

How to Get the Most Out of Your School Tour (at Sterne and Other Schools)

I've led hundreds of admissions tours for prospective parents. But it wasn't until I was shopping around for kindergarten programs for my son, that I had a chance to step out of "work mode" and take on the lens of a parent.

There's a formula for admissions tours at every school – an intro from the admissions team, a talk from the Head, maybe an opportunity to meet a parent, or chat with a student. This framework aside, it's important to remember that schools are, first and foremost, living, breathing institutions with their own personalities and cultures. Mondays are sometimes tired, cranky days at schools, especially first thing in the morning. The air is thick with anticipation on Friday afternoons. At Sterne, club days, Expedition Days, and "socials" run by the Associated Student Body produce the echo of excited yelps in high school corridors and prompts to "Please stop running" in the lower school hallways. Being in a school bursting with life can be equal parts invigorating and overwhelming for parents who are trying to find the perfect home for their children and teens.

Fortunately, there are ways that discerning parents can get a sense of a school beyond the curated classroom visits and stops along the tour route that show off beautiful facilities or particularly compelling bits of student art. It's all about asking the right questions, and knowing what to look for.

Many families who are interested in Sterne are here because of the best-in-class learning support. A caveat before you read the questions below: Sterne approaches has an integrated learning support approach, and utilizes Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This is one of our greatest differentiators and is core to our philosophy.

Below are some crucial questions to ask the learning support team when touring other Bay Area independent schools:

-How do students qualify for learning support services?

-How many learning specialists are on staff at this school? What is the typical caseload for these specialists?

-How many days or hours per week should I expect a learning specialist to work with my child?

-How is student progress monitored and communicated to parents? How is student progress monitored and communicated to other specialists?

-What classes might my child have to miss in order to receive support services? (It's common for students to be pulled out of the core class in which they need support. It's also common to be pulled out of an elective class.)

-How does the school support students so they don't feel "othered" when they receive these services?

-How are accommodations determined and communicated to the teacher? How are accommodations determined and communicated to parents?

If your child has reading or writing challenges, ask:

-How does this school approach reading and writing instruction? (Listen for references to "structured literacy". This is the explicit teaching of phonics, decoding, and spelling for younger students. Older students should receive explicit instruction in reading comprehension, and written expression.)

-How does this school use audiobooks, dictation, and AI to support students with literacy challenges? If you get blank stares, this will tell you a lot.

Observing classrooms can also offer a great deal of insight into the school's educational philosophy, and teacher training.

If your child has attention or processing difficulties, look for these things happening in classrooms:

-Teachers circulating the room, and using non-verbal prompts, or proximity to help students focus in.

-The presence of “multimodal teaching”: key phrases on the board, verbal repetition of important information, prompting students to repeat or summarize information, subtitles on any video content, and choice boards. (Beware of teachers who talk too much or too quickly. While direct instruction is an essential part of any lesson plan, too much verbal input can overwhelm students with auditory processing challenges.)

-A sensory friendly environment: look for quiet work areas, flexible seating, uncluttered wall space (especially near the white board and teaching area), and organized stations.

-Deliberate practices for “Socratic seminar” or discussion: too much unstructured, informal calling out can produce auditory overload for some students. This should be a short and organized part of classroom instruction, and not the whole lesson.

-A truly seasoned teacher will know which students need more time to process: using their name to draw their attention, a teacher may say, “Sarah, I’m going to call on you for the next answer”.

Finding a great school for your child may feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. But with your new knowledge of how proper learning support, and high-quality teaching can transform your child’s education, only a few schools should truly stand out in your search process.

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