

GLAD YOU ASKED

10 QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK WHEN CHOOSING A PRIVATE SCHOOL

Choosing the right school for your child is one of the most important decisions you will make for your family. If that choice includes private education it could be one of the most expensive decisions. Other than cost, what other considerations are there? Here are ten questions you should ask:

1. CURRICULUM: DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE A COHERENT CURRICULUM?

Creating a K-12 curriculum is a large and complicated undertaking. In school communities there are always personal and professional pressures to include “x” or not include “y.” A school’s curriculum should have clear ends in mind, and it should not be susceptible to sudden or drastic modifications of a fundamental nature. Schools, both public and private, are too often prone to experiment with educational fads, or they are subject to other pressures which, if not carefully scrutinized, result in an eclectic curriculum that does not cohere.

Our answer: New Covenant’s curriculum was developed within the framework of the classical tradition, field tested with students for hundreds of years. The broad modalities of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric provide the basic road map, guiding us when as we work with contemporary curricular products. The pedagogy and content objectives are substantially settled, so while we re-examine our plans and resources for teaching on a regular basis, we focus our self-study on determining whether the materials we are using are still the best suited to help us meet our goals with each student. Thus, while Shurley Grammar in grades 1-4 is not in itself “classical,” the content it includes and teaching methods it employs are consistent with a commitment to learning English grammar.

2. FACULTY: WHAT IS THE TEACHER RETENTION RATE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN?

Continuity with teachers is crucial. It takes time for teachers to assimilate into the culture of a school. If

there is high turnover among teachers, it could be a warning sign that something in the school culture has gone wrong.

Our answer: New Covenant searches carefully to find teachers who are not only qualified, but exceptional in their fields of expertise, their willingness to craft their teaching skills to serve students ever more effectively, and their passion for living out genuine faith in their classrooms and beyond. We are proactive and invest significant funds in professional development to nurture, train and retain teachers. We work hard to secure grants to supplement what is budgeted each year. Recent surveys of our faculty, staff, and board suggest that the executive leadership of the school is highly respected and trusted, and faculty members overwhelming report that they would recommend New Covenant as a great place to work. Consequently, our turnover rate is very low. Every member of the faculty leadership team has been at New Covenant for 15-20 years.

3. COMMUNITY: DOES THE SCHOOL HOLD THE VALUES OF MY FAMILY?

Raising godly children is difficult, and Christian parents rightly protect their children from negative influences. Important as that is, it is essential that children also be disciplined in the positive, what we would call virtue. Children and young people need to see other adults in their lives affirming the same values set before them at home.

Our answer: New Covenant begins with the Headmaster’s commitment to know every child by name. Teachers most certainly know each of their children and come to understand their unique differences. While the school is an academic institution, we are a Christian community with expectations, values and habits faithful to Scripture. The word “disciple” is directly related to “discipline,” which does not imply merely negative consequences for bad behavior. It speaks of routines that form

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habits of the heart and teaches students what to love and emulate in their own lives.

4. GUIDANCE: WHAT IS THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY OF NEXT LEVEL PLACEMENT? Schools exist to prepare young people for the future. While a curriculum is guided by idealistic goals, the practical reality is that students must be prepared for the next season of life. This may include college, university, vocational, or other training.

Our answer: New Covenant provides a broad education that offers a variety of experiences across the disciplines; thus, a student who graduates from New Covenant most likely has been afforded exposure to interests that might not have been discovered in a narrower curriculum. This leads to potentially greater opportunities at next level placement. Our graduates are consistently placed in all Virginia Universities, both public and private, and over one hundred others nationally. Many graduates are presented with several colleges or university acceptances from which to choose. On the other hand, not every student chooses to attend college, nor should they necessarily. Every student, whatever their ultimate path, has been exhorted to see beyond college. Our emphasis is not only how to make a living, but how to live.

5. GOVERNANCE: IS THE SCHOOL GOVERNED BY A STRATEGIC BOARD?

Strategic board governance is critical to the long-term success of a school. The board's task is to ensure the financial health of the school and to keep it true to its mission. Boards that become entangled in the day-to-day operations of the school will neglect their first duty.

Our answer: New Covenant is governed by a board of directors that has embraced the task to ensure the viability of the school's mission, not only for the current students, but also for the current students' children and future generations. The board is profiled with each seat occupied by a member who brings a specific background or skill set to the table. It concerns itself with strategic action and does not deal with day-to-day issues. It works with a clear

governance model developed by a long association with Independent School Management (ISM) with which the board consults at least once every three years.

6. DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE A CREDIBLE SAFETY PLAN?

When you drop your child at school each day, you need to know that the school has done its due diligence to ensure that every student is safe. While horrific events appear all too often in the news, the fact is that there are many more scenarios in which children are likely to be at risk.

