
Where in the World Is the Ideal Boarding School?

Brian R. Wright, M.P.A., M.A., Ph.D.

Examining the synergies between schools and the communities in which they live

The popular image of a boarding school that has been perpetuated through movies, books and, yes, admissions brochures can be a factor in your search for the perfect boarding school for your children. If you indulged me for a moment and closed your eyes and pictured a boarding school, your mental image would probably include green fields and buildings covered in ivy, a quad where students gather to play games and socialize, a chapel with a spire that stretches skyward, athletic fields surrounded by trees full of New-England-autumn color, and maybe a pond to complete the picture.

Many schools fit this image; many schools do not. Of course, even those parents who are just beginning the search for the right boarding school for their children know that despite the popular image, boarding schools come in all shapes and sizes. The decision you and your family make about which boarding school will work best for you and your child must take into account many considerations, and the school's amenities and the general "feel" you get while on campus are certainly vital elements in that decision. As important as it is, however, to recognize that one size definitely does not fit all, is the fact that in trying to fit the right "fit," sometimes parents don't give enough consideration to the school's location.

When we go through the process of choosing a boarding school for our children, we take note of the amenities the schools on our list have to offer, and we may very well compare it to the checklist we have in our heads that details what a boarding school *should* look like. Whether the picture we have in our heads is realistic or not, the process of going down the list gives us comfort: if a school looks like our idealized version of a boarding school, then we feel better about sending our children there. Of course, it goes without saying that our vision includes a challenging curriculum, caring faculty who will expand our children's intellectual horizons, and an administration dedicated to keeping our children safe, happy, and intellectually

BRIAN R. WRIGHT



Headmaster
The Williston
Northampton School
Easthampton, MA

engaged.

Sometimes parents overlook the impact that a school's location can have on their child's educational experience. In some cases, choosing a boarding school becomes similar to the process of buying a car: we want the leather seats, the GPS, the Goodyear tires, the entertainment package with DVD player, and, of course, air bags all around. We can be seduced by that new-car smell and perhaps forget to ask ourselves an important question: where will the car spend most of its time after it leaves the showroom?

When we think about location, of course, we'll focus on how far the school is from home and how easily we'll be able to visit, and how easily our children will be able to make it home during breaks. And we'll also spend some time comparing urban schools with rural and suburban ones and perhaps debate the merits of a particular location in a general sense. Generally speaking, for example, an urban school can offer the resources of a city, such as museums, shows and the feeling of a faster-paced, more active lifestyle. A rural setting, by contrast, provides a more removed feeling, where the concentration is on academic and social endeavors more centered on the school's campus. Finally, we'll examine the way our child learns and which environment will be more advantageous to his or her education and well-being. But once we've settled on the type of school--rural or urban; big or small; local or farther away--our work isn't done, because then it's time to consider what those in real estate are quick to tell us is perhaps the most important consideration: location, location, location.

The word location shares a similar etymology with the similar word locus, which means a center or focus of great activity or intense concentration, which is perhaps a better way of thinking about location for our purposes. To put it another way, location doesn't mean simply where the school is located, but how well the school is centered within its community and able to be a true focus of educational activity for students.


What does a well-connected school look like? Well, just as people can have multiple connections within the community where they live, so can schools. In order to get a full picture of the extent of the connections between the school and its location, a good first place to look would be at the most visible signs of a relationship. Does the school allow people in the community to use the school's facilities? Many schools, for instance, allow town residents to use their athletic facilities and fields, particularly in the winter when it can be hard for some people to find a place to exercise. Such a policy makes a statement about the relationship between the school and its community. Another question: How many of the school's neighbors attend the plays or lectures that the school may make available to the general public? One such New England school, for instance, has a fine theater program that annually produces a play for children that coincides with the local public schools' winter vacation so that elementary school children can attend. And they do: each year this production attracts hundreds of children and their parents to campus. A third question, how much community service do the school's students do in the local neighborhoods? A healthy relationship between school and community means more opportunities for students to learn and experience new things and to contribute to other people's lives.

It may be tempting to simply consider the above examples as part of the larger category of school reputation, but that's true only up to a point. A reputation can be an ethereal thing, hard to pin down and often unduly influenced by the

opinions of a few people; and it simply would not be practical to ask as many local residents as you can about the school's reputation. Furthermore, while a spirit of openness to, and cooperation with, the community might tend to enhance a school's reputation, what we're talking about here is something deeper than reputation: it's a reflection of the school's commitment to its students in the way the school can lead by example in being a good citizen. Parents and prospective students can begin researching the connection between school and community by asking direct questions during a campus tour. You can also find information on the Internet, of course, but it's important to look beyond what you might find on the school's website and possibly review the coverage the school has gotten in the local news media. This research can not only tell you something about the types of programs that the school has offered and will be offering, but it can also give an indication of how well the town and the school get along. Of course, the entire decision shouldn't be made based upon some stories in the newspaper; instead, this should just be one piece of evidence to use in making your decision.

So what does it all add up to? The school's location and the ties it has to its community pay off not only in how well regarded the school may be in the community, but also in how well it can serve its students and faculty, in ways that might not be readily apparent at first. Harkening back to the image of the ideal boarding school once again, people tend to think of a boarding school as a self-contained oasis of learning where faculty and students work together harmoniously and without the need for, and without fear of taint from, the "real" world. We know, of course, that this is not—and should not be—the case; John Donne's words are as true for boarding schools as they are for human beings: "*No man is an island, entire of itself.*" Technological innovations have made the world smaller and the need to be a global citizen greater. Only by being engaged with the world around us can we properly position ourselves to be able to properly educate our students.

What does an ideally situated and connected boarding school look like? Well, it's one that is equipped and empowered to be able to take advantage of the intellectual and artistic culture and resources in its back yard. We all know of the benefits that trips to museums, lectures, concerts, and other events can provide for students. A properly engaged school has the ability to incorporate these resources and events and make them a significant part of the academic program, thereby enhancing the curriculum in exciting ways. All of this is made possible by the connections that the faculty and school administration have within the community. Faculty are asked to do a lot at boarding schools—to be dorm parents, coaches, mentors, and advisers, in addition to being teachers—and to do and be all of these things twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. On top of all of that, faculty are asked to keep abreast of the latest innovations in their fields. There are many, many fine examples of dedicated faculty members who can—and do—manage to do all of that at once, but a better model is to bring college faculty to a campus where successful collaboration with a community that values education is the norm, where faculty members can rely on solid relationships with the surrounding intellectual community, honed by years of being a good neighbor, to bring real world examples of academic rigor into the curriculum in an intellectually enriching manner.

You may think that I'm describing an educational Utopia that, as the word's origins imply, simply does not exist anywhere; that I may be guilty of simply substituting one hyper-idealized vision of a boarding school for another. However, the truth of the matter is that such synergies do exist between schools and the communities in which they live. As you continue the search for the boarding school that best fits your child, it might be worth examining how healthy that relationship between school and community is, and how well the school utilizes the resources and intellectual capital of the community to enrich the educational experiences of its students and faculty. One of the major reasons why parents first begin to look at boarding schools for their children is the belief that boarding schools can provide superior resources and prepare them for college. There often is no better way than having the students learn directly from college and institutions in the immediate neighborhood. In finally deciding upon which school to choose, it might be worth examining how well the school uses the resources it has in its area. As those realtors say, "location, location, location." 

Copyright © 2008 VincentCurtis Educational Register. The VincentCurtis Educational Register maintains the copyright for all material posted here. Any reproduction for other than personal use will be considered a violation of that copyright.