

Mason Associates Educational Consultants

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HOW TO CHOOSE A TRADITIONAL BOARDING SCHOOL

First, there are two basic types of boarding schools – traditional and therapeutic. Traditional boarding schools run on a typical school-year basis: start in the Fall; take the usual holiday and semester breaks during the school year; finish in the Spring; take the summer off; resume in the Fall. Traditional schools also have a “rhythm” in their admissions process: visit in the Fall; apply in January; notification in March; parent/student decision by mid-April; fill from the wait list or late applications. Most traditional boarding schools also admit day students.

Therapeutic schools, on the other hand, run on a 24/7, year ‘round basis. Typically, holidays and vacations are a function of where the student is in the treatment process, and there are no day students. Admission is on a rolling basis.

Second, finding the “right” traditional boarding school is all about finding the best “fit” for each student. This is especially true as the desirability of attracting students from traditional boarding schools diminishes in the admissions offices of the most competitive colleges. The parent who thinks admission to a prestigious school is a ticket to an elite college should rethink their reasons for sending junior away.

The “right” school certainly will stretch every child in new and challenging ways; this probably couldn’t have happened in his or her old school, often because the structure of extracurricular scheduling conflicts. For most parents, their child’s individual growth process alone is worth the price. You must begin with an honest inventory of your student’s strengths and needs. Don’t try to work backward from a particular school’s college placement history. If you do you may find yourself with no place to go in the Spring of Senior year.

Make a list of the things you want in a boarding school; let your child make the same list of her/his interests: academic rigor, type and quality of extracurricular activities, sports, location, spiritual emphasis, size, travel/study options, academic supports, etc. Your lists will differ. Talk to your child about these differences. Remember you all will change as you work through the select, visit, interview, and applications processes.

Meet with your student’s teachers to discuss what you are planning. Some will think it’s great, others won’t. Try to understand what they are telling you; don’t forget they will be the ones writing letters of recommendation to the schools.

If your child is a thespian, musician, athlete, linguist, debater or whatever, try to learn whether the schools in which you are interested are going to be good matches for his or her talents and skills. Call current parents, go watch a game or a play, ask where the graduates of the school have furthered their passion in college. When you visit the schools, make sure the admissions Tour Director matches your

child with a student who shares their interests or curiosities. Most will try, but things sometimes go awry. Go back for another visit if you need to.

Third, it's easier to gain admission to the ninth or tenth grade than to the eleventh; most traditional boarding schools don't accept one-year seniors. Also, most boarding schools cannot operate on a "needs-blind" tuition basis. Some schools can admit new students at the "seams" – at mid-year or at the Fall semester break. Most schools do not accept new students after the Spring break.

Many (but not all) traditional boarding schools also offer a post-graduate (PG) year. Mason Associates counsel our post-graduate (PG) parents that there are three broad categories of candidates for the PG. If your child doesn't fit into one or more, perhaps you should reconsider the PG option.

- students who are chronologically or socially young: they're just not ready to meet the social and emotional demands of being away at college. An additional year of maturation away from home may make all the difference as they prepare to move on to college.
- athletes, especially those playing sports where another year of physical growth and development, higher-level coaching and competition, and more regional exposure to talent scouts will make them more attractive to college recruiters and coaches.
- the "fillers" – students who need a few more AP courses, a bump in their SAT/ACT scores, another year of language, etc., to qualify for a more competitive group of colleges than they could from the home high school.

Fourth, most boarding schools run a "wait list" after their regular admissions cycle is complete in April. It's important for parents to understand that the "list" is not really a list at all, but rather a "pool" from which admissions officers finish filling their classes, or, if they experience "melt" during the summer, to fill the suddenly-open bed. As such, the pool is always being added to; you may apply to a boarding school at any time of year, even after the traditional cycle is done. If your child is appropriate and there's a bed, the school will accept her or him. Mason Associates have had kids accepted after Labor Day.

Finally, never visit more than two schools per day. Prepare rigorously for each visit: pore over the view-books, revisit the websites, write down some questions for the interview on a 4" x 6" card. Use the time you're on premises well: talk to students, poke in nooks and crannies, wander around after the formal tour and interview is over. As you are leaving the campus, turn your question card over and write your most vivid impressions. You will find this brings the school back out of your mental hard drive when you're writing applications and, if you're admitted, to deciding which schools to revisit.

Good luck!

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