

# Factors Affecting School Choice

ISCA Research Report  
2008



Independent Schools  
Council of Australia

## About independent schools

Australia's 1,100 independent schools enrol some 511,000 students, accounting for nearly 15 per cent of total Australian school enrolments.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education, while others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other high risk factors.

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are registered with the relevant state or territory education authority.

For more information about independent schools visit ISCA's website at [www.isca.edu.au](http://www.isca.edu.au).

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# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. The educational outcomes parents want for their children

Parents want different outcomes for their children depending on their level of schooling.

- Parents identified learning of essential reading, writing and numeric skills as the most significant outcome from their children's independent primary schooling
- For secondary schooling, parents identified the most significant outcomes as their children being able to think for themselves and gain confidence/high self-esteem
- Parents also want their children to be prepared for employment as a significant longer term educational outcome.

## 2. What parents say are the best things about independent schools

The top three positive aspects of independent schools identified by parents were:

- good teachers
- disciplined environment
- good facilities.

However, parents also acknowledged their concerns with the costs associated with educating their children in an independent school.

## 3. Why parents would recommend independent schools to friends and family

An overwhelming majority of parents indicated that they would recommend independent schools to their friends and family. The most significant reason cited was because of good teachers.

## 4. The most important reasons why parents choose independent schools

Parents identified the following as significant factors in their decision to choose an independent school:

- educational excellence
- good teachers
- a supportive caring environment
- good facilities.

## 5. What children want from an independent school

Parents indicated that what their children want most in their schooling are good teachers.

# ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

## 1. Background

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) commissioned research to explore the factors that affect school choice amongst parents of children attending independent schools. The research was undertaken in 2007 and examined:

- The educational outcomes parents desire from independent schools
- The advantageous and disadvantageous aspects of independent schools
- Whether parents would recommend independent schools to friends and family
- The factors in choosing an independent school
- What children want from an independent school.

## 2. Research methodology

The research has relied on qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

The research initially employed qualitative research methods to determine in-depth perceptions of why parents choose independent schools, and what they are looking for from a school for their children. The primary purposes of the qualitative research were to inform the development of the quantitative questionnaire and to provide context and depth to the quantitative findings. A questionnaire in the form of an online survey of 401 parents of children enrolled in independent schools was used in the research.

The quantitative data was weighted to ensure that the findings are representative of the population by State, age and gender.

## 3. Framework of analysis

The survey data identified and ranked the factors that affect school choice. This report categorised the various factors into four groups:

- The *most significant* are factors that parents clearly identify as the most important to them
- *Frequently cited* are factors that while not clearly identifiable as significant, are nevertheless important to parents
- *Commonly cited* are factors that are not ranked highly, but are interpreted as factors for specific sections of the parental population
- *Rarely cited* are the factors that parents indicated the least number of times as having influenced their schooling decision.

The categorisation of factors is consistent with the decision making process being studied, given that parents use more than just one factor in determining their choice of school. Placing factors into broad categories recognises that parents prioritise their reasons for choosing an independent school, but their ranking of these reasons is a matter of individual choice.

The responses to each question included in the study demonstrate that parents determine school choice according to a variety of factors and place different importance on each factor according to their own situation.

In essence this research confirmed that parents identify a variety of factors as reasons for their decision in choosing an independent school education for their children.

# RESEARCH ANALYSIS

ISCA's research explored what parents want from, and the factors that affect their choice in sending their children to an independent school. The survey design targeted individual aspects of parental decision making to identify the factors which influenced their schooling decisions. It explored parental attitudes concerning what they perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of independent schools, the reasons behind their choice of school, why they would or would not recommend independent schools and what they think their children want from an independent school.

## A well-rounded education

The research showed that parents want their children to have a well rounded education from independent schools with a strong emphasis on learning life skills. This is seen in parental wants such as *to be able to think for themselves* and *to gain confidence* being placed in either the most significant or frequently cited categories in response to questions regarding primary and secondary school and longer term educational outcomes.

While parents' specific wants change according to each stage of their children's schooling, parents placed more weight on their children developing skills that would equip them for the next stage of their education (and life). The most significantly cited factors parents wanted from independent primary and second schools and longer term educational outcomes were:

- The primary school significant outcome was *to learn essential reading, writing and numeracy skills*, which would provide their children with a sound educational foundation
- The secondary school significant outcomes were for children *to be able to think for themselves* and *gain confidence/high self-esteem* which are important interpersonal skills for post high-school years
- The longer term significant outcomes were for children to be able *to think for themselves* and *be prepared for employment*, which are highly important skills for children to interact with society as an adult.

