



The **11** QUESTIONS PARENTS NEED TO ANSWER WHEN PLANNING THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION

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Who will be interested in reading this guide?

- Parents who want to give their child the best preparation for life;
- Parents who are looking for character education as a part of their child's school experience;
- Parents who are weighing the choice between private school and public school;
- Parents who have been disappointed with the public-school system;
- Parents who are trying to find the private school that is best for their child;
- Parents who suspect that their school's gifted and talented program is lacking;
- Parents who are looking for more than an ordinary education for their child;
- Parents who want to see their child challenged and inspired;
- Parents who want their child's true potential, talents, and passions to be discovered and developed.

Why have we written this guide?

Parents want the best for their children, but it is often difficult to be sure what that is in today's overwhelming world of parenting guides, conflicting advice from family and friends, and changing educational trends. Parents can be hard on themselves, fearing that they are being judged on every aspect of child rearing. They often wonder which direction is best, which options are most sound,

and what ultimately is best for their child. Some parenting choices are more important than others, however, and choosing the right school environment and early education for your child is one of the biggest decisions you will make during his or her young life. The right choice can provide great reassurance and support for parents as well as children.

We want you to know that the real focus of choosing the right school for your child shouldn't be on the latest educational trend or the most popular program. Rather, the focus should be on your individual child, his or her needs and potential, and the probable long-term outcome of your choice. In our opinion, the best choice for your child's education is one that provides in-depth, well-rounded academics, strengthens character, nurtures the ability to think critically and creatively, develops talents and interests, and helps your child meet the challenges and opportunities of life with confidence.

We can't tell you for certain that Westminster School is the best choice for your child or your family—that is up to you to decide. But we can share with you what we believe, what we have learned through more than fifty years of partnering with parents in raising and teaching children, and what we see every day in our halls and classrooms.

That being said, let's take a closer look at what the options are and some of the most important questions parents need to explore when considering an educational path for their child.



Your Child's Educational Path

A thorough and rich education is one of the few gifts in life that no one can ever take away—and the earlier a child receives this gift, the longer he/she has to gain from it, develop it, and reap its benefits. But what constitutes a truly great education? When should it begin? More importantly, how can parents ensure that they are giving their children the tools, discipline, and spirit for learning that will carry them through life? It all comes down to choosing the right school and educational path for your child—and at the right time.

At Westminster School, we believe that providing children with a superior education at the primary-elementary-middle school level is imperative in developing an enthusiastic, capable, lifelong learner. This time of life is when children are most impressionable, and the learning experiences and habits of character formed during these crucial years become part of the person. Children blossom in an environment that promotes kindness, respect, integrity, courtesy, and intellectual excellence. We also believe that the best educational program is based on a carefully designed, coherent, sequential curriculum that is well-rounded, challenging, and creative. The classical education offered at Westminster School teaches children not what to think, but how to think, and—through the nurturing of good character—guides them to develop into their best possible selves.



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Presenting Challenge, Building Character, Instilling Confidence
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QUESTION #1

Public school or private school?



Nowadays, more parents than ever are choosing a private school for their child. As you plan for your child, this is an option you should consider. “Why?” many parents might think, “I went to public school and I turned out OK.” But, how can you really know the difference a private education can make if you have not experienced or closely considered it? Parents may tell themselves, “Everyone says this is a great school district.” A private school might respond, “Compared to what?” Parents may also think, “You can’t beat the price of public school.” And, it is certainly true that private education comes with a price tag. However, is there a better investment in your child’s future than his/her education? And, before placing your child in an environment that will have a major impact on his/her entire education—and life—it is important to consider the recent challenges and issues faced by our nation’s public-school system:

- **“Teaching to the test.”** With schools being judged on their

students’ standardized test scores, many districts have taken the creativity and depth out of daily teaching in order to focus on test-specific, rote learning. Long days devoted to reviewing for and taking standardized tests several times a year take away from real learning time and may dull the child’s interest in school. Some schools have even minimized recess time.

- **Funding and budget decisions that short-change children.** Limited budgets and difficult spending decisions mean that many public schools have cut music, art, theater, and athletic programs in recent years. For the same reasons, staff have been reduced and class sizes have increased. With poor teacher-student ratios comes less individual attention for each child.
- **Overwhelmed teachers.** Public school teachers must cope with large classes, multiple teaching levels, limited resources,

frequent disciplinary issues, and mixed support from parents and administrators. Elementary and middle-school teachers may have a teaching degree but often do not have a specific subject background or specialty, yet they are frequently asked to teach several subjects.

