
Boarding School: Discovery, Growth and Success

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*A school away from home —
a place to live while learning, to grow into the person one always wanted to be*

I first went away to summer camp when I was 14, and it was the most transforming experience of my life. From the time I boarded the camp train in Indiana until the end of the summer in New Hampshire eight weeks later, I could feel myself growing almost daily into the person I wanted to be. It was not that I “needed” to change: I came from an active, loving family and was doing well. However, the camp environment, the counselors, and my fellow campers nurtured the interests, values, and skills that had been planted in me by my family; and those interests, values, and skills began to grow in new ways.

I spent many more summers at camp as a camper and a counselor; and I watched repeatedly as young campers went through the same kind of exciting growth I had experienced. When the time came to choose a career, teaching at a boarding school seemed an obvious choice as a natural extension of my camp summers. I wanted to work at a place where the experiences of summer camp could continue all year long.

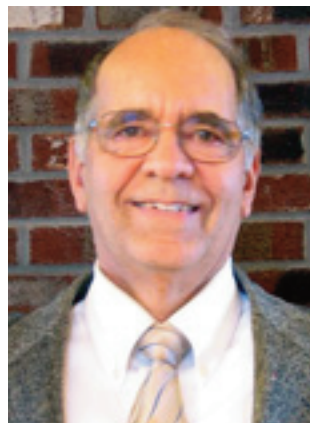
A boarding school is much more than a place to live while you learn. It is a community of fellowship, fun, and learning. It is a place for working together with friends through courses that may be difficult; for joining with others in athletic challenges; and for figuring out how to adapt to life with a difficult dorm mate or a demanding teacher. It is a place where students are exposed to each other’s foibles, and where, by learning to accept someone else’s shortcomings, they learn also to accept their own.

Of course, growth and success depend on finding the right school. The school must be one that fits an individual student’s personality, needs, interests, and

educational skills. Boarding schools vary in size, scholastic competitiveness, athletic emphasis, social interests, teaching approach, formality, and overall school culture. Most people are aware that there are boarding schools for the most accomplished students; and many people know there are residential therapy programs for students who have had very serious scholastic or behavioral difficulties. Fewer people are aware of the many schools in between that are designed to provide a good education and a good living experience for “ordinary” students. Perhaps even fewer people are aware of the many schools where students who have struggled elsewhere, either scholastically or socially, thrive just because they are in a community that fits their temperament, their interests, and their abilities.

Military schools provide an interesting example. Many people incorrectly believe that students who

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have had difficulties elsewhere achieve in military schools because such schools have harsh discipline. There may be some military schools that are harsh, and perhaps that is good for certain students; but most students who thrive in military schools do so because they like and need well-defined expectations and the public acknowledgement that comes with uniforms, rank, and systematically awarded privileges. Some of them might be students who have floundered in schools where there is too much flexibility and too much tolerance for different styles of learning and behavior.

Military schools are good for some students but not the right place for others. Many students need an unusual amount of flexibility, extra time to think, and time to pursue their own creative inventions. Perhaps a Waldorf school, with an emphasis on creative arts and spirituality, will fit one student; and perhaps a Friends' (Quaker) school with regular time for reflection and introspection will fit another. Some students will do their best in a high school allowing almost as much scholastic and personal independence as a college; and others, regardless of age, may need the extra personal attention and care that are common in junior boarding schools.

Those unfamiliar with the range of available boarding schools might be surprised to learn that there even are schools that actively seek students generally considered to have particular disabilities or to be at high risk in traditional school programs. Such schools are not therapy schools or treatment programs. They are instead schools that value the quirks and unusual abilities that may be bothersome elsewhere; or they may be schools that have learned how to adapt to behaviors considered problematic elsewhere. A very bright, highly focused child might receive a diagnosis such as Asperger's syndrome or nonverbal learning disabilities in a large school with a stressful social environment, but that same student might thrive in a small, friendly, scholastically oriented school where it is easy to become acquainted with everyone and where intellectual pursuits are valued more than athletic or social accomplishments. In transferring to such a school, an

isolated and unhappy student might suddenly find himself happily in the "mainstream" of students who share similar interests and temperaments. In the same way, some schools, rather than being upset by "ADHD behavior" may genuinely like and successfully adapt to the high energy and impulsive friendliness that characterizes many children diagnosed with ADHD.

A search to find just the right boarding school takes time and patience. Internet and print directories are a good place to start for an introduction to many schools. Hiring an independent educational consultant can help by giving parents the guidance and advice of a professional who is familiar with many schools and has experience matching students and schools. Visiting schools before making a choice is essential. Asking admissions directors for advice about their own and other schools can be of additional help. The goal is to find a school that not only seems right in its descriptions but also has the right "feel," where the student, the parents, and the school personnel all seem to understand each other and believe they will like working together.

I have now watched more than a generation of young students discover themselves, grow, and mature during their boarding school years. The adventures and experiences have been different for different students; but over and over former students have come back after many years to tell me how important their school years were for them and how much of what they became as adults started to grow while they were away at school. Most of those students, even the ones who had difficulties in their younger years, would have become fine adults whether or not they attended a boarding school, but something very special happened to them while they were away at school, and that "something" will always be a very significant part of them.

Boarding school: a school away from home; a place to live while learning; a place to grow into the person one always wanted to be. It is an option that I hope parents will continue to offer their sons and daughters.

