



Independent Schools
Council of Australia

WHY PARENTS CHOOSE INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Independence

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In March 2007 Independent Schools Queensland released the results of a comprehensive survey of parents on the factors influencing their choice of an independent school. Bill Daniels, executive director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, looks at some of the implications for schools.

Recent quantitative research on school choice undertaken by Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) offers valuable information for schools both in developing and evaluating their marketing strategies.

One of the most interesting findings of the ISQ report is the high proportion of families (61 per cent) considering only independent schools in their range of choices. (See Table 1.) This suggests that there is potential for schools to take advantage of this latent 'branding', for example by badging themselves as independent in signage. Many schools have already adopted this practice. This finding confirms that as well as making points of difference between independent schools evident to parents, there is value in differentiation of independent schools from the state and Catholic sectors.

Table 1. ISQ 2006: Sectors considered by parents when selecting schools

Respondent	Type of schools considered			
	Only Independent Schools	State & Independent Schools	Catholic & Independent Schools	Catholic, State & Independent Schools
Parent of Preschool/Prep Student	53.6%	18.2%	7.0%	21.2%
Parent of First Year Primary Student	58.5%	17.7%	6.6%	17.2%
Parent of First Year Secondary Student	65.2%	12.2%	8.6%	13.9%
Parent of Primary Transferee Student	71.0%	9.3%	5.8%	13.9%
Parent of Secondary Transferee Student	65.1%	13.8%	6.3%	14.8%
TOTAL	61.3%	14.8%	7.1%	16.8%

Reasons for choosing an independent school

When asked why they chose an independent school, rather than a school in the other education sectors, parents surveyed by ISQ cited a range of reasons. Key amongst these was the belief that the school selected provided a better all-round education. The second most important reason was access to a Christian education, followed by better discipline, the reputation of the school, similar values and beliefs, smaller class sizes, better facilities, religious affiliation/education, closeness to home and past experience of having a child at the school.

The ISQ research also extensively surveyed the factors influencing choice of an independent school. In total 37 factors were identified, and categorised as relating to type of school, the curriculum offered, the characteristics presented by the school, services offered and 'people' factors (see Table 2).

Table 2. ISQ 2006: Factors influencing choice of school

Category	Factors	Importance of factors in decision				
		None	Very little	Some	A lot	Very
School Type	Religious affiliation	15.5%	15.0%	29.3%	16.9%	23.3%
	Non-religious affiliation	43.6%	21.3%	20.6%	6.8%	7.7%
	Teaching methods/philosophy	0.4%	0.6%	6.1%	35.4%	57.4%
	Both sexes at school	13.2%	11.1%	24.9%	24.9%	25.9%
	Single sex school	59.1%	15.4%	10.8%	6.3%	8.3%
	School offers p-12 schooling	14.7%	10.2%	16.8%	19.9%	38.5%
	Schools offers only primary (or secondary)	61.4%	18.3%	11.8%	4.2%	4.3%
	School operates a junior, middle, senior structure	18.1%	13.8%	23.3%	22.2%	22.5%
	Small class size	1.7%	2.3%	15.1%	31.1%	49.7%
	Size of school	2.6%	4.2%	22.9%	31.5%	38.9%
Curriculum	Artistic & musical opportunities	2.6%	6.4%	28.1%	31.4%	31.5%
	Opportunities to learn languages	5.6%	11.8%	31.8%	27.3%	23.5%
	Sports opportunities available	3.1%	7.4%	30.0%	33.2%	26.3%
	Provision for special needs	21.2%	15.6%	23.8%	18.2%	21.2%
	Range of subjects offered	1.7%	2.5%	18.2%	40.1%	37.4%
	Facilities for science & technology	2.6%	3.9%	21.3%	37.2%	35.0%
	Provision for diverse learning pathways	5.0%	7.2%	21.9%	30.0%	35.8%
Characteristics	Encouragement responsible attitude to school work	0.2%	0.3%	4.0%	29.5%	66.0%
	Developing a sense of community responsibility	0.5%	0.6%	8.0%	33.7%	57.2%
	Students from similar social backgrounds	14.8%	20.5%	30.2%	18.9%	15.6%
	Good discipline	0.2%	0.6%	4.5%	26.0%	68.7%
	Strong academic performance	1.2%	2.0%	17.1%	35.3%	44.4%
	Preparation for student to fulfil potential in life	0.2%	0.4%	3.8%	23.1%	72.4%
	Prospects for school leavers	3.6%	3.9%	15.9%	28.9%	47.6%
	Reputation of school	0.5%	1.4%	9.2%	29.6%	59.3%
	Mix of students from all social backgrounds	7.6%	11.7%	33.5%	25.0%	22.2%
School seemed right for student's individual needs	0.5%	0.9%	8.1%	30.5%	59.9%	
Service	Level of school fees	3.5%	6.6%	36.3%	31.4%	22.2%
	Closeness to home	4.7%	8.8%	32.2%	29.5%	24.8%
	Ease of access via rail or bus	30.4%	19.0%	24.4%	14.4%	11.8%
	Availability of before or after school care	39.7%	17.4%	20.1%	10.8%	12.0%
	Presence of child-care facility on site/adjacent	56.5%	16.1%	12.1%	7.1%	8.1%
People	Experience of friends with children at the school	12.0%	7.5%	20.8%	30.5%	29.3%
	Past experience of having a child at the school	53.9%	4.4%	7.0%	12.8%	21.9%
	Own or spouses personal experience at the school	66.8%	6.8%	9.0%	7.8%	9.7%
	Child's own choice	29.3%	15.5%	27.2%	17.3%	10.7%
	Appearance/behaviour existing students	2.6%	2.2%	15.6%	36.2%	43.4%