Our answer: New Covenant has a detailed safety plan developed with the Lynchburg Police Department and first responders. The plan is reviewed and updated regularly so that we are in compliance with best practices for serious safety threats. The routine safety protocols, however, are equally important. On these faculty and staff are engaged with the lunch room staff, the school nurses, the athletic director and trainers. Ensuring day-to-day safety on a large campus demands our attention and results in ongoing training in staff and faculty meetings.

7. ACADEMIC STANDARDS: DOES THE SCHOOL DEMONSTRATE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

Nearly every school measures the academic achievement of students through testing. In Virginia public schools, this comes in the form of SOL standards and testing each spring. Private schools use a variety of instruments – and sometimes none at all. You should know what test(s) the school is using, what those tests measure, and how the results are used.

Our answer: New Covenant is a member of the Educational Records Bureau (ERB). While many private schools use the well-known Iowa, Stanford, or California achievement tests, we found that these instruments did not measure our students very well. New Covenant students consistently out scored them. Many years ago we began using the CTP-5, developed by and for independent schools that look like New Covenant academically. The CTP-5 is proctored each

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January in grades 2-9 and the results are published directly to you. The results are studied by our faculty and used to refine curriculum and instruction. The CTP-5 also allows us to compare ourselves to larger groups – to independent schools, and to other classical, Christian schools. For grades 10-12 we also use the PSAT and the SAT or the ACT. We also use the Classical Learning Test (CLT) which is increasingly accepted by leading colleges and universities in lieu of the SAT.

8. PROFESSIONAL STAFF: HOW ARE MEMBERS OF FACULTY AND STAFF COMPENSATED?

Private schools struggle in this area. It is very common, particularly in church-run Christian schools, to hire personnel who approach their work as a “ministry.” Viewed one way this can be seen as a noble sacrifice. Viewed another way this means that schools are not incentivized to increase pay, and are less likely to attract quality teaching professionals over time. If parents don’t fully understand this, they may be happy with the low tuition rates this practice can yield, but less satisfied with the overall quality of education in the long run.

Our answer: In the early 2000’s New Covenant adopted the 80% compensation rule. This means that faculty members could not be paid less than 80% of their public school counterparts with equity based on education and experience. In practice our average faculty salary is higher than this. All faculty members hold degrees in their teaching fields and more than 60% of them hold master’s degrees. Since schools are labor intensive, most of the operating budget is dedicated to faculty and staff. New Covenant’s budget is no different with about 85% of the operating budget designated for salaries.

9. ENRICHMENT: HOW DOES THE SCHOOL PROVIDE A RICH MENU OF OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE OF THE CURRICULUM?

Smaller schools are challenged to provide opportunities in the arts, athletics or even field trips. Large schools often face the difficulty of handling the sheer numbers of students that would join a given activity, and thus forgo or restrict athletics, student travel, music and the arts to fewer students.

Our answer: Arts, culture and athletics are central to the mission of classical, Christian education, and we encourage students to live fully and well. Consider the fact our entire sixth grade spends a day and a night in Colonial Williamsburg, every high school student travels to Washington, DC (EVERY YEAR) for a different itinerary. Every student has the opportunity to participate in band, orchestra, choir and art. These are not options; they are requirements that set New Covenant apart. We have invested in our facilities and in highly skilled and qualified faculty in physical education, studio art, drama and music, and we provide a carefully structured schedule to allow students to participate in each of these arenas. Students are not tracked as “sports kids” or “band kids,” but are required to pursue a broad array of opportunities.

10. COST: IS THE SCHOOL TRANSPARENT IN ITS TUITION STRUCTURE? Private schools are expensive. Making a commitment to a private education requires economic planning and financial choices. Some schools publish base tuition, but don’t necessarily reveal the added fees that drive the cost up, sometimes as much as 10% higher. Base tuition can jump by hundreds of dollars when you add activity fees, sports fees, or tech fees, etc. When you compare costs of two or more schools, you should make sure that hidden fees such as field trips are accounted for. If you compare school pricing this way, you can be sure you are comparing “apples-to-apples,” which then allows you to make a solid value judgment.

Our answer: New Covenant is not the cheapest school in the area; nor is it the most expensive. However, the published tuition is the rate; there is nothing hidden. The only added cost is a published student activity fee in middle school and up that covers field trips and other activities (these outings play a role in the curriculum). In higher grades there are user fees associated with labs and special tests. Of course, meal plan, uniforms, and after school care are costs that vary from family to family. We consciously avoid surprising parents with unpublished fees, or nickeling and diming parents for unpublished events.