- **Inconsistent learning and disciplinary environment.** Unfortunately, public schools are working so hard to meet so many different needs with shrinking resources that they often leave teachers on their own when it comes to establishing consistent classroom management, upholding high academic standards, and ensuring respectful and courteous behavior among students. Without consistency and administrative backing, the school environment can become unfocused, even unruly, and not conducive to engaged learning.

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- **Undermining effects of fads and politics.** Public school students are often the pawns of local, state, and national politics. Likewise, public schools may too readily embrace the latest educational trend in a desperate effort to improve performance. Private schools do not depend on government funding to drive their programs and policies.

A private school has the independence to determine the best

way to give your child the diverse, in-depth, and challenging education that he/she needs to become a critical thinker and to grow as an individual learner. Small class sizes with specialized teachers mean more one-on-one attention, while a consistent, school-wide value system ensures that your child experiences and practices important values which you emphasize at home—such as kindness, respect, and responsibility—and which they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. If you are worried that your child won't score well on the SATs because he/she missed years

of public-school standardized testing, you should know that studies have found that private school students scored better on the SATs in as many as 11 out of 12 comparisons, even when taking the socioeconomic differences of the two groups into consideration. Private schools are able to independently select standardized tests that best assess their students' knowledge and skills in comparison with those of students at high-achieving schools across the country. Freed from frequent standardized test preparation, private school teachers are also able to capitalize on more instruction time.

What difference does elementary school make— Isn't high school what really prepares a child for college?

As parents begin to consider options for their child's education, they might ask which school years are the most important. Many parents may think that high school is more important than elementary and middle school in properly preparing a child for college. And, looking at it from a financial perspective, a parent might think that paying for just four years of private high school is a better deal than funding private school from pre-K or K-8th grades. What's wrong with these assumptions?

Between the ages of 3 and 14, your child will change more physically, intellectually, and emotionally than during any later developmental period of his/her life. This time of great transformation is the most impressionable time of life, when a child's environment is most powerful in shaping him/her. This is when the building blocks of character, attitude toward learning, work ethic, social skills, and confidence can best be established. A superior environment and academic program during these impressionable years can make a huge difference in a child's personal and academic development and, ultimately, in how fully he/she realizes his/her potential.

Consider the story of Lisa, who attended Westminster School along with her older sister, Jessica. They both look back at their private school years with fondness and pride. They will tell you that they received superior preparation for high school, where they not only found themselves significantly ahead



of their peers academically, but also much better prepared, personally, to face new challenges. The in-depth, accelerated Westminster program, delivered by subject-specialist teachers, gave them a boost that lasted through college and graduate school, to say nothing of the life skills that made them stand out from the crowd. These included the confidence to share their thoughts and opinions and being able to speak articulately. They were not afraid of public speaking and felt comfortable meeting new people and in a variety of social situations because their Westminster education had given them lots of experience in doing just that.

Looking back, Lisa now understands why her elementary and middle school years were so important to

her later success. For example, she didn't fully appreciate the relevance of classical studies, including Latin, when she studied them at Westminster School. In high school, however, she realized how much greater her knowledge of history was than that of her peers. Later still, she recognized how much stronger her reading and writing skills were, because so much of English comes from Latin and French, also a part of Westminster's program. Superior communication skills have also been the key to many Westminster graduates' acceptance into competitive math/science high-school programs.

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Not only was Lisa well prepared academically, but she also remembers many life lessons that shaped her attitude and conduct. She recalls the Westminster headmaster speaking to her class before field trips and other special occasions about “the Westminster Way.” They were taught how to comport themselves appropriately and with consideration of others in any given situation. They were reminded that respect for others and gratitude for one’s good fortune are key to being a good citizen and a happy person. And the good

manners that were part of daily life at Westminster School have remained with her ever since. All of these advantages strengthened Lisa’s chances when opportunities came along—for school admissions, leadership positions, and jobs she wanted.

Parents who have decided that a private school education is best for their children have yet more to consider. For example, when should a child enroll? Do you give your child a head start by enrolling him or her in private school at the elementary school level, or is waiting until high school just as good?

It can be tempting to wait until high school to enroll your child in private school, especially for financial reasons. Parents may think:

- Most elementary-level programs are basically the same.
- My child will benefit more from private school when he or she is older.
- Education isn’t really important until secondary school. Kids just need to be kids when they’re young.
- All my child needs are a few years at a private school to put on college applications.
- Waiting until high school will sure save us a lot of money!

But these claims miss how crucial to a child’s long-term achievement the elementary and middle-school years are.

Why the Elementary and Middle-School Years are so Crucial

After infancy, the most formative years of a child’s life are from ages three to fourteen. These are the years when he/she becomes the person that he/she will be throughout life. Waiting until the mid-teens diminishes a child’s opportunity to establish good character habits, strong thinking skills, self-esteem, and lasting enthusiasm for learning.

