

School open days go beyond the sales pitch, Madeleine Heffernan writes.

Liz Rouse likens choosing a school to buying a house – you will probably need to inspect plenty before you find the right one.

“You might walk into three houses and think, ‘I could never buy this one.’ You go into the fourth, and it might not be the most glamorous house, but it’s the one you feel you want to buy,” said Dr Rouse, who has done research on children starting school.

“Choosing a school is very much like that – it’s the vibe you get.”

Open day period is upon us, providing an opportunity for schools to spruik and for families to get a feel for the place, the students and the principal.

Open days won’t provide all the answers for parents weighing up where to send their child.

But they will reward parents who have thought deeply about what they want in a school, and attend as many as possible with questions at the ready.

“There’s a lot to be said for these anonymous rock-up-and-see-the-school days because you’re able to get a view of the school that is not necessarily the sales pitch,” said Dr Rouse, senior lecturer in education (early childhood) at Deakin University.

Dr Rouse said parents should ask students the best thing about attending the school, the worst thing, and why. Parents should also observe how the principal interacts with students and ask how this school would get to know their child, she said.

Educational anthropologist Martin Forsey said open days were an opportunity for parents to cut through the marketing guff and get answers to their questions.

“The grounds can make a difference but people make schools, and it’s very important to try and get a sense of that,” he said.

The associate professor in anthropology and sociology at the University of WA said there were three key areas for parents to think about beforehand: the academic, extracurricular and the pastoral and discipline side.

Open season

“I’d be asking them [the school] about the philosophical approach to care, their discipline programs,” he said. “And I’d be asking the child guides about their typical day and how the school deals with problems in class.”

Bradley Fry is principal of K-12 school Tintern Grammar in the Melbourne suburb of Ringwood. He said the questions parents ask on open days generally fell into three categories: what the school stands for; its policies on things of concern such as bullying, mobile phones and subject offerings; and “nuts and bolts” questions such as class sizes.

Mr Fry said parents “really need to try and develop a view of what they believe is important in an education for their child and family before they attend the open day”.

“Once parents have a good

CONTACT

education@theage.com.au

VISIT

The Age Education Facebook page

understanding of what they’re looking for in a school (academics, sports, arts, holistic development, etc), they need to get a view on if they feel this school is going to prepare their child for a globalised world and the move from school to tertiary, and then the world of work beyond that.”

Melbourne mother Zoe Metherell has attended a few open days and plans to attend more as she and her husband decide where to send their son next year.

Ms Metherell said open days gave an insight into the school’s approach and community, and

were particularly useful when parents had a lot of schools to choose from.

“I live in an area with a lot of choices and I’ve been to interesting open days where they presented their philosophies and their approach,” she said. “And how else do you decide – the school’s website?”

Choosing a school is particularly challenging for parents of children with a disability.

Catherine Devine is looking for a school for her second child, five-year-old Joshie, who is non-verbal and was recently diagnosed with autism.

Joshie also has a complex medical history, being born with a hole in his heart and without his right thumb.

Mrs Devine said while Joshie won’t start at a mainstream

school, ideally he would move across through the bridging program offered by special schools when he is ready.

Her advice for parents of children with special needs is to cast a wide net.

“We’re really looking at two schools that are in close proximity and seem to be a fit for his needs, but there are five that might be suitable so I’m going to see all five,” she said.

“Definitely go to the open days because it will give you a feel for the school.

“Make sure you have a really clear list of questions and an understanding of what your child is going to need at school.

“And if you go in with the same questions and ask each, then at least you can compare apples with apples.”

Catherine Devine is looking for a school for her second child, five-year-old Joshie.
Photo: Eddie Jim

