For sports that are conducted off site, facility fees are covered by the universal activity fee.



10. How does your school view the role of community service?

Engaging in community service provides students with the opportunity to become active members of their community and has a lasting, positive impact on society at large. Community service or volunteerism enables students to acquire life skills and knowledge, as well as provide a service to those who need it most.

Did You Know?

A recent survey of college admissions officers found that community service can be a tipping factor when making college admissions decisions. In fact, 53% of those surveyed said that community service can almost be a “tie-breaker” between applicants who are equally qualified.*

A school with established community service programs shows a commitment to a standard of education that seeks not only to prepare students for college or careers, but also to build character in their students so that they can become good stewards of the world that they have been given. This could consist of any number of smaller community service efforts, all the way up to international trips or mission trips for intensive volunteer activity helping those in substantial need.



FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Williamsburg Christian Academy prides itself on building character and a service-oriented mindset in our students. As we like to say, our value proposition is that we offer an education based in values. WCA highly values service to our fellow man as a core life educational construct, and each student is required to complete a set number of community service hours prior graduation, which is most often fulfilled by the many community service days that are scheduled during school days. In fact, most students though organizations like Key Club and others, go far beyond the base requirement.

*<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereknewton/2018/04/05/new-survey-shows-value-of-community-service-in-college-admissions>

11. How does your school provide faculty the opportunity to develop?

The answer to this question is a great litmus test for understanding the culture of a school. Schools with cultures that truly value continuous improvement will make investing time and resources in professional development a priority for both faculty and administrators because the best educators are the ones who are always learning themselves.



TIP: Ask for specific examples of how faculty engage in professional development.



What are some characteristics of an engaged teacher?

- creates inventive ways to convey material
- is both liked and respected by students
- encourages students to seek them out for extra help outside class time
- gets involved in school events and clubs
- appreciates and incorporates parent feedback

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

Upper School teachers receive professional development each Wednesday, for a full hour prior to students arriving at school. Lower School Teachers have regularly scheduled half-day training sessions. WCA's commitment to educating the whole child is one of the aspects of WCA that brings teachers to the school- the ability to break out of the cookie-cutter mold and 'teaching to the test' approach of many public schools.

12. Can my student shadow another student during a typical school day?

There is no better way for your child to get a feel for a school than shadowing one of its students for a day. In a tour you as a parent can be skillfully maneuvered to show only the most glowing aspects of a school, without getting a flavor for how the school really is like day-to-day. But no matter how much a school might plan for a shadow day to be perfect, students shadowing will likely see things that they like, and also things that they don't like about a prospective school.

Sometimes the aspects they may not like so much are exactly what you want for them in a new environment, but others may be indicators that your child will ultimately just not be happy there, and the school may not be the right fit for them. You need to find that out before you commit to spending at least a semester's worth of tuition there!



Schools that offer to have your student shadow and encourage it, show they have nothing to hide and are eager for your child to experience their educational environment. Once you elect to shadow, ask about specific policies and procedures so your student can fit in and feel like a student of the school.

Things like:

- ✓ Dress Code
- ✓ Mobile Device policies
- ✓ Class Schedule

and of course for you, what time to pick your child up!

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

WCA welcomes students to shadow and actually prefers prospective students to do so. Students are paired with current students with similar interests and personalities.



Ways to get the best out of shadow day:

For students:

- ✍ get to know the student you are shadowing and ask lots of questions- they will usually be very honest
- ✍ fully engage in the classroom and take advantage of opportunities that present themselves throughout the day...if you know the answer to a question, raise your hand
- ✍ reflect on how your day went with your parents- the good and the bad

For parents:

- ✍ If you haven't already, take a tour
- ✍ When your student comes home, ask how everything went...and then **listen**
- ✍ Ask for a debrief from the school regarding what they saw during the shadow

13. What planning steps are you taking for safety and operations surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic?

Proper prior planning prevents poor performance. Most of us have heard that saying once or twice and it's never been more true in this period of history. The failure to properly create and implement a plan for school re-opening has significant potential consequences, even deadly ones. It is critical for you to know how the school you are about send your child to is going to protect them from coming down with the virus, or at least mitigate the possibility of contracting COVID-19. Equally important is the plan if the government orders another shutdown. Is your

Did You Know?

..the Virginia Department of Health requires all schools opening in Fall 2020 to submit a COVID-19 Health Mitigation Plan? But the submission of a plan is all that is required. The guidelines or restrictions that must be addressed are very loosely stated, leaving a lot of leeway on just what schools actually do to safeguard their teachers, students, and by extension, their families.

private school prepared to take their instruction remote without missing a beat? Some schools are operating under the assumption that this won't occur, but this gamble is being made with your tuition money.

Ask the following questions in regards to how they will deal with the following scenarios:

- How do you plan on maintaining proper social distancing between students when required?
- Will masks be required and when?
- If the government mandates shutdown of schools again, what is your plan to deliver a full curriculum?
- What happens when a student or staffmember is diagnosed with the virus?
- Will you have athletics and extracurriculars, and how will that work?
- How will you sanitize spaces both during and after the school day?

FOR EXAMPLE, AT WCA...

WCA has consulted countless experts, and has thoroughly examined guidance from the CDC and Virginia Department of Health. The end result of that analysis was the release of our Fall Opening Plan and Health Mitigation Plan. These two documents clearly lay out the processes and procedures WCA will use to keep students safely distanced and healthy. WCA also has rolled out an extensive remote learning system that can not only deliver our curriculum 100% virtually if needed, but will also be an integral part of our flipped learning approach into the future.



Conclusion



One of the most difficult decisions a parent has to make is choosing the right school for their child, and we applaud you for exploring your options. Because many schools offer such a wide range of educational experiences, parents should carefully consider their own educational values. Comparing how each school's thinking and educational practices and environment align with your own is absolutely critical when choosing a school.

We hope this guide helps you choose the right school for your child. If we can be of help to you in any way, please contact us at admissions@williamsburgchristian.org.

—The Williamsburg Christian Academy Team



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