The wide variety of outcomes identified by the results of the educational outcomes section suggest that parents have a range of priorities that differ according to individual circumstances. Parents also have an "eye to the future", by wanting their children to develop skills that equip them to meet future challenges at later stages of their development.

## What parents want?

- Parents want their children to have a well rounded education with a strong emphasis on learning life skills
- Parents' specific wants change according to each stage of their children's schooling.

## What influences parental school choice?

- "Good teachers" is the resoundingly important factor influencing parents' decision making
- Parents see teachers as pivotal in the development of their children's academic, moral and life skills
- Parents consider a school's wider environment and how it supports their children's education
- Parents expressed concern at the costs associated with sending a child to an independent school – but indicate they see these costs as an investment in the future success and happiness of their children
- Parents indicated a high level of satisfaction suggesting that independent schools are meeting the educational outcomes they are seeking.

## Good teachers

The research also identifies a number of common factors that affect parental school choice. A compilation of the results of the survey sections relating to school recommendation, school advantages, factors in choice and children's wants demonstrates a pattern of factors that parents rely on to inform their schooling decisions. *Good teachers* is the resoundingly important factor influencing parents' decision making, given that it ranks in the most significant category across all four survey sections. This is not surprising considering that many of the educational outcomes identified by parents are delivered by the front line staff at schools.

The nature of the outcomes parents want from schooling also suggests that they want teachers to have a role wider than catering for academic performance needs. Parents see teachers as pivotal to their children's moral development and in providing skills that can be used throughout a child's life. Factors such as the school *teaches/reinforces moral values* and that the *child is treated like an individual* were frequently cited by parents as factors affecting their school choice. Parents see teachers fulfilling the dual role of educator and mentor.

The wider school environment is another important factor to parents, in that a school's staff and the physical environment support their children's education. This is reflected by parental views that

independent schools provide a safe, protective environment for academic and personal development. The importance of a positive school environment is a reoccurring theme with the factors *supportive caring environment, good balance between education and fun, safe environment, smaller class sizes* and *good facilities* being consistently ranked in the most significant or frequently cited category across the survey.

## An investment in the future

The research also showed that tuition fees and the costs associated with sending a child to an independent school are a concern for parents. Cost related issues were significantly cited responses to questions targeting the disadvantages of independent schools, and the reasons for not recommending an independent school. Despite the costs, parents continue to choose to send their children to an independent school, which suggests that they see their decision as an investment in the future success and happiness of their children.

The research also highlights a number of core strengths of the independent sector. There is a very high recommendation rate amongst parents whose children attend independent schools, which is reflective of a high level of satisfaction with the independent sector. The high level of satisfaction also suggests that independent schools are meeting the educational outcomes parents are seeking for their children.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 1. Educational outcomes

Parents were asked to name all the outcomes that they wanted from their child/children’s primary, secondary school education and their child/children’s education in the longer term.

1.1 The most significantly cited educational outcome parents wanted from an independent primary school was for their child/children to *learn essential reading, writing and numeric skills*. Parents frequently cited that they wanted their

child/children to be *able to think for themselves, gain confidence/high self-esteem, learn how to relate to others, learn/reinforce moral values, learn self-discipline/self-control, gain a love of learning/curiosity* and for them *to be happy* as primary school education outcomes.

1.2 The desire for children *to be able to think for themselves and gain confidence/high self-esteem* were the most significantly cited educational outcomes parents wanted from an independent secondary school education. Parents also

Question 1 Educational outcomes from primary school			
<i>What are you looking for from your children’s primary school education?</i>			
Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn essential reading, writing and numeracy skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be able to think for themselves</li> <li>Gain confidence/high self-esteem</li> <li>To learn how to relate to others</li> <li>Learn/reinforce moral values</li> <li>Self-discipline/self-control</li> <li>Gain a love of learning/curiosity</li> <li>For them to be happy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be challenged</li> <li>Learn to explore ideas</li> <li>To learn what their talents are</li> <li>Develop leadership skills</li> <li>Academic achievement/high academic performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pride in their school</li> <li>Prepared for employment</li> <li>Learn about their cultural and religious heritage</li> <li>Multilingual skills</li> </ul>
Question 2 Educational outcomes from secondary school			
<i>What are you looking for from your children’s secondary school education?</i>			
Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be able to think for themselves</li> <li>Gain confidence/high self-esteem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be challenged</li> <li>For them to be happy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic achievement/high academic performance</li> <li>To learn how to relate to others</li> <li>Self-discipline/self-control</li> <li>Prepared for employment</li> <li>To learn what their talents are</li> <li>Learn/reinforce moral values</li> <li>Gain a love of learning/curiosity</li> <li>Learn to explore ideas</li> <li>Learn essential reading, writing and numeracy skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop leadership skills</li> <li>Pride in their school</li> <li>Learn about their cultural and religious heritage</li> <li>Multilingual skills</li> </ul>



frequently cited that they wanted their child/ children to *be challenged* and for them *to be happy* as secondary school educational outcomes.

