



9 questions to help you learn more on a high school tour

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The answers to these questions will help reveal what the school is *really* like. Students can tell you about the school's culture. Parents can tell you if the administration is proactive, responsive, or neither. Educators and staff members should be able to discuss the school's [mission](#), priorities, and programs — and why they make a difference.

In addition to asking the following questions, use our [high school tour checklist](#) and [what to consider](#) worksheet to keep track of what each school has to offer.

3 questions to ask a teacher or staff member:

1. How does your school use [new ideas from the science of learning and education research](#)?

A great answer should have specifics, going beyond a single idea or policy. If you only hear about a single teacher introducing a mindful minute before class or how the school is shifting to a later start time then you know the school doesn't have a deep focus on evidence-based policies and practices.

Example: *Studies show that long lectures aren't effective, so we use [inquiry-based learning](#) to give students more choice in both what they learn and how to show it. Teachers use technology tools and brain-based teaching techniques to engage students, etc.*

2. What are your school's most effective practices for helping kids get into college and succeed once they get there?

A great answer should mention a wide range of [college counseling](#) services designed to be used by all students, starting in ninth or tenth grade. If all you hear is that the school's college counseling services are limited, don't start until junior year, or are focused exclusively on certain students, the school probably doesn't have high-quality college counseling.

Example: *We have a dedicated career and college counseling center — with a full-time college counselor — that's open to all students five days a week. Local college students volunteer year-round to help students with the application process. We have a required [college preparation class](#) starting in ninth grade that helps students explore their passions, research careers and colleges, and go through the college application and financial aid process. We have a college FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) night where we work individually with every family to fill out their financial aid applications. We bring colleges in to talk to students and bring alumni back to talk about their college experiences. We take students on tours of local colleges.*

3. How do you support students in finding their passions or career pathways?

A great answer should give you specific examples of the ways that all students go through programs or processes that help them explore and imagine their futures. If you only hear about a couple of popular after-school clubs or electives, such as robotics, you know that the school doesn't have a lot of support for exploring career pathways. The best schools offer a diverse array of pathways and career exploration that are woven into the school day.

Example: *We do a lot of [project-based learning](#) to allow students to design learning projects and go deep on a subject. Every senior does a year-long [senior capstone project](#), which teaches them to tackle a real-world problem and present it to the community. We also have three popular [pathways](#) — digital media, medicine, and mechanics and engineering — which let students develop skills and explore future careers. Our [internship program](#) pairs juniors with community businesses they're interested in to get a taste of different professions.*

Additional questions to ask a teacher or staff member:

- What's one thing the school needs to improve on?
- What has the school struggled with the most in the past few years?

3 questions to ask a parent:

1. What does the school do when a student is failing?

A great answer offers specifics that show the school actively supports students with many intervention strategies *before* students fail. If you hear that it's up to parents

or students to ask for help, take note. Schools that proactively intervene when kids are struggling do far better than schools that wait for students or parents to ask for help. Similarly, it's important to gauge the quality of the support services available. For instance, tutoring is an important intervention but not all tutoring is equally effective. Research suggests that peer and volunteer tutoring — while helpful — is not as effective as tutoring with teachers or trained paraprofessionals.

Example: *The school doesn't wait until a student fails. Their teacher or counselor will call you even if your child starts slipping behind in a class. Your student can get one-on-one tutoring from teachers and [peers](#). The school has adopted [mastery-based learning](#) so students can learn at their own pace, do homework and tests over again if they need to, and eventually succeed in any class, no matter how long it takes.*

2. How does the school involve families?

A **great answer** suggests that the school actively engages all families meaningfully and makes every effort to remove barriers to family engagement. Schools committed to engaging families will find ways to do so even if the families are busy or don't speak English. Fundraising for specific programs is fine, but ideally, schools should be working to build community and engage parents about their child's academic and emotional success.

Example: *I really feel like the school makes an effort. A few years ago, the school redid its [mission statement](#) and parents helped write the statement and core values. They often have Zoom meetings so we don't have to attend parent meetings in person. They send out lots of surveys to get our input on everything from topics for parent information sessions to what kinds of electives they're going to offer.*

3. What has your child's experience been like with their teachers?

A **great answer** makes it clear that teachers are professionals who know their subject matter, care about their students, and emphasize equity in their teaching. A not-so-great answer suggests that each teacher operates in their own private world without much oversight from the school administration. This isn't uncommon: at many schools, teachers have a lot of autonomy and their skills vary widely. The best schools have practices that make sure all teachers are using effective, equitable methods, including a culture of high teaching standards and a commitment to care about each student as an individual.

Example: *The teachers are really accessible. The school has created an [advisory period](#) and now students have the same advisor for all four years. My child loves his advisor and feels like he can go to her anytime.*

Additional questions to ask a parent:

- **Do your students come home excited about learning?**
- **What's one thing you wish the school would do differently?**

3 questions to ask a student:

1. What are you learning these days?

A **great answer** makes it clear that no matter the subject — from math and science to humanities and history – students are excited about what they're learning and they can talk about it. [Rigorous education](#) requires students not only to learn new material but to talk about it and use it in new ways. When this happens, kids feel more ownership over their learning and their education feels more relevant to their lives. If the student's answer just involves references to quizzes and units rather than ideas and the substance of what they're learning, it suggests that the point of school is to follow rules and get good grades rather than actual learning.

Example: *We are doing really fun small group projects on how different cultures have influenced local arts. My group is doing something on New Orleans musicians who helped create early American jazz. I suggested doing this one since I'm a jazz saxophonist! I wrote the music for our 10-minute video presentation.*

2. What's the best thing about the school?

A **great answer** from students will vary, but since high school is first and foremost a place where your child is going to learn something or grow emotionally, then good answers should be about learning (not necessarily academic) or a sense of community, rather than something narrow like a single sports team. If you hear nothing about the teachers, the academics, the environment on campus, or unique programs, it tells you something: the school isn't making a big impression on the student.

Example: *At my middle school, it was really cliquey and hard to make friends. But here everyone is really chill. And the teachers and staff actually care. Ms. Jones, Mr. Blake, and*

Mrs. Achimbe are awesome. Literally, there are so many cool teachers. I feel like [I can always talk to someone](#).

3. What's the most interesting project you've worked on this year?

A great answer should reveal that the student actually had: 1) a project that was memorable, and 2) a sense of agency over what they learned. Schools that understand how students learn the best offer some kind of [project-based learning](#), which has been shown to engage students far more than traditional, lecture-based, teach-to-the-test education. If you only hear about projects in clubs or after school or the student can't recall a project, it may be a sign that for the most part, classroom learning mostly involves students passively listening to their teachers lecture. Ideally, the school is using projects as a way to teach academic subjects all four years of high school.

Example: *We got to do a project in biology about ocean acidification and its effect on different marine ecosystems. With an aquarium, we created this exhibition that showed how the coral reefs are dying and presented it at the local museum with actual scientists in the audience. It was really intense.*

Other questions you can ask a student:

- What do you think the school could do better?
- Do you ever feel bored at school? When?