Making the switch from public to private education for high school means placing your child in a situation where it may be difficult or impossible to catch up with classmates. Imagine suddenly being surrounded by students who have read

Shakespeare, studied geometry and physics, or learned Latin and French while you have not. How would a child fare who suddenly faces high academic expectations at age 15 which he/she has not developed the study skills or work ethic to meet successfully? Might he/she feel at a loss, not due to a lack of ability, but simply because he/she has not had the opportunities in school for advanced studies or to develop talents and special interests? And, just as important as academic benefits, parents should realize that, when children are taught to be respectful, responsible, kind, tolerant, creative, and resilient at a young age, these

characteristics will inform their behavior and decisions throughout their lives. The long-term effects are exponential!

Doesn’t your child deserve a great start? We want to be there during your child’s crucial, developmental years, when he or she is filled with the greatest potential, the brightest possibilities, and the most enthusiasm for school and learning. The elementary and middle-school school years are the ideal time to instill character values, habits of scholarship, breadth and depth of knowledge, and to teach a child to think clearly and independently. There is no better time.

QUESTION #3

Aren't private schools for "rich people" and full of "snobs?"



For many American parents, the thought of private school brings to mind the stereotype of over-privileged snobs who think that they are entitled because they come from well-to-do families. This is a harmful misconception that can easily be proven wrong with a trip to our campus. In truth, Westminster School enrolls a diverse array of students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and a multitude of races, religions, and cultures. The common bond among all the students (and parents) at Westminster School is not their social status, income, race, or religion; it's their dedication to learning and preparing for a wonderful life.

Scholarship opportunities and financial aid options

In the past, it may have been true that private schools were only an option for those families with high incomes, but today, a private school

education is more of a viable choice than many realize. For example, Westminster School, a non-profit corporation, is more affordable than many comparable schools in the area because of its streamlined budget, lean administration, and careful investments. At the same time, a significant number of our students receive financial aid packages that help their families afford the education that they deserve.

It's our hope that families can afford to send their child to Westminster School if they choose. Our need-based financial packages and range of payment options are designed to help families make a high-quality education possible for their children.

Investing in your child's future

We understand that paying private school tuition involves challenge and sacrifice for many families. But we

also want you to know that we use that tuition wisely in order to provide your child with a stellar education and unparalleled foundation, which he/she will be able to build upon through high school, college, and beyond. At Westminster School, your tuition goes toward an impressive array of activities, experiences, and resources, including a rigorous, accelerated academic curriculum, top-notch, subject-specialist teachers, one-on-one attention, a safe and beautiful environment, daily P.E. and athletics, art and music classes, dramatic productions, field trips, and an environment that consistently promotes the values most parents want for their children. Yes, many parents balk at paying for primary education—until they remember that you often get what you pay for. Investment in a high-quality education will pay rich dividends throughout your child's life.

Will this school's environment help my child develop strong values and good character?

A School Like No Other: What Sets Westminster Apart?

- Westminster is dedicated to providing a classical education for the 21st century—one that ensures real academic depth and teaches children *how* to think.
- Westminster guides students to become their best selves.
- Westminster instills in students the habits of kindness, courtesy, responsibility, and dignified personal presentation.
- Participation in the arts is core to the entire Westminster program.
- Westminster's student population is one of the most diverse in the area, especially among private schools.
- Westminster School offers one of the best educational experiences in the region for an affordable tuition.



Many parents are disappointed by the public schools when it comes to the general environment. They see that the teachers, while well meaning, are overwhelmed by the demands of large classes and the wide scope of students' educational needs. There are many disciplinary problems that require attention, leaving little time and energy for teachers and administrators to reinforce values that parents are working so hard to instill in their children. In our ever-changing, multi-media society, children are exposed to many powerful influences that counteract cherished values. Will your child's school be a strong partner in guiding his/her character education?

Good parents strive to be role models when it comes to values and teaching their children the difference between right and wrong, respect for others, responsibility for one's own actions, good manners, and how to behave properly in social situations. However, when your child is at school for seven hours a day, wouldn't it be helpful to have the adults consistently model, teach,

and insist on good character and appropriate behavior? And, wouldn't it be helpful to have your child among other students, including older role models, who are also being guided in the same way? Because Westminster School's administration and faculty are united in conveying such values to the students, you will notice a difference between Westminster students and children who have not been handled in this consistent way. At Westminster, your child will be learning some very important lessons, starting on the first day of pre-school or kindergarten:

- Respect yourself; behave with self-control.
- Treat others as you like to be treated: with fairness, courtesy, and kindness.
- Be tolerant of the differences among people; these provide richness to our school and community.