As well as ranking the importance of each factor in their decision making on a 5-point scale of importance from 'no importance' to 'very important', parents were asked to identify the single most important of the 37 factors. While a number of parents noted that their choice was based on a combination of factors, over 94 per cent of parents did select one factor. The factor identified most frequently by parents was the ability of the school to prepare a student to fulfil their potential in later life (17.4 per cent of parents). This factor was chosen nearly twice as frequently as the next most commonly selected reason, which related to the school seeming 'right for the individual needs of the child' (8.9 per cent of responses), followed closely by 'religious affiliation' (8.3 per cent), 'appearance/behaviour of existing students' (8.0 per cent), 'experience of friends with children at the school' (7.6 per cent of responses), 'teaching methods/philosophy' (5.9 per cent), 'past experience of having a child at the school' (5.6 per cent), 'strong academic

performance' (4.6 per cent), 'good discipline' (4.6 per cent) and 'reputation of school' (3.6 per cent of responses).

ISQ's research picked up some significant differences in what parents nominated as the single most important factor affecting their choice depending on the age of their child. For example, while overall the second single most important reason was 'the school seemed right for the student's individual needs' (8.9 per cent of all responses), the second single most important reason for both prep-level parents and first year secondary parents was 'religious affiliation' (10 per cent of preparatory student parents and 8.6 per cent of first year secondary parents). For first year primary student parents, the second single most important reason was 'teaching methods/methodology' (9 per cent of first year primary parents).

This finding suggests that schools need to examine whether a different emphasis is required in their marketing communications depending on school level.

Student choice

While there is some anecdotal evidence that students are exerting a strong influence on choice of school at the secondary level, a comparison of the ISQ research results from the 2006 survey (see Table 3) with those from the association's 1999 parent survey shows a very slight weakening in the influence of children's opinions in their parents' decision making.

The ISQ research does not examine the factors that influence the students' opinion, although there are some clues in research undertaken for the federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in 2000¹. This study found:

When parents are choosing a secondary school their children often visit potential schools with them and their children's preferences are often the deciding factor. Parents report that their children usually have the same criteria that they do, although school uniform and the school their peers are likely to attend are especially important to children. (Cuttance and Stokes, p 77.)

It is interesting to note that key messages in the introductory text of the student brochure produced by the National Association of Independent Schools in the United States cover recognition of the needs and aspirations of the individual, the opportunity to make friends in a close knit community, access to teachers 'who are passionate about what they do' and learning to think for oneself.

The US experience indicates there is some value in considering students as well as parents in marketing efforts.

