

# SELECTING A SCHOOL

Choosing a school for your child in Australia can be tricky as there are so many to choose from, *writes Karen Bleakley*





Your primary school child might flourish in a structured play environment



Consider how your child's reading will be supported at the school

## 21 THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN CHOOSING A SCHOOL

- Does the school have air conditioning in the classrooms?
- Does every classroom have a fridge for packed lunches to keep them cool?
- What are the school fees and what payment plans are available?
- What sibling discounts are available?
- What activities are included or cost extra – such as swimming lessons, school trips and music lessons?
- What activities are available outside school hours?
- Does it feel like the school has a strong sense of community?
- Is there a clear path from kindy, to primary to high school and are all campuses nearby?
- If your kids are in primary school, what is the teaching style? Is it focused on free play or is it more structured?
- How big are class sizes?
- Do classes have a full-time teaching assistant?
- What is the school's policy on bullying?
- How do you feel about religious schools?
- What are the facilities like?
- What learning opportunities are available as your children get older?
- How many children go on to university from the school?
- How in-depth will the religious teachings be?
- Is there provision for before and after school care and vacation care? Is this flexible and how much does this cost?
- What does the school do to support the local community?
- What charity work is the school involved in around the world and how can kids participate in this?
- What is traffic like around the school? Is there a suburb nearby where you'd like to live?

**W**e moved to Queensland just before our four-year-old twins were due to start school. Back in the UK, we didn't have a choice when it came to education. Private schools were out of our reach, and our local primary couldn't even serve all of the children in the catchment.

Our plan was to view the local state schools after narrowing down the suburbs we liked. There were two things we didn't think about private schools before we arrived in Australia.

The first was cost – we were moving without jobs and didn't want to take on any big commitments until we had work. The second was that we aren't particularly religious. Most private schools in Australia are faith schools (there are independent schools but these are more expensive) so

we assumed that would stop us from applying to these.

### MAKING DECISIONS

Just after we landed, we started chatting to real estate agents, to parents in the parks and to friends of friends. Being here and talking to people with experience of the system really helped us work out what we wanted from a school.

So many people recommended the local private schools, so we looked into the fees and realised that they were more affordable than we thought.

We decided to view the local state school and two private schools. It was a great feeling to know we could choose the school that suited our family the best.

Although we liked the state school, it was a private school that won for us in the end. We hadn't expected to find a school

we loved so much, but we felt it was worth the investment for so many reasons. These are just a few of them..

- It has a day-care, kindy, primary and high school on the same site. This means pick-ups and drop-offs will always be easy, and after such a big move our kids never need to change schools again.

- The classrooms are air conditioned. We felt if we couldn't concentrate in 35-degree temperatures, how could we expect them to?

- They have an aviation programme and there is even an option to do pilot lessons as they get older.

- There's a school coffee shop where pupils are taught catering and service skills in a full-sized catering kitchen (and where parents go to meet up and eat freshly baked cakes after drop-off!).

- They have a huge theatre and the pupils

are taught practical skills like lighting and staging. It also provides a great gathering place for the whole school to get together for assemblies and school productions.

- The kids do two-weeks of intensive swimming lessons each year, which is included in the school fees.

- The high school kids read with the preppies which helps make the large school feel like a community as everyone knows one another.

- Preppies have a structured play environment which one of our boys really needed (he always found free creative play without direction too overwhelming).

- Every year they put on a big community fete and a Christmas event with fairground rides and fireworks. At the events, the head teacher works on the coffee stand and everyone mucks in and volunteers.

- The school strives to raise money for good causes and there are plenty of opportunities for pupils to go overseas to do charity work. It sets such a good example to the kids that their actions can be powerful enough to change the world.

Our school feels like more than a school; it's like an old-fashioned community and I just love it.

If you're moving to Australia, here are a few things to consider when making your decision about schools...

### RELIGION

There are independent schools in Australia, but most private schools are religion-based. You don't need to be the religion of the school to send your children to them though – you just need to be comfortable with the religious teachings.

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Conduct a research visit during school hours to see classes taking place

## CATCHMENT AREA

Private schools generally accept you wherever you live, if they have places available. Popular schools can get booked up early, so research the area you're moving to and find out the demand.

## ENTRY

Private schools usually require you to have an 'interview' before accepting you. This is where you visit the school with your children and chat to the staff. Don't panic too much about this – our five-year-old twins were terrors during our interview! They hid under the desks and didn't want to answer questions but we still got in. It was really just a chance to meet us rather than to test the kids.

## FEES

Private school fees can be paid in a lump sum at the start of the year or on a payment plan to spread the cost (we pay

our school fees every two weeks to keep them manageable), and there is a sibling discount to make fees more affordable for larger families. The fees can include extras like swimming lessons and excursions, which makes it easier to budget as you know your outgoings each month. Some schools charge additional fees for music lessons and other activities though so do find out what is and isn't included.

## VIEWING

When you go to view the schools, make sure you visit during school hours as it's

really helpful to see classes taking place, and to see how the kids react to the teacher who is showing you around.

## DECISIONS, DECISIONS

If you're starting to think about schools in Australia, try to be open-minded about your options. Do your research, speak to as many local people as possible and go and view the schools for yourself as soon as you land. Online they all sound amazing, but nothing beats walking around it for yourself – only then will you know whether it's the one. 🇦🇺



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