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- Be honest. If you did something wrong or made a mistake, own up to it.
- Always do your best work—neatly, completely, and with pride.
- Strive for independence.
- Stand up straight and look others in the eyes when you address them.
- Call adults by Mr./Mrs./Ms.
- It's "Yes," not "Yeah," and "May I please have...," not "I need..."
- Good manners, including table manners, are taught.

These are just a few examples of the respectful comportment and character values that we expect from our students. It is not unusual for a teacher to pause during a class in order to address an important life lesson, just as a parent would. According to the Urban Program Resource Network, character education "encourages students to think critically and act responsibly. It is the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable the learner to make informed and responsible choices. It involves a shared educational commitment that emphasizes the responsibilities and rewards of productive living in a diverse global society." When schools lack the time or means to consistently reinforce these values, there are too many hours in the day when children are left to fend for

themselves or be guided mainly by the behavior of their peers.

Character education is also addressed through our curriculum, with its emphasis on classic works of literature and in-depth history studies, both of which provide ideal opportunities for developing empathy for others and exploring ethical issues. The goal is for a Westminster student to become a self-disciplined, morally responsible, fully engaged citizen of the world. In this way, we help our students reach their full potential and contribute positively to the world. A Westminster graduate embodies strength, courage, and the confidence to pursue dreams. Our focus on character is every bit as important as our attention to the child's intellectual development.

QUESTION #5

How well-qualified are the teachers?



Private schools in the state of Virginia have greater independence than public schools and are permitted to set their own standards for teachers. As an accredited member of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and the Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS), Westminster is required to show proof that all staff are well-qualified for their positions.

At Westminster School, we take great care when hiring our educators. A suitable resume may qualify a teacher applicant for an interview, but Westminster also looks for the qualities that make for a great teacher and a positive influence on children: a loving heart, enthusiasm for teaching, depth of knowledge and passion for the subject, an attractive personality, professional

presentation, good manners, the ability to speak and write well, rich outside interests, a sense of humor, and the strength of character to manage a classroom full of lively children. In addition:

- All Westminster teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree and many have either an advanced degree in the subject that they teach or a master's degree in education.
- Most of our teachers have practical experience in their specialized field. We occasionally hire a teacher just graduated from a master's program; however, they almost always have additional experience which provides assurance that they will be a good fit for our program.

- Many of our teachers have extensive teaching experience—and at various levels.
- A significant number of our teachers have been teaching at Westminster for more than a decade, and some of them are Westminster School alumni.
- All school employees, including teachers, are subjected to both state and FBI background checks prior to employment and every three years thereafter.

Teachers who are new to Westminster undergo extensive orientation training and are mentored by their team leader and department chair, as well as the administration. Continued professional development is encouraged and facilitated by the school.

Does this school offer the latest (best) in educational theory?

If you attended a public school, chances are that you were exposed to a number of teaching fads and educational trends—often before each new approach had been fully tested and its long-term ramifications completely understood. It seems that every year a new buzzword emerges in public schools that is hoped will turn around low standardized test scores and render American children the strongest competitors when they enter the work force.

Westminster School offers a classical education, with well-established methodology and content, which also reflects best practices that have developed over the years. Westminster School has a proven record of success, with its graduates gaining admission and achieving acclaim in competitive high schools and colleges. A big part of the strength of our program is that we do not abandon successful strategies to adopt the latest educational proposals, without carefully considering the benefits and disadvantages. We are much more likely to gradually adopt small, proven aspects of new teaching approaches than we are to follow what is popular.

For example, when many public schools turned their backs on phonics in favor of whole language and invented spelling, Westminster continued to embrace traditional reading instruction—which we *knew* to be effective—while, over time, incorporating the most useful aspects of whole language learning. Westminster’s consistently high student achievement in reading and language arts has proven the wisdom of this careful approach,



while most public schools have seen a downward trend in students’ reading and writing skills. Likewise with teaching math, Westminster has repeatedly reviewed its methods and efficacy through comparisons with other approaches, adapting and modifying new approaches that are genuinely helpful. The results are shown in our own math program, which extends through algebra and geometry, and the subsequent high-school achievements of our graduates.

Currently, many public schools are abandoning instruction in grammar, cursive writing, and long division. (Why learn these skills when we have computers and calculators to do our thinking for us, right?) At Westminster, we understand the continued importance of these subjects in training the mind, fostering independence, and preparing students for a myriad of challenges in the learning environments and workplaces of the future. Again, Westminster stands by proven teaching methods while integrating genuinely helpful findings of educational research.