Table 3. ISQ 2006: How the child's opinion influenced the decision

Student	Not at all	Very little	Some	A lot	Totally
Prep	30.0%	20.9%	24.5%	21.0%	3.6%
First Year Primary	26.4%	19.4%	26.9%	21.7%	5.6%
First Year Secondary	12.8%	14.5%	32.3%	33.9%	6.6%
Transferee Primary	7.2%	12.3%	30.0%	41.6%	8.8%
Transferee Secondary	8.5%	10.5%	28.5%	39.0%	13.5%
TOTAL	19.6%	16.9%	28.3%	29.0%	6.2%

The importance of people

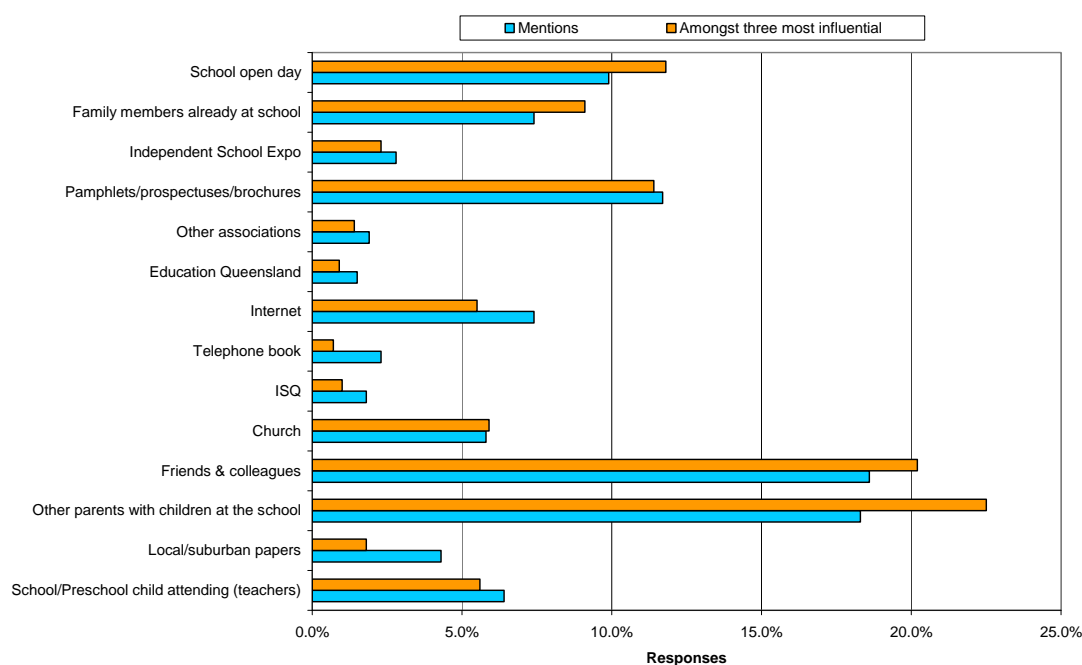
In the ISQ survey parents were asked to identify where they went for information about schools and which of these sources they considered most influential in their decision making (see Figure 1). The results show that people are the most important information source parents rely on in their decision making process. The most frequent source of information mentioned was 'Friends and colleagues', closely followed by 'Other parents with children at the school'. The next most frequently reported source was 'Pamphlets, prospectuses and brochures', which received over a third fewer responses.

The importance of networks in parents' decision making is highlighted in the Cuttance and Stokes study for DEST:

Personal contacts through their own experiences, information from other parents and from their own children have greater value for parents when judging a school than does written information provided by the school. Parents use written information to reaffirm or supplement the choice or judgement that they make on the basis of personal contacts. Parents indicate that no amount of written information can make up for an impression of poor teacher/parent, or teacher/student, interaction. Parents view written information provided by schools as a form of marketing or as being provided for public relations purposes and view it with some caution. They do not completely disregard written information, but attempt to use it to complement information from other sources. Some parents look to written information to confirm their own impressions of a school. (Page 75)

This study also found that parents can be systematic in monitoring schools through family, neighbour and parent networks and actively seek the opinions and experiences of other parents whose children attend or have attended the school (page 77).

Figure 1. ISQ 2006: Sources of information and their influence



Most of the parents surveyed in the ISQ study accessed printed information from schools before making their choice, and nearly all found it of use (Table 4). The study also shows that printed information is still of greater importance to parents as a source of information in school choice decisions than school websites, although most parents who did access websites found them useful. However, with parents relying primarily on people networks for information, ISQ’s research highlights the importance for schools in having comprehensive internal marketing strategies in place.

Table 4. ISQ 2006: How useful was printed information provided by schools in helping the decision?