1.3 The ability for children *to think for themselves* and *to be prepared for employment* were the most significantly cited longer term outcomes parents wanted from an independent school education. This was followed by the frequently cited outcomes of *gaining confidence/ high self-esteem* and *for them to be happy*.

2.1 The most significantly reported advantageous aspects of independent schools were that they employed *good teachers*, they offered a *disciplined environment* and *good facilities*. Parents frequently cited other benefits of independent schools including *educational excellence, a supportive and caring environment, the school teaches/ reinforces moral values, smaller class sizes, a safe environment*, that children were *treated like individuals* and that the school provided a *stable environment*.

## 2. Advantages and disadvantages of independent schools

Parents were asked to identify what they consider to be the advantageous and disadvantageous aspects of independent schools.

<b>Question 3 Educational outcomes longer term</b>			
<i>What are you looking for from your children's education in the longer term?</i>			
<b>Most significant</b>	<b>Frequently cited</b>	<b>Commonly cited</b>	<b>Rarely cited</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be able to think for themselves</li> <li>• To be prepared for employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain confidence/high self-esteem</li> <li>• For them to be happy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn how to relate to others</li> <li>• To be challenged</li> <li>• Self-discipline/self-control</li> <li>• Gain a love of learning/curiosity</li> <li>• Develop leadership skills</li> <li>• To learn what their talents are</li> <li>• Learn to explore ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic achievement/ high academic performance</li> <li>• Learn/reinforce moral values</li> <li>• Learn essential reading, writing and numeracy skills</li> <li>• Pride in their school</li> <li>• Learn about their cultural and religious heritage</li> <li>• Multilingual skills</li> </ul>
<b>Question 4 Advantages of independent schools</b>			
<i>In your opinion, what are the good things about independent schools?</i>			
<b>Most significant</b>	<b>Frequently cited</b>	<b>Commonly cited</b>	<b>Rarely cited</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good teachers</li> <li>• Disciplined environment</li> <li>• Good facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational excellence</li> <li>• Supportive and caring environment</li> <li>• Teaches/reinforces moral values</li> <li>• Smaller class sizes</li> <li>• Safe environment</li> <li>• Child treated like an individual</li> <li>• Stable environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child receives individual attention</li> <li>• School pride</li> <li>• Good principal/school leadership</li> <li>• Wider curriculum/subjects of interest</li> <li>• Extra-curricular activities (eg: sporting, social, camps, etc.)</li> <li>• Choice of educational approach/philosophy</li> <li>• Good balance between education and fun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides networking opportunities that extend beyond the school years</li> <li>• Parental involvement in decision making/direction</li> <li>• Faith-based environment</li> </ul>



### 3. Independent school recommendation

Parents were asked if they would recommend independent schools to their friends and family. They were also asked the reasons for their decision to recommend or not to recommend an independent school education.

3.1 The overwhelming majority of parents surveyed indicated that they *would* recommend an independent school education to their friends and family. Any instances where parents *would not* recommend independent schools or indicated that they *didn't know* if they would recommend an independent school were classified in the rarely cited category.

3.2 The most significant reason given by parents for their recommendation of independent schools was because of *good teachers*. Parents also frequently cited a *supportive and caring environment, good facilities, disciplined environment*, a belief that the school *teaches/reinforces moral values, smaller class sizes, educational excellence* and a *safe environment* as reasons for recommending an independent school.

3.3 The most significant reason given by parents why they would not recommend an independent school education was *school fees*. There were no frequently cited reasons why parents would not recommend an independent school.

Question 5 Disadvantages of independent schools			
<i>In your opinion, what are the not so good things about independent schools?</i>			
Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School fees</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cost of additional/extra activities/items</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not cater to non-academic interests/vocations</li> <li>Rules of conduct too strict</li> <li>Pressure to conform very high</li> <li>Children too protected from the outside world</li> <li>Establishes a sense of elitism in children</li> </ul>
Question 6 Parental recommendation of independent schools			
<i>Would you recommend independent schools to friends and family?</i>			
Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Don't know</li> <li>No</li> </ul>

## 4. Factors in independent school choice

Parents were asked to indicate the reasons why they chose an independent school and the factors that influenced their decision.

4.1 The most significant factors parents considered in choosing to send their child/children to an independent school were because of *good facilities, good teachers* and a *supportive and caring environment*. Parents also frequently cited *educational excellence, smaller class sizes, disciplined environment*, the school *teaches/reinforces moral values, safe environment*, they are *worried about negative influences in other schools, children receive individual attention, school philosophy* and a *stable environment* as reasons for choosing to send their child/children to an independent school.