How do we ensure that we keep up with the times without jumping on every bandwagon? One important way is through our accreditation by the Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS) and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), relationships which require Westminster School to constantly examine its mission and philosophy, review its teaching methods, update textbooks and other materials as needed, and integrate up-to-date technology into its curriculum. Westminster School undergoes a thorough review by VAIS every five years. Furthermore, our administration and faculty embrace ongoing professional development opportunities, so we keep abreast of current educational practices. In addition to using standardized tests, which compare our students’ achievement with that of students in high-ranking public and private schools across the country, our academic departments are charged with continually assessing the effectiveness of our curriculum as compared with other public and private school programs in the area.

QUESTION #7

How important is class size?



One of the most noticeable differences between public and private schools is typical class size. While average elementary public-school class sizes vary from state to state, most range from 20 – 28 students. At Westminster, no class has more than 18 students (16 for preschool and kindergarten, with an aide); most classes average 12-14 students. This structure is based on time-tested models and research-based findings.

Aside from studies, we also know what we have seen through the last 50 years of teaching students at Westminster School: smaller class size means more one-on-one time with the teacher, more individualized learning, and closer relationships among students. When there are

fewer students in a classroom, the teacher has the opportunity to get to know each student and his/her family better—partnerships that almost always boost learning and student engagement. A smaller class size also allows teachers to communicate often with parents regarding their child's progress.

Finally, smaller class sizes make it easier for a teacher to focus on a wider range of goals. Instead of just striving to cover the academic curriculum, instructors have time to focus on each child's social/emotional development, comportment, and personal development.

Classroom Size in Primary Schools:

- The Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, concludes that class size reduction is one of only four evidence-based reforms that have been proven to increase student achievement through rigorous, randomized experiments.
- Several studies demonstrate that students who are assigned to smaller classes in the early grades do better in every way that can be measured: higher test scores, better grades, and improved attendance.
- Smaller classes enhance the development of “non-cognitive” skills that tests don’t capture, such as persistence, motivation, and self-esteem, which are also linked to success in both school and life.
- Students in smaller classes had significantly lower drop-out rates, higher grades, and achieved better results on the college entrance exams.

Will the school provide the technology skills needed for my child's future success?

Speaking of teaching trends, in recent years many public and private schools have switched gears to computer-based learning and high-tech classrooms as the digital world gains greater prominence in the workplace and at home. And many parents have come to believe that more technology equates with a better education. While some of technology's powers are clearly helpful, many educators, including Westminster School, believe that administrators have gone too far in filling classrooms with screens.



Modern technology provides wonderful tools for learning and communicating, and computer literacy is absolutely vital in this day and age. However, dependence on technology and the abandonment of traditional learning deprive children of crucial knowledge and skills that they will need in the future.

Westminster's approach to technology use is based on the following tenets:

- **There is a time and place for computers at home and in the classroom.** The Westminster curriculum includes technology education and integration in grades 3 - 8. Students have access to regular technology instruction, laptops, computer-based resource tutorials, and online textbooks. We understand that it is important for our students to learn how to type and word process, how to research topics on the Internet, create power-point presentations, create spreadsheets, access cloud technology, and utilize computers for data analysis and simulation in