Respondent	No use	Not very useful	Fairly useful	Very useful	Extremely useful
Parent of Preschool/Prep Student	0.7%	4.3%	36.5%	43.8%	14.8%
Parent of First Year Primary Student	1.5%	6.9%	35.2%	39.4%	17.0%
Parent of First Year Secondary Student	2.0%	7.0%	40.2%	41.0%	9.8%
Parent of Primary Transferee Student	1.7%	5.0%	35.2%	44.3%	13.9%
Parent of Secondary Transferee Student	1.1%	4.6%	35.1%	41.4%	17.8%
TOTAL	1.4%	5.7%	37.0%	42.0%	13.8%

School visits

ISQ’s research shows that school visits were considered of particular importance in the decision-making process by those parents who made them (Table 5). Over 82 per cent of

parents considered the visit as ‘very useful’ or ‘extremely useful’. Nearly 94 per cent of those surveyed had visited at least one school.

The importance of school visits – such as open days, school events and informal visits when parents arrive unannounced and ask to look around – is supported by the Cuttance and Stokes study, which found that these provided parents with personal experience of a school which they valued highly:

Direct interaction with the school gives parents a feel for the climate of the school. Parents often use the words ‘school climate’ or ‘school ethos’ to describe what is important to them. These experiences may be very subjective as a way of judging the effectiveness of a school, but parents trust their impressions, and indicate that they rarely misjudge a school. (Page 75)

The DEST study also identifies those areas that are of most interest to parents on these visits:

At school open days parents judge schools on how well the sessions are organised, how friendly, warm and approachable the staff are, how principals project the school, and how the schools’ values, as espoused by principals, match their own expectations of a school. They also make judgements based on the behaviour of the students at the school. (Page 76)

Table 5. ISQ 2006: How useful were school visits in helping the decision?

Respondent	No use	Not very useful	Fairly useful	Very useful	Extremely useful
Parent of Preschool/Prep Student	0.4%	1.6%	13.3%	41.2%	43.5%
Parent of First Year Primary Student	0.8%	1.0%	15.0%	43.7%	39.4%
Parent of First Year Secondary Student	0.8%	0.9%	19.0%	46.9%	32.3%
Parent of Primary Transferee Student	0.5%	0.8%	14.9%	41.9%	41.9%
Parent of Secondary Transferee Student	2.3%	0.6%	13.7%	41.1%	42.3%
TOTAL	0.7%	1.1%	15.5%	43.5%	39.2%

The role of the principal

It’s clear that for parents the ‘proof is in the pudding’, and students, teachers and principals are all very important advocates for their school. The role of the principal in particular affects parents’ decision making. The Cuttance and Stokes study found:

Parents’ impressions of principals, made either through hearing them speak at school open days or through an interview, can heavily influence their decision to choose or not choose a school. . . . Parents are also attracted to schools where the principal can articulate a vision that meets parent aspirations for their child. (Pages 82-83)

This finding reflects the results of qualitative research undertaken by ISCA in 1998², which showed that parents identify school leadership as an important aspect of schooling.

In ISQ’s study, over 90 per cent of those parents without a child already in the school rated meeting the principal as important, with 40 per cent rating it as ‘extremely important’ (see Table 6).

Table 6. ISQ 2006: The importance of meeting people associated with the school (excludes parents with students boarding at the school)

	No importance	Not very important	Important	Very important	Extremely important
Principal	2.2%	6.8%	21.6%	27.5%	41.9%
Deputy Principal	6.4%	21.6%	32.5%	23.6%	15.9%
Students	4.3%	9.3%	33.9%	30.3%	22.2%
Parents of Current Students	6.1%	14.3%	31.7%	27.7%	20.2%

Schools invest considerable resources in developing marketing tools. ISQ’s study, which surveyed just over 4,000 parents in 85 independent schools in Queensland, provides invaluable information for schools to create targeted messages and tools that will best communicate their information to parents.

NOTE

ISCA acknowledges the generosity of Independent Schools Queensland in making a full copy of their report and data tables available for this article. A report ‘What Parents Want – Key Findings’, which summarises the key findings and insights from ISQ’s survey, is available at www.aisq.qld.edu.au.

¹ Cuttance, P and Stokes, SA (2000). Reporting on Student and School Achievement. Research report prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, January 2000. An online version is available at <http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2000/cuttance.pdf>

² Irving Saulwick and Associates (1999). What Parents Want from Their Children’s Education in Independent Schools. Condensed report of a qualitative study undertaken in 1998 for the National Council of Independent Schools’ Associations (NCISA). Published by the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria Inc. Available at www.isca.edu.au and www.ais.vic.edu.au