

Outsmarting the system: New York

Live in or around NYC? We did the homework to help parents make informed choices about the area's schools.

By GreatSchools Staff

When Laura Brown's daughter was 4, she and her husband went to check out their neighborhood school on the upper West Side of New York. They had high hopes for the school, but they were disappointed. The school's test scores were low and it was overcrowded. The kindergarteners had to take turns going out for recess because they couldn't all fit on the playground at the same time. The other half sat in the auditorium watching cartoons.

"As parents we were torn," Brown said. "We wanted the best situation for our daughter but we felt guilty for leaving behind a bad school. But it comes down to doing what's best for your child."

The Browns knew that the school would not work for their daughter, so they set out to navigate the complex system of New York's public schools. With more than 1.1 million students, 1700 schools, and 80,000 teachers, New York has the largest school system in the country. Finding the right school can be a daunting task and will probably mean a bit of homework for the parents.

Liz Perelstein, president of [School Choice International](#), helps families who have kids starting in New York's schools, whether through relocation or starting in kindergarten. The fact that NY has lots of options when it comes to school creates challenges as well as opportunities for parents, she says.

"Choice is great, but it makes picking the right [school] that much more complicated," she said, with a laugh.

Need help beating the system? Read our suggestions for navigating the area's often-complex rules and finding the best school for your child.

Get the 311

One of the first steps is to call 311 to find out what your zoned school is. Perelstein warns not to take a fellow parent's word for what school your child is zoned for, because it changes often. Also if your zoned school is full, you will get sent somewhere else. So start by calling 311.

Prepare the paperwork

When you register your child, you have to bring a bunch of paperwork directly to the school you are registering for. Make sure you have everything before you head out to the school:

- Your child's birth certificate or passport
- Immunization records
- Proof of residence (check the [website](#) for a full list of acceptable documents)
- If your child is in special education, bring her Individual Education Program (IEP) and/or 504 Accommodation Plan.

Child first

Most elementary school children do attend their neighborhood school, but if you are not happy with your zoned school, you have other options including specialty programs, and un-zoned schools (these accept children by special application or lottery. They are also referred to as option, choice, or magnet schools.)

While you may be drawn to schools that have a good reputation, parents should consider their child before the school, says Perelstein. Think about how your child learns best, if she has particular talents or weaknesses and which schools will offer the best for her. Think about other situations where your child has thrived. How does she do socially? Does she need special help academically? Does she get most excited about math, but not reading? Does she love big groups or small intimate settings?

Talking to other parents about schools in the system will give you a piece of the puzzle, but they may not provide the information you need for your child.

Do your homework

The first stop in narrowing your choices is GreatSchools.org's [New York page](#). From there you can browse schools in your neighborhood and begin setting up a "search and compare" list, including private schools and preschools. You can not only see test scores but read the comments of other parents. The [NYC school website](#) provides another source of indispensable information. The site lets you enter your address to find out what school you're zoned for and links you directly to the school's site so you can look at all their stats, including NCLB report cards, class size, special education reports, demographics, attendance rates, and the school's budget.

The site also has a section called "Choosing a school" that has a school search tool and information on all of the city's options, including charters, gifted and talented schools, and English language learning schools.

[InsideSchools.org](#), an independent non-profit that contains loads of information on NYC schools, has a search tool

that includes all the schools, including charters, magnets, dual language programs, and gifted and talented programs.

Brown started a folder for each school she was considering. She pored over all the stats for each school, and wrote down the information so that she could easily compare her choices. She also used the folder to keep track of the various deadlines for each school's application process.

Visit the school

Brown visited all the schools that she was considering for her daughter, a practice that Perelstein recommends. Each school has a parent coordinator on site who is a great resource for prospective parents. Most schools will schedule an open house and visiting days for parents. Visits will give you a good insight into the school's philosophy, teaching style and mission, but they won't give you the full picture.

Perelstein advises parents to drop in at the school during drop off or pick up, or during the children's recess time. Watch how the teachers interact with the kids, notice if the principal greets the children at drop off, check out the other parents, take note of how many adults are on the playground. In general, the more adults present – be they administrative staff, teachers or parents – the better.

Citywide specialty schools

New York's huge public school system offers many choices and many specialty schools. Is your child into math? There's a school for that! Dance, music, languages? There are schools for those, too.

Some examples of specialty schools are:

- [Ballet Tech/NYC Public School for Dance](#) (grades 4-8): a collaboration between Ballet Tech and the city Department of Education that takes 150 students.
- [PS 150 Tribeca Learning Center](#) : a small school in downtown Manhattan. Admission is through lottery, with priority going to students with siblings at the school and who live in the district. The remaining seats are by lottery.
- [New Explorations Into Science, Technology, and Math](#): a K-12 city-wide program for gifted and talented students. Admission is based on testing.

Check out each of the schools you're interested in and keep track of their admissions policies and deadlines. As Brown discovered, no two are alike.

Transfers

If your child's school does not seem the right fit once you're in, transferring out is possible, but not easy. If your child is in a school that is deemed a failing school by No Child Left Behind standards you will receive notice from the school department with information on how to transfer your child to another school.

The Department of Education lists all of the schools designated as "in need of improvement" at its [web site](#).

Even if your school is not designated as failing, you may request a transfer. The first step is to fill out a variance form, which you can pick up from your [local enrollment office](#). You state in the form the reason for the transfer (such as medical, safety, or hardship) and include all the documentation.

Explore the alternatives

Aside from the specialty schools that may focus on a specific subject, there are other options as well, including charters schools and private schools.

Charter schools

Public charter schools are another choice for parents looking for something outside of their zoned school. Charters are run independently of the local district and their admission is through lottery (though students who live within the charter school's district will have priority). Currently there are 125 charters in New York, with new ones opening up each year.

Although all charter schools sound good from the outside, the facts are that many charter schools do not beat the performance of comparable public schools. On the other hand, there are charter schools which do an exceptional job. How do you find the diamonds among the rubble? [The New York City Center for Charter School Excellence](#) lists math and English test data for charter schools, along with a detailed analysis and a grade-by-grade comparison of test scores of charter and neighborhood schools. Test scores should not be the litmus test for quality but they can give a parent clues as to which schools are worth visiting.

Private schools

For parents willing to spend more (or for those able to obtain financial aid), private schools can offer a whole slew of new options. For a list of private schools in New York, check out our listings, which include [495 private and parochial schools](#).