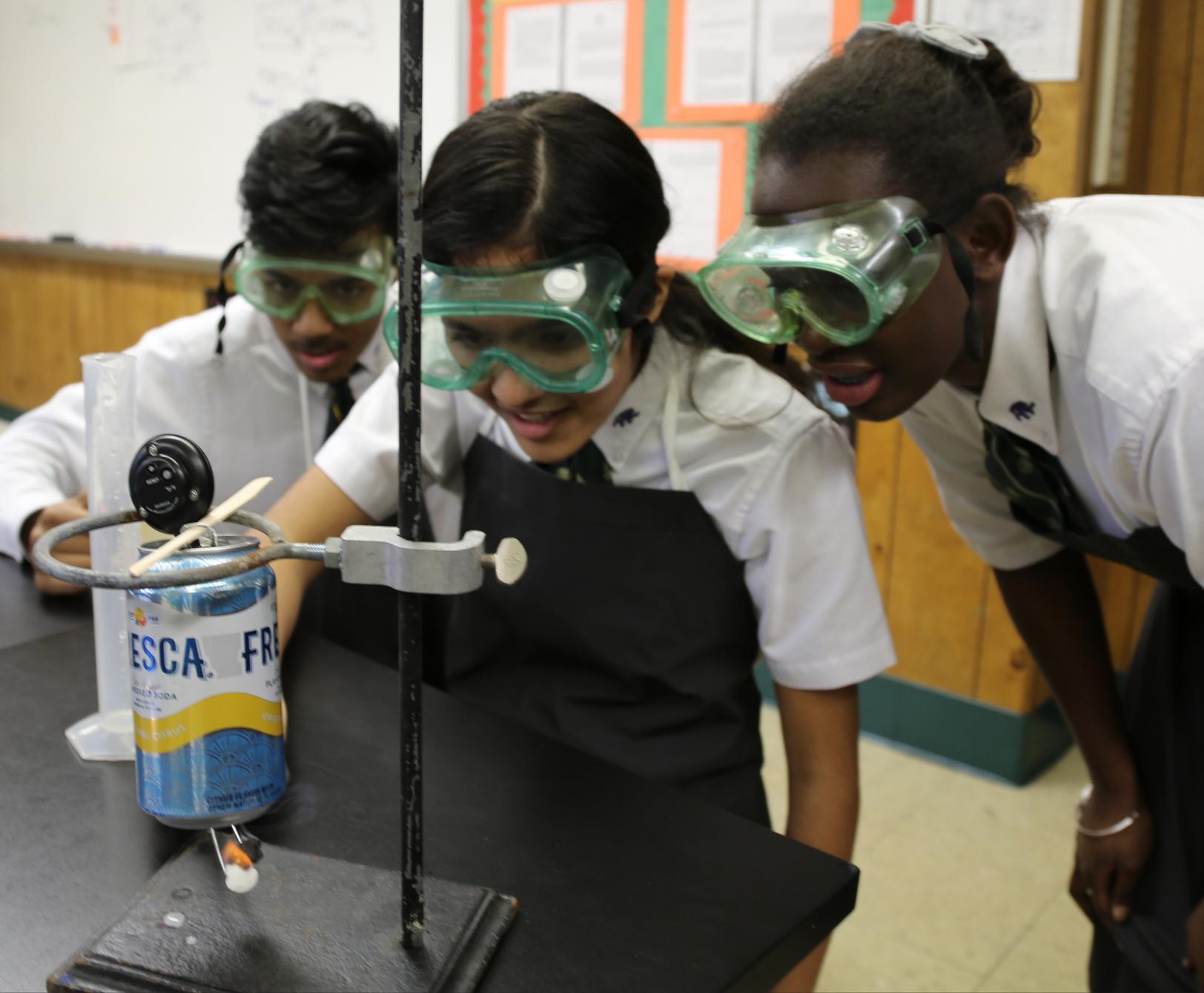
science and math classes. We also understand that learning involves many human aspects that a computer program cannot satisfy, including motivation, differences in learning styles, teamwork and peer interaction, individual creativity, and the inspiration and sense of caring that a passionate teacher can impart to an individual student.

- **Learning to write without computers is important.** Many public schools are dropping cursive writing and penmanship from the curriculum. However, research shows crucial benefits from learning to write in cursive, including stimulation of the area of the brain associated with learning to read, better retention of information with live note-taking, fine motor skill development, and the ability to read important public and private historical documents. Wouldn't you want your child to be able to read for herself the *Declaration of Independence*, or a love letter from her great-grandfather to his bride? Furthermore, the

ability to express one's thoughts though handwriting—and crafting sentences without the help of spell check, grammar check, and Word—will always be an asset, one that distinguishes the independent writer both personally and professionally.

- **Children need time away from screens.** Research shows that screen time is at its highest level ever for children, with the average child spending hours per day in front of televisions, computers, tablets, and smart phones. This has been proven to be harmful—especially for young learners. Digital presentations train the brain to be passive, to receive pre-digested information, narrow vocabulary, and reduce the child's empathy for others. Children benefit from using every aspect of themselves—their intellects, emotions, imaginations, and bodies—to explore and understand the world and their own possibilities.

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- **Technology is difficult to separate from distractions.**

When students have free access to computers, they also have access to social networking sites, games, online videos, and endless other distractions, not to mention dangers. While technology has many benefits, it has been proven to be detrimental to attention spans and the focus needed to engage in in-depth learning.

- **Technology impedes self-reliance.** When children can simply use a search engine to

get answers (not necessarily accurate ones), their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are tremendously undermined. And when students can easily find crib notes and even completed essays on the Internet, an entirely different set of issues arises.

- **Just because a computer can do it for you doesn't mean you shouldn't learn it.** Some schools believe penmanship, graphing, calculating, and other skills no longer need to be learned because computers can do the work for us. We believe that everyone should master basic skills before they employ

these computer functions. At Westminster, students learn the *how* and the *why* behind the *what*. The student who masters basic skills will always have the advantage over one who is dependent on technology.

Our philosophy regarding technology in the classroom matches our attitude toward all pedagogical trends: we carefully consider and integrate new teaching tools, but only after a close examination of the evidence and results. We never just close our eyes and swallow what's offered.

QUESTION #9

What about the school's arts program?



