

No-Tears Guide to Moving to Fairfax



How to Choose the **Right School**

Your guide to Fairfax County Public Schools
scores, ratings, and special programs

Presented by Home by School.com

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Because we want you to be successful in ultimately finding the Right Home for your family, we have put together The No-Tears Guide to Moving to Fairfax. This report on “How to choose the Right School” is part of such guide. In this report, we have simply compiled information which is public and freely available on official websites.

However, please know that, by law, we cannot recommend a school over another.

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How to choose a public school in Fairfax County

When Ellen's family was getting transferred into Northern Virginia, she set out to find the right school for her children first. But finding the right school turned out to be a very difficult task because all the information was scattered on the web. She thought her needs were simple: a good elementary school that would go to grade 6 and a good middle school that would only house grades 7 and 8. After much research on different rankings and programs available, she thought that she had found some good candidate schools, so she turned her focus on finding a home that would allow her children to attend those schools.

Your home address matters

As you know, in Fairfax County, Virginia, your home's address determines which schools your children can attend. And choosing the right school for your children can be tough. There are so many factors to consider: test scores, school ratings, the size and condition of the facilities, the reputations of the teachers, and so on.

The purpose of this guide is to give you an overview of the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) system in order to help you choose the schools that best meet your needs.

Let's start with an overview of Fairfax County:

The 411 on Fairfax County and its public schools



**Fairfax County
Public Schools**

Fairfax County, Virginia is considered part of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Its area spans almost 400 square miles west of our Nation's Capital. As of 2008, its population exceeds 1 Million inhabitants.

The Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) system is comprised of 197 schools and centers.

There are:

- 139 elementary schools (PK-5 or 6),
- 3 middle schools (6-8),
- 19 middle schools (7-8),
- 4 secondary schools (7 -12),
- 21 high schools (9 -12),
- 2 alternative high schools, and
- 8 special education centers

The FCPS system is ranked 12th nationally by enrollment (it's also the largest in the State of Virginia) with estimated 175,296 students in the 2010-2011 school year.

Sure, so the FCPS system is large, but how good is it?

Schools in Fairfax County are pretty good

The June 2010 edition of Newsweek magazine ranked all FCPS's high schools in the top 6% of public schools in the nation – based on its annual Challenge Index.

How is the FCPS system divided?

Fairfax County's School System is divided, for administrative purposes, into Clusters. Those clusters are further divided into high school pyramids.



The Fairfax County Public Schools map – divided into clusters

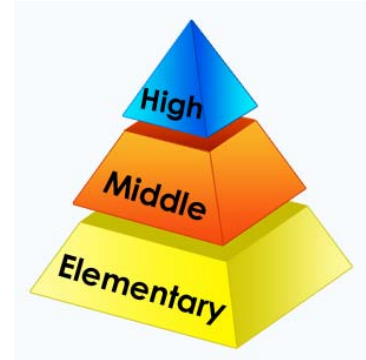
Understanding high school pyramids

Most school districts work like a pyramid. At the top is a high school, and underneath it, supporting that high school, are one or more middle schools and several elementary schools.

For example, the Lake Braddock Pyramid has 6 elementary schools and 2 middle schools all feeding into the Lake Braddock high school.

Why do pyramids matter?

Because the high school your children attend can have a huge impact on where they go to college, and how prepared they are for their college years.



The high school pyramid with its middle and elementary "feeder" schools

What if your kids are still too young for high school?

Even if your children aren't ready for high school yet, you'll want to be thinking ahead:

Which high school has the best preparation for college, the right college counseling office for your kids' needs, the best record of placing students at top ranked colleges?

Once you know this, you can look for a school in the base of the pyramid to find the elementary or middle school that's the best match for your children. Over the years they'll progress up the pyramid to the top.

Unless you plan to move before your children are in high school, you'll want to consider their entire pyramid experience when you pick a neighborhood to live in.

Something to keep in mind is that some schools in Fairfax County do not belong to a pyramid. Such is the case of all alternative high schools as well as the magnet high school Thomas Jefferson for Science and Technology.

So, now that you know how important is the school your kids attend, how can you tell which schools are assigned to a specific home?

How to determine which schools serve a home address



The Fairfax County School board determines the boundaries

To determine which schools serve a particular home address, visit the official Fairfax County Public Schools' boundary information system, available at:

<http://boundary.fcps.edu/boundary/>

From this page, you can enter a home address to get the official school assignments for that home. You can also get driving directions and print out school boundary maps.

