
The Small Independent Boarding School Experience

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First consider the benefits and then identify the right school to serve the needs of your child

People often ask why an independent boarding school, or moreover a small independent boarding school, is an effective educational environment. The majority of parents who send their children to boarding schools do so for a variety of valid reasons. On the one hand, British royalty have a tradition for their children to go off to school to avail themselves not only of outstanding academic programs but also other facets of boarding life that help build character, independence, and preparation for a successful college experience and life. On the other hand, while Americans usually take great pride in their local public and independent schools, there are those situations in which families sense a need in their children that a local school may not be able to provide. In such situations, boarding schools offer programs that may be more effective. In some cases, the local public or independent schools do not have the quality academic programs that will challenge a student's potential or address a learning difference or a specific learning style. A boarding school represents a choice, an alternate solution. There are families who realize that boarding exposes students to other students from throughout the region, country, or world. Students become more understanding of those who differ. Boarding helps provide a greater focus on academics and structure for daily life.

So, What Are These So-Called Big Benefits? A Mission and Philosophy that is Alive Rather than Just Stated

Small independent boarding schools have a greater focus on a particular mission. In most cases, the intentional small size keeps the school from trying to be all things for all people. The leadership of a small school usually has a focused vision and philosophy; thus, the mission does not get lost as it might in a larger environ-

ment. The mission becomes more than a statement; it becomes a daily way of life, a specific way of teaching and exposing students to knowledge, and a way of knowing each student as an individual. This individual attention and focus on the individual can be implemented easily by sitting down with a student after school to discuss a personal problem, helping a student with a difficult math problem, assisting a student in looking at a variety of colleges, or simply talking about the myriads of problems that often overwhelm a young woman or man.

Knowledge of the Student

In small independent boarding schools everyone seems to know everyone. Most enjoyable in a small school is learning each student's personality and idiosyncrasies. There is usually a greater acceptance of diversity because everyone realizes that they must get along due to the size of the school. The faculty, peers, or other staff members quickly notice a student who is depressed or "sad" for the day. In a small school, it is often a member of the food service staff who may slip

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a student an extra dessert or a kind staff who loans a pencil because they really know the student. There are fewer avenues for a student to become lost or disassociated. Students, faculty, and administrators seem more eager to reach out to others. Parents, likewise, usually find less bureaucracy in a small boarding school. The administration and the faculty are not so tiered that one has to go to just one person to know a daughter or son's progress or needs. Small boarding schools also reach out to parents even more so because of the smallness of the school and the knowledge that they have of those in their charge.

A Small Family and a Real Sense of Community

A small independent boarding school becomes very similar to a large family. They are usually less institutional, and the faculty members are often very much like family members. Faculty members do more than teaching. In most cases they are also dorm parents, coaches, personal counselors, college advisors, and student advocates. Administrators are usually far more involved in the students' lives because they, too, must assume more than one role. Meals are times when everyone gathers to share news, hear announcements, or make plans for special events. When there are parents' weekends, alumni events, or other special campus functions, everyone is called upon to help out, and everyone shares in celebrations or festivities.

Greater Participation

In larger schools, it often seems that only "the best" play on varsity teams, serve as cheerleaders, sing in the chorus, or take part in the school play. On the surface, larger schools may have established the "best" reputations. At a closer look, many students may have never had the chance or had the encouragement to participate. While a small boarding school may have fewer athletic teams, fine arts groups, or other activities, there is usually the need for everyone to participate. Sitting in the bleachers and hearing parents exclaim that they never realized their son could play soccer, or seeing a grandparent have tears when seeing a grandchild exhibit an unusual talent that had never been tapped captures the essence of extracurricular activities in the small boarding school. Many youngsters need encouragement and the opportunity to develop into their full potential. In a small independent boarding school, the focus is truly on the individual student.

How should a Parent Determine Whether or Not their Child Needs a Small Boarding School?

Parents say they want what is best for their child. Yet, when it comes down to what is "best" they often leave it up to their son or daughter who truly may not know what is best. When a family is considering a boarding school, the student should certainly be involved. It is incumbent on the parent, however, to review the various guides that offer descriptions of schools, to contact

the schools themselves for literature and a personal tour.

Students with the following needs often receive the "big" benefits:

- A student who is underachieving academically and needs small classes, individual attention, and greater accountability;
- A student who enjoys a small family-like atmosphere but may be an only child or a child who has siblings who are very competitive or appear to always rise to the top;
- A student who has athletic or fine arts talents but has not always had the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities because they have been associated with schools in which only "the best" get to participate;
- An international student who wants to learn English or more about American culture in a more community oriented atmosphere;
- A student with a learning disability or different learning style who needs multi-sensory instruction, organization, and accountability;
- A student needing greater structure and accountability in his/her academic or personal life;
- A student who is extremely gifted and needs more individual attention.

How Can a Parent Identify the Right Small Independent Boarding School?

In searching for the right boarding school, parents should identify a school that prepares their child to be a productive citizen in a diverse society; students should be taught to appreciate the opinions of others while gaining an understanding of various cultures and heritages, thus driving civility in all relationships. The underpinning of the school should be anchored in the belief that a child's education is immensely enhanced when parents, teachers, and administrators work cooperatively as partners in education; the result being a personalized approach to education that continually evolves to accommodate students through teaching methods, assistive technology, and curricular content for a student's entire stay at the school.

A personalized approach further promotes academic and personal growth that ensures success for college and life. This philosophical approach to education should stimulate an appreciation and understanding of a "living" education via a multi-sensory instructional approach, comprehensive engagement with technology, the development of leadership and life skills, and learning experientially. This personalized style of education ensures the development of each student with a high degree of information retention, motivation, direction, and self-esteem. Thus, students harness the benefits of working in a dynamic educational environment that develops skills in communication and collaboration.

The identified school's community should include

involved and passionate people that embody the school's mission and philosophy. International and global studies should be incorporated into the curriculum emphasizing an overall desire to affect positive change in the world. This approach prepares a student for living in an ever-changing global world resulting in increased student awareness—economically, socially, and ethnically. Teachers, counselors, and administration should bring an extensive range of experiences from both academic and professional fields holding a variety of advanced degrees. Other important components of the small boarding school community must include a parent association and athletic booster club organizations. The school needs to empower vibrant groups of volunteers to support the school through classroom involvement, educational programs, fine arts, athletics, special events, and fund raising activities. As the final part and often overlooked ideology of a small boarding school philosophy, the school should be connected to other learning communities that seek to improve education for children around the world.

How Should Families Make the Final Decision?

The decision of educational placement is usually one of the biggest decisions that a family will ever make. There is little room for error. While the decision to purchase real property is simply a choice to make one more comfortable, the decision about educational placement can make an impact on a person's life forever. Thus, the final educational decision should be that of the parent, not of the child, and it must be an informed decision.

The search to identify the right school is often accompanied by stress. If the stress becomes overwhelming, it may be in the child and family's best interest to consider an educational consultant. An experienced educational consultant, with the knowledge a wide variety of available options, can become familiar with the needs of the child and family, and help them make a sound decision for placement in the appropriate school.