As public schools across the country face stark budget cuts (or redirect their money toward technology in the classroom), and as school districts concentrate more heavily on “teaching to the test,” art and music programs are disappearing by the thousands. Bands, orchestras, and private instrument lessons are often the first to go, followed by choirs, music classes, drama productions, and fine art instruction.

We believe that arts education is crucial to a child's development as a well-rounded, creative, fully realized person. Participation in the arts helps a child discover who he/she is, empowers self-expression, develops creative thinking skills, and enhances overall quality of life. These developments are crucial, not only to an individual's sense of personal fulfillment but also to his/

her success in any area of endeavor. Westminster strives to weave art throughout the student's daily life through classes, creative project assignments, field trips and inhouse events, and the school environment.

At Westminster School, we offer the following arts programs:

- **Drama program.** All students, grades K-8, participate in their class play each year. Each student has a speaking part, and plays typically also include singing and choreographed movement. This helps all children learn to express themselves and gain confidence performing in front of a crowd. By the 7th grade, students are ready to take on a Shakespeare play, and in 8th grade, a Broadway musical.

- **Music program.** All students participate in music classes, which include basic literacy, music appreciation, and choral instruction. Students gain familiarity with major movements and composers along with a working knowledge of musical arts, including symphony, ballet, and opera. In addition, an optional orchestra program for students in grades 3-8 includes weekly instrument lessons, ensemble practices, and several public performances each year.
- **Visual arts program.** With a project-based exploration of many media and techniques, enhanced by art history, our visual arts program teaches children that there are myriad ways to observe, interpret, and represent the world around them and express their response to it. Students in all grades attend regular art classes, where they develop solid skills and are given a lifelong appreciation for creating, analyzing, and enjoying art.
- **Dance program.** Each year of physical education includes a dance unit. In lower grades, students learn basic components of movement and dance along with simple line dances. As students grow, they are introduced to social dancing, for example, square dancing, and progress to ballroom dancing and dance parties in the upper grades.

In addition to the personal benefits of arts participation, studies show that involvement in the arts is also associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, verbal skills, and enjoyment of school.

Should I look for a school that emphasizes my child’s particular talents and abilities?

It is natural for parents to take pride in and encourage their children’s special interests and abilities. Sometimes, however, parents focus so much attention on these special strengths that their child misses out on experiences that are equally important for his/her well-rounded development and long-term happiness. At Westminster, we make sure that children are challenged and nurtured in all areas—academic, athletic, artistic, and in personal presentation and social skills. Challenges and opportunities are built into the Westminster program that help produce graduates who stand out from the crowd.

Nurturing excellence in all areas of endeavor

Because of this all-around stimulation, we have seen many children with a recognized talent discover an unsuspected strength in a totally different area. We have also known children who discover a passion for a certain subject or

activity that gives them a lot of engagement and pleasure, even if they aren’t “the best” at it. Life’s road can be long and challenging, with many unexpected twists and turns. What children gravitate to at age 6 or 10 may not be what sustains them at 25 or 40. We want our graduates to develop a wide array of intellectual and personal resources to provide engagement and personal satisfaction throughout their lives. At the very least, we wish our students to gain an appreciation and familiarity with all areas of study, from math and science to art and music to physical fitness and athletics.

At Westminster, we value and celebrate all forms of achievement: athletes are celebrated as much as academic honor roll students. A success on the stage is every bit as exciting as a straight-A report card. Each child has a place, and when the arts, physical education, and extracurricular activities are valued, as they are at Westminster, our

students realize that these aspects of their day are important parts of education, and of life. It fosters self-respect as well as appreciation for the contributions of others.

Resources for the struggling student

At Westminster, we have a motto: “Celebrate strength, strengthen weakness.” Just as we celebrate our students’ diverse successes and achievements, we also concentrate on improving areas of learning that some students find more challenging than others. We understand that working to strengthen weaknesses and expand limits not only creates better-rounded individuals, but it also builds integrity, determination, self-discipline, and self-confidence. For all students who would benefit, we provide extra help through individual and small group tutorials as well as a student resource center for recommended remediation and/or enrichment—all at no extra cost to families.



QUESTION #11

Is it difficult to get into a private school?



Some parents don't consider private school as an option simply because no one in their family has attended one before or perhaps because they aren't comfortable with the idea. These families may be worried that their child isn't a good fit for a private school, that they would not acclimate well to the challenging environment, or even that they wouldn't get in at all.

We cannot stress enough that the way that private schools are sometimes portrayed in movies and on TV is markedly different from the atmosphere that we work hard to create at Westminster School. Our program welcomes all kinds of children and families. We include students from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. The only thing that we ask is that your child be enthusiastic about learning and fulfilling his or her potential.