In the next installment of the No-Tears Guide to Moving to Fairfax, you'll have the opportunity to browse homes for sale – organized by school (not just by zip code or postal city).

Now that you know the very basics of the FCPS system, let's move on to how to select a high school – starting with three different ratings.

How to select a high school based on ratings

In this report we have compiled three different sources of ratings that you can use for evaluating and comparing high schools. There is a table at the bottom of this section with all the FCPS high schools and their three ratings – all in one place.

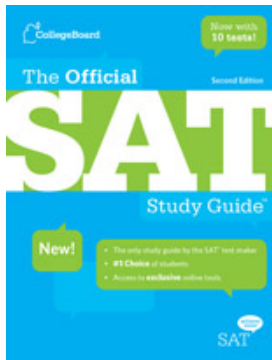
The three most commonly-used sources of ratings are:

- SAT (formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores
- SOL (Standards of Learning) ratings
- The Challenge Index

Let's look at each of them to see how they are used:

What is the SAT test?

Some parents are interested in learning about the effectiveness of a high school to prepare its students for college. A good way to gauge this effectiveness is to look at average SAT scores by school.



The College Board, an organization comprised of thousands of universities, colleges and higher education institutions, administers the famous SAT test - which is the one required by most higher education institutions as part of their admissions process. This test is a standard way of measuring students' ability to do college-level work.

The College Board association administers standardized tests such as the SAT

In Fairfax County, most high schools offer pointers on how to register online for this test through their counseling offices, and SAT preparation courses are offered through the Adult and Community Education (ACE).

Now, let's see how some people use Standards of Learning to rate schools:

What are Standards of Learning (SOL)?



The Virginia Dept. of Education administers the Standards of Learning (SOL)

Standards of Learning are rigorous academic standards provided by the government, measured annually through special tests and assessments.

These Standards of Learning are applied to subjects such as: English, Mathematics, Science and History/Social Science.

The Standards of Learning are administered by State, and thus, the Virginia Department of Education is in charge of keeping track of each school and its performance.

How do some websites calculate a single-digit 1 to 10 rating based on SOL?

Some popular school-comparison websites have created a 1 to 10 rating for schools based on the State's Standards of Learning. What they have done is something similar to this:

Take the testing results for each school (which are expressed as a % of students who passed each test), then averaged the results and rounded them up to a single-digit number (1-10).

For example, a SOL test result average for a high school (9-12) looks like this:

Test	% Passed
English	98
Math	98
Writing	98
History	99
Science	98

After averaging the results and rounding the results, this school's 1 to 10 rating is: 9.

If you want to see the detailed School Report Card by school or by division (i.e. county), visit the Virginia Department of Education – the link is in the Resources section at the end of this report.

As you can see, test scores are one way to rate schools. But some people think that test scores don't necessarily reflect how good a school is for a child. One of these people is Jay Matthews, a columnist with The Washington Post, who created The Challenge Index:

What is The Challenge Index?

About a decade ago, Jay Matthews and his colleagues realized that the traditional way of rating schools (based mostly on test scores) did not help the typical American family with selecting schools in typical neighborhoods.

In response to that, Jay Matthews maintains a yearly ranking of DC Metro Area public high schools, which is not based on test scores but instead is based on the opportunity given to all students to rise to the challenge of taking advanced courses' exams.

What the index measures is the total number of students in the high school (not just seniors) who took an advanced-level test (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge, or another college-level test) divided by the number of graduating seniors. The index is meant to highlight how well each high school works at preparing its students for college.

Another calculation used by The Challenge Index is the "Equity and Excellence Rate" (E&E%). This rate is the percentage of all graduating seniors who had at least one score on an advanced-level test. According to The Washington Post, the average AP Equity and Excellence Rate for all U.S. schools is about 15 percent.

The complete 2009/2010 Washington Post Challenge Index can be found at the link provided in the Resources section, at the end of this report.

Now that we have reviewed what the SAT, SOL and The Challenge Index are, let's compare them side by side:

Comparing high school ratings

In the following table, we have compiled the three most commonly-used ratings for ranking high schools:

- The Challenge Index
- SOL (Standards of Learning) ratings for Virginia
- Average SAT scores

Additionally, for comparison purposes, we have included all of the high schools in Fairfax County (including Falls Church City and the City of Alexandria), as well as some high schools in Northern Virginia counties adjacent to Fairfax (Arlington and Loudoun).

