



PASADENA EDUCATION NETWORK

Choosing a Middle School for Your Child

Just like when you were selecting an elementary school for your child, some people will tell you that you shouldn't send your children to PUSD secondary schools. But they probably haven't been on a school campus in years, and they aren't aware of all the options that are now being offered. In reality, many families are choosing PUSD middle and high schools because of the innovative programs and excellent student outcomes. PUSD graduates are attending some of the country's most prestigious colleges and universities, including Harvard, Brown, Yale, UCLA, Berkeley, and more ([see the full list here.](#))

What's important to you?

Before you start to look at your options, think about what's important to you. What qualities do you value in your child's elementary school? A school that prepares 11-13 year olds for their eventual transition to high school shouldn't look or feel like an elementary school, but thinking about what you value – whether it's a responsive administrator or the rapport the teachers have with their students or specific enrichment opportunities – will help you focus on what to look for at a new school.

What are your absolute requirements, and what other features would be desirable? What does your student expect or want to do while in middle school? Electives and extra-curricular activities give middle school students a chance to try new things and to find peers who share their interests, so if your child has a particular interest (theater, sports, robotics, foreign language, etc.), you'll want to identify schools where they can try out that activity as well as be exposed to other options.

When you have an idea of what's important to your family, then identify your neighborhood middle school, review the PEN Fact Sheets, and develop a list of schools you want to visit.

Things to Look for During Your Visit

(Adapted from a document developed by the Pittsburgh Council on Public Education)

Physical Environment

The school campus is clean and is reasonably quiet while students are in class. Display cases, hallway walls, and the main office area are used to display student work, or show signs of student activity (e.g., Associated Student Body campaign or club activity posters). The library is accessible to students on a regular basis, and there are comfortable places for students to read as well as work.

Classrooms are clean and reflect what is being taught there. Keep in mind that middle school teachers may have 4-6 different groups of students rotating through their classroom in the course of a day, so classrooms are less likely to reflect a single community of students the way elementary classrooms do. Nevertheless,

there should be examples of student work on display, along with other material (visual aids, books, maps, computers, etc.) relevant to the subject.

Questions you may want to ask:

- Do 6th graders stay in a single classroom all day, or do they change classes? If they change classrooms, how far do they have to go, and are they mingling with older students during passing period?
- Do the students use lockers?
- Where do students eat?
- Do students change for PE? What are the facilities like?
- What facilities/equipment are available for science labs, or art? How regularly are these used?

Teaching

Teachers consistently convey high expectations for all students.

- State standards for the lesson being taught are clearly posted in the classroom.
- All students are encouraged to take part in classroom discussion.
- Teachers appear to be engaged by their students and the subject they are teaching.

Teachers support student learning by drawing connections to what they already know.

- Teachers link new information to ideas previously discussed.
- Students are encouraged to connect what they are learning with the world outside of school: local, national, or global events, personal experiences, possible careers.
- Examples illustrating such connections are on display in the classroom: newspaper clippings, student projects, career-related posters, etc.

Teachers ask students to think, not just to memorize facts.

- Students are asked to discuss, debate, or defend their ideas, and problem-solving strategies.
- Teachers pose questions that require thoughtful answers or extend the implications of the concept being discussed.
- Classroom and homework assignments involve more than one activity and some higher-level thinking.

Teachers offer many ways for each student to learn and to show what they've learned.

- Teacher instructs the whole group, but also works with smaller groups and may work with individual students as needed.
- At times during the day, students work on differentiated tasks or with materials matched to their individual needs and interests.
- During whole-group lessons, teacher looks for confirmation that directions and concepts are getting across, and can re-state directions and ideas in different terms as needed.
- Students have opportunities to be active and creative in learning and demonstrating their understanding: drawing, charting, building, performing, experimenting, etc.

Teachers promote the idea that students learn from one another.

- Students have opportunities to work in pairs or teams: e.g., peer review of written work, small group discussion, group problem-solving, lab teams, group project work.
- Students are encouraged to build on or respond to what their classmates have said in class discussion, not just to respond to the teacher.

Learning

Learning is the main activity in the classroom.

- Minimal time is being spent on busywork, discipline, interruptions.
- Teachers manage their classrooms without obvious effort.

Students understand what they are expected to learn and how to learn.

- Broad learning goals and specific lesson objectives are clearly posted and discussed/referenced
- Scoring guides (rubrics) are available to help students evaluate and improve their own work. Could include posted examples of student writing, math assignments that illustrate different strategies for solving problems and different ways to show the solution (graphs, charts, numeric and verbal answers).
- Students have different information resources readily accessible: books, computers, other students, posted lists of strategies, charts, etc.

Students demonstrate engagement in the learning process.

- All students participate in class discussions, with the teacher actively working to elicit and support the participation of less outgoing students.
- Students refer to sources to back up their statements.
- Students are able to suggest alternatives and argue for a point of view.
- Students are able to identify important ideas and summarize what they have read.

Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

- Students are expected to maintain portfolios, work folders, or notebooks that are readily accessible for them to review.
- Students track their assignments, deadlines, and test dates.
- In student-led parent conferences, students are able to talk about their class and homework assignments and tests in terms of the rubrics or scoring guides set forth for evaluating their work.
- Students set goals for themselves, based on an understanding of the standards to be met, and can articulate any specific areas where they need to improve.

Social Environment

School leadership sets clear expectations for behavior and community values.

- The values of the learning community are clearly and consistently articulated.
- Adults on campus (teachers, administrators, staff, volunteers) model respect for others.
- Positive behavior is acknowledged and rewarded.
- Bullying is not tolerated; rules and policies are clear, fair, and consistently enforced.

Students are treated as individuals.

- Students have opportunities to make choices: electives, different options for demonstrating their learning, clubs/extracurricular activities.
- Teachers and the school community recognize and celebrate individual as well as group accomplishments.
- Teachers know their students.
- Each student has at least one adult on campus that s/he can talk to when s/he has a problem or concern.
- Clubs and extra-curricular activities available to all students (e.g., during lunchtime or immediately after school) give students an opportunity to “find their niche” and get involved in something that interests them.

Parents and the wider community are encouraged to take part in supporting student success.

- Parents are given clear guidelines as to how and with whom to communicate when they have a question or a problem regarding their student.
- The school communicates its values and expectations to parents, and lets parents know what they can do to reinforce those expectations and support their child’s learning.
- Parents support the school through the PTA and by taking an active part in School Site Council, and other advisory groups (ELAC, African-American Parent Council, etc.)
- Teachers are encouraged to make “good news” calls, and return voice mail or email messages within 24 hours.
- Administrators reach out to neighboring businesses, faith groups, or residential associations and encourage them to work with the school to keep students safe and support their learning.

After selecting the schools that are best for your child and your family, it’s time to enroll either at your assigned school of residence or participate in the Open Enrollment school choice lottery. If want to attend your neighborhood school, then you will [register online](#) and upload the required documents on the PUSD website. Schools typically start registering new students in March for the following school year. If you prefer to enroll in a school other than your assigned school, you’ll wait to register until after you get your Open Enrollment placement.

To find out more about selecting schools or to attend one of our programs, visit www.penfamilies.org. To receive PEN’s weekly e-newsletter, and for the most up-to-date information about tours, informational programs, and enrollment dates and deadlines, [sign up for a free PEN membership](#).