Of course, it can be hard to understand what a special place Westminster is without experiencing it for yourself. We strongly encourage anyone interested in our school—or anyone with preconceptions and doubts—to visit Westminster,

meet our students, speak with our teachers, and see what it is really like on a day-to-day basis. Attend a play or music performance. Take a tour. Speak with some of our parents. Discover for yourself how we educate the whole child and give children the tools they need to succeed—not just in school, but in life.

Conclusion

Like many parents living in Fairfax County, David and Serena Elton had heard such great things about the public-school system. Yet, when it was time to enroll their oldest daughter in school, they were uncertain about what to do with her once she completed a Montessori pre-school program. Their daughter was very small for her age, and they were worried about sending her to public school where she might not fit in with the other children or be judged as less capable than she was. They even made special arrangements for her to stay through first grade to give them time to weigh their options. The Eltons wanted to look really carefully at their public-school options, and to consider private schools.

When David and Serena visited the local public school, they discovered that the students got out early every Monday, that they had very large class sizes, and that many of the students were working on skills that their daughter had learned much earlier. They visited school after school, but never felt that they had found a place where their daughter would thrive and not feel “different” from the other students. These parents were almost at the point of home-schooling their daughter.

A good friend of Serena's suggested she consider Westminster School. Serena had heard of it because she had actually had a few classmates in public high school who had attended Westminster. Interestingly, she remembered them as the “smart” ones in the class who were always so well prepared. The Eltons attended a Westminster open house where they were able to tour the school with the admissions director, who described the program at each grade level, and watch the students and teachers in action. They listened to the headmaster speak with eloquence and passion about the school's mission and philosophy. David and Serena didn't know it as they left the open house, but each of them had independently made the decision to send their daughter to this wonderful, unique place. They loved the emphasis on good manners, respect, kindness, and of course, the academic excellence. The school itself was immaculate, and they loved the quiet elegance of the entire campus. They knew that their daughter would get the high-quality education they so wanted for her.

Continued on page 17

As young parents, though, David and Serena knew that paying tuition would be difficult. If they sent their daughter to Westminster School, could they afford to send their other children? How would they manage it? Could they justify spending this money when they lived in a premier public-school district? After comparing notes, they decided that they would move forward with the process and make the necessary sacrifices to send their daughter to the school that they knew would be right for her. They were fortunate enough to have a generous grandmother help them when she visited the school and also realized that they had found the right school for their little girl.

Their daughter started at Westminster School a little on the reserved side. However, her teachers never let her size become an issue. Other students not only discounted her small stature, but became her biggest champions. Because the children were treated with respect and kindness by teachers and administrators, it was only natural that they treated their peers the same way. They even forgot that she was unusually small, except when she lined up shoulder-to-shoulder with her classmates for honor-roll assemblies.

One thing that really made a difference to their daughter's development was the drama program at Westminster School. Each year, she gained courage and poise through performing on stage. When she reached the upper school, the headmaster (who directed the plays at that level) realized that she needed a big role to help her with her confidence. Performing in that play was a life-transforming experience. She ended up excelling at Westminster School and being accepted to a top-notch private high school. If you ask her now, she will attribute a lot of her success to



Westminster School and the loving guides she had during those years.

David and Serena ultimately decided to send their other children to Westminster School, as well. Even though they had picked it for their oldest, who had a special set of circumstances, it turned out to be an equally positive experience for the other two, as well. Even though their children had different personalities, needs, and interests from one another, the school's well-rounded program helped each of them develop in a very positive direction. The Eltons remain grateful to the school that helped support their goals as parents and partnered with them during some of the most important years of their children's lives.

Appendix: Additional Questions to Ask Before Choosing a School

Choosing the right school for your child can be complicated and even overwhelming. When considering and planning your child's education, ask these questions and weigh the answers carefully before making your final decision:

- What is the school's mission and philosophy of education? Does this make sense to me?
- What do I care most about my child's education?
- How well will this school prepare my child for high school and college?

- In what areas does my child need to grow and how would the school nurture that growth?
- What is the general atmosphere of the school? Would my child thrive here?
- Is this school a good fit for my family's needs?
- Does the school form an effective partnership with parents?
- What is the school's approach to discipline and safety?
- What extracurricular activities are available to students?
- What are some of the school traditions?
- What are the avenues for becoming part of the school community?
- What are the admissions requirements?

Asking what you are looking for from a primary education for your children is, in our eyes, equal to asking what you value most in life, what you want most for your children, and what is most important to the development of a well-rounded, knowledgeable, upright, creative, and kind individual. These are serious questions, but Westminster School offers deeply considered and sound answers honed through 50 years of giving children an education for life.



ASKING WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR

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