Public High School	District	The Challenge Index 2010		2009-2010 1 to 10 Rating (Based on SOL)	2010 Average SAT Scores **
		Index	E&E %		
T.C. Williams	Alexandria	1.505	28.00%	1	1442
Wakefield	Arlington	2.554	36.60%	2	1484
Washington-Lee	Arlington	4.797	45.50%	5	1670
Yorktown	Arlington	4.344	73.60%	6	1741
George Mason	F. Church	5.333	66.70%	7	1795
Annandale	Fairfax	1.391	40.80%	4	1518
Centreville	Fairfax	3.591	51.90%	5	1596
Chantilly	Fairfax	3.125	51.30%	8	1663
Edison	Fairfax	1.87	43.40%	4	1512
Fairfax	Fairfax	3.369	55.30%	8	1635
Falls Church	Fairfax	2.358	30.20%	6	1505
Hayfield Sec	Fairfax	2.216	30.20%	4	1475
Herndon	Fairfax	3.523	54.10%	4	1642
James Madison	Fairfax	3.569	59.70%	8	1734
Lake Braddock Sec	Fairfax	3.418	51.70%	8	1639
Langley	Fairfax	3.767	67.10%	9	1812
Lee	Fairfax	1.441	39.00%	3	1003
Marshall	Fairfax	3.228	61.40%	9	1690
McLean	Fairfax	4.002	70.30%	8	1778
Mount Vernon	Fairfax	1.183	29.30%	3	1458
Oakton	Fairfax	3.496	59.70%	9	1729
Robinson Sec	Fairfax	2.708	48.60%	8	1665

Public High School	District	The Challenge Index 2010		2009-2010 1 to 10 Rating (Based on SOL)	2010 Average SAT Scores **
		Index	E&E %		
South County Sec	Fairfax	2.773	48.70%	7	1572
South Lakes	Fairfax	3.135	48.00%	3	1579
Stuart	Fairfax	2.429	41.30%	3	1532
Thomas Jefferson*	Fairfax	7.307	100.00%	10	2200
W.T. Woodson	Fairfax	4.137	69.40%	8	1738
West Potomac	Fairfax	2.244	44.20%	4	1561
West Springfield	Fairfax	2.873	48.90%	9	1644
Westfield	Fairfax	2.664	54.90%	7	1625
Briar Woods	Loudoun	3.173	40.10%	7	1598
Broad Run	Loudoun	3.346	36.50%	7	1611
Dominion	Loudoun	3.254	28.30%	6	1607
Freedom	Loudoun	3.2	32.00%	5	1543
Heritage	Loudoun	2.158	31.70%	4	1559
Loudoun County	Loudoun	2.761	31.70%	6	1607
Loudoun Valley	Loudoun	3.542	43.90%	6	1622
Park View	Loudoun	1.899	25.80%	1	1474
Potomac Falls	Loudoun	2.41	39.80%	8	1626
Stone Bridge	Loudoun	3.21	41.50%	8	1639

* " Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County, with a Challenge Index rating of 7.575 and a Challenge Index Equity and Excellence rate of 100 percent, is a magnet school with a selective admissions process and an average SAT score, 2214, higher than the highest average for any regular enrollment school in the country. The Challenge Index is designed to show which schools are challenging average students and does not work well with schools such as Jefferson that have few or no average students." – The Washington Post

** The SAT National and Virginia Average scores for School Year 2009-2010 are 1509 and 1521, respectively. The maximum SAT score is 2400.

One way to select a school is based on ratings, but special programs are also a very important aspect for selecting a school.

How to select a high school based on special programs

Most high schools in Fairfax County are fairly comparable in terms of academic performance. And students need much more than academics to complete their education. When students participate in a special program, they have the opportunity to learn very valuable skills beyond the standard academic curriculum.



Some FCPS Schools offer Spanish Language Immersion Programs

What are special programs?

Special programs are a way of grouping different regularly occurring activities which cater to a specific group of students. For example Fairfax County Public

Schools offers special programs focused on advanced academics, language immersion, fine arts, and special education, among many others.

Why choose by special program?

Every child is different, and every child has different needs. Take Cathy's experience, for example. When her family was moving back to the DC area for her husband's job at the State Department, she wanted her kids to continue learning French, as they were coming back from a country where they had been surrounded by that language. One of her priorities for finding the right school for her children was to find a school with a French immersion program.

Other families have other needs. Perhaps they want to have their children continue with the International Baccalaureate program, which is only offered in select high schools in the County. Or maybe they want their kindergartener to go to a full-day program – currently available in about 75% of the elementary schools in the County.

Whatever your needs, it's best to identify them and then to go looking for the right school to fulfill them— you'll be glad to have put in the effort of doing the research up front.