4.2 *Word of mouth* from friends, family or other parents was clearly the most significantly cited

variable affecting the parents' decision to send their child/children to an independent school. Other commonly cited influences were *personal experience, school open day* and *interaction with school staff*.

## 5. What children want

Parents were asked to indicate what they believed their children want from their school.

5.1 The parents indicated that they believed the most significant factor that their child/children wanted was *good teachers*. Parents also frequently cited a *good balance between education and fun, a supportive and caring environment, good facilities, to be treated like an individual*, and a *safe environment* as factors that their children wanted from an independent school education.

Question 7 Reasons why parents would recommend an independent school <i>Why would you recommend independent schools to your family and friends?</i>			
Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive and caring environment</li> <li>• Good facilities</li> <li>• Disciplined environment</li> <li>• Reinforces moral values</li> <li>• Smaller class sizes</li> <li>• Educational excellence</li> <li>• Safe environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child treated like an individual</li> <li>• Stable environment</li> <li>• Child receives individual attention</li> <li>• Good principal/school leadership</li> <li>• Wider curriculum/subjects of interest</li> <li>• Extra-curricular activities (eg: sporting, social, camps, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School pride</li> <li>• Good balance between education and fun</li> <li>• Choice of educational approach/philosophy</li> <li>• Parental involvement in decision making/direction</li> <li>• Faith-based environment</li> <li>• Provides networking opportunities that extend beyond the school years</li> </ul>
Question 8 Reasons why parents would not recommend an independent school <i>Why would you not recommend independent schools to your family and friends?</i>			
Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School fees</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not cater to non-academic interests/vocations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishes a sense of elitism in children</li> <li>• Cost of additional/extra activities/items</li> <li>• Children too protected from the outside world</li> <li>• Pressure to conform very high</li> <li>• Rules of conduct too strict</li> <li>• Don't know</li> <li>• None</li> </ul>

### Question 9 Factors for choosing an independent school

*Why did you chose to send your children/child to an independent school?*

Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good facilities</li> <li>• Good teachers</li> <li>• Supportive and caring environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational excellence</li> <li>• Smaller class sizes</li> <li>• Disciplined environment</li> <li>• Teaches/reinforces moral values</li> <li>• Safe environment</li> <li>• Worried about negative influences in other schools</li> <li>• Child receives individual attention</li> <li>• School philosophy</li> <li>• Stable environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good principal/school leadership</li> <li>• Child treated like an individual</li> <li>• Wider curriculum/subjects of interest</li> <li>• Good balance between education and fun</li> <li>• School pride</li> <li>• Faith-based environment</li> <li>• Choice of educational approach/philosophy</li> <li>• Extra-curricular activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental involvement in decision making/direction</li> <li>• Provides networking opportunities</li> <li>• Near to home</li> <li>• It's where my child wanted to go</li> <li>• Child's friends/siblings were going to the school</li> <li>• Only option in local area</li> </ul>

### Question 10 Factors influencing school choice

*Who or what influenced you and informed you in your decision to send your child/children to an independent school?*

Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word of mouth</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal experience</li> <li>• School open day</li> <li>• Interaction with school staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School website</li> <li>• Advertising/marketing from independent schools</li> <li>• Teacher in previous school</li> <li>• Child has trial period at school</li> <li>• Newspaper articles</li> <li>• Television radio news</li> <li>• Politicians</li> <li>• Radio talkback</li> </ul>

### Question 11 What school children want from their independent school

*What do you think your child/children want from their school?*

Most significant	Frequently cited	Commonly cited	Rarely cited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good balance between education and fun</li> <li>• Supportive and caring environment</li> <li>• Good facilities</li> <li>• Child treated like an individual</li> <li>• Safe environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child received individual attention</li> <li>• Extra curricular activities</li> <li>• Stable environment</li> <li>• Children's friends go to same school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller class sizes</li> <li>• Wider curriculum/ subjects of interest</li> <li>• Educational excellence</li> <li>• Good principal/ school leadership</li> <li>• Near to home</li> <li>• Teaches moral values</li> <li>• School pride</li> <li>• Disciplined environment</li> <li>• Choice of educational approach/philosophy</li> <li>• Faith based environment</li> <li>• School philosophy</li> <li>• Provides networking opportunities beyond school years</li> <li>• Parental involvement decision making</li> <li>• Child does not know what they want/ need from school</li> </ul>



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*The Independent Schools Council of Australia is the national peak body for the Australian independent schools sector*

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