



# CLOSE-UP

EDUCATION

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## 10 Ways to Pick the Right School District

### CLASS STRUGGLE

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WASHINGTON — We say we are buying a house. But for most of us parents, the public school we are investing in, and sometimes it can be a very daunting financial and personal decision.

In the early 1990s, when my journalist wife was making what seemed to me big bucks as a television producer, we could afford to live in Scarsdale, N.Y. That vil-

lage's public schools cost us about as much in real estate taxes as the tuition at the private schools our kids had attended in Pasadena, Calif. Fortunately, we got what we paid for in Scarsdale. That is not always the case.

How do parents evaluate the schools their children may attend and escape the heartbreak of buying a great house that turns out to be in the attendance zone of a flawed school? Here are 10 ways to make the right choice, in descending importance:

1. Go with your gut. After you have analyzed all the data and had the conver-

sations outlined below, you still have to make a decision. Consider how you react emotionally to a school. If you're not feeling it, don't send your kids there. They will sense you have doubts at a time when they need to believe that this is the place for them.

2. Talk to parents. If strangers knocked on your door and asked what you thought of the local school, would you tell them? Of course you would. An unspoken code of honor exists among parents on such occasions. Ask the school for the names and numbers of a few PTA officers, or check with the neighbors and

ring the bell of a house with kids that go to that school. Be polite. Listen carefully. They might even invite you in for coffee.

3. Visit the school and ask to speak to the principal. Picking up the vibes within the building is useful. Is it well maintained? Do the walls have lots of recent schoolwork? But trying to see the principal is crucial. If he or she has no time to see you, beware. Even if an assistant principal agrees to answer your questions, an unreachable principal is a danger sign. The best principals I know are delighted

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