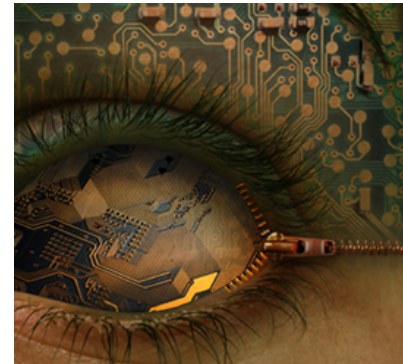
Below is a list of special programs available in the Fairfax County Public Schools system.

FCPS special programs

Fairfax County offers over a couple dozen special programs. We have loosely grouped them here by type, to make it easier for you to find the ones that might be of interest.

High School-specific

- * Online Campus
- * Career and Technical Education
- * High School Academies
- * High School for Science and Technology



A beautiful example of digital art created by FCPS students. This was entered into the SAIC Technology and the Arts Competition in April 2010

Advanced Academics and College-related

- * Advanced Academics
- * Advanced Placement (AP)
- * International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB)
- * International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP)
- * College Success Programs

Student Activities and Athletics

- * Student Activities and Athletics offered at the secondary level
- * Middle School After-School Programs

Languages & Fine Arts

- * English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- * Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES)
- * Foreign Language Two-Way and Partial-Immersion Program
- * Fine Arts

Services for younger children and special education

- * Family and Early Childhood Education Program, Head Start, Early Head Start
- * Preschool Diagnostic Centers
- * Special Education

Academic intervention

- * Title I
- * Professional Development Academic Center
- * Summer School



Supporting Services

- * Psychology Services
- * School Counseling
- * Social Work Services
- * Student Safety and Wellness
- * Day Care (School-Age Child Care - SACC)

Elementary Magnet Schools participate with The Kennedy Center's Changing Education Through the Arts (CETA) program

Elementary School-specific

- * Elementary Schools for the Arts and Sciences (Magnet schools)

Adult Education and Alternative High Schools

- * Adult/Alternative High Schools
- * Adult and Community Education (ACE)
- * Alternative Learning Centers
- * Interagency Alternative Schools
- * Mentor Works
- * Transitional High School Program

The complete list of special programs with descriptions and links to more information is available at the Fairfax County Public Schools website. A link to the web page is available at the end of this report, in the Resources section.

So far, we have explored the two main avenues to selecting a high school. First, by reviewing the most commonly-used ratings, and then, by giving you an overview of the different special programs offered by Fairfax County Public Schools.

And, what if you are also interested in choosing an elementary or a middle school? Well, then... read on!

How to select a middle or elementary school

Many parents find that selecting an elementary or a middle school is a similar process to selecting a high school. The three most-commonly used criteria are:

- * Ratings (in this case based on Standards of Learning – SOL)
- * Special programs available, and
- * Grades offered

Let's start with ratings:

SOL ratings for elementary and middle schools

The Standards of Learning (SOL) ratings for elementary and middle schools are very similar to the ones for high schools. Students get tested in grades 3 through 6 in some or all of the following subjects: English, Mathematics, History, and Science.

Just like with high schools, some websites average and round up the test percentages (pass/fail) per school and display a “school rating” as a 1 to 10 single-digit number.

Be sure to follow the link to the Virginia Department of Education website - available in the Resources section of this report- for detailed tables containing SOL test results for the 139 elementary schools and the 22 middle schools in Fairfax County.

Once you feel comfortable with the SOL-based ratings for a school, you can also focus on the special programs available.



The After-School programs for Middle Schools vary by site

Special programs

As you could see from the “FCPS Programs” list just above this section, there are quite a variety of special programs offered by schools across the County. But every school is different. So if you or your children are very interested in a specific program you will want to ensure that the school that you select offers that program – in order to avoid disappointment.

Another element which you might want to consider is: the grades offered at a specific school.

Grades offered

Do you recall Ellen’s story from the beginning of this report? She was looking for a middle school that would only have grades 7 & 8. This was an important consideration for her because she preferred that her children stayed together in elementary school through grade 6.

Other people want their children to attend a secondary school comprising of grades 7-12. It really depends on each family’s preference. What is yours?

You can find out the grades offered for your preferred schools by following the link to school profiles in the Resources section of this report.

Now that you have learned all about the details of choosing a school, let’s summarize in the next section.

Summary

In this report we have covered some basic stats on Fairfax County and its public schools. You also learned what school pyramids are and why they are important to your home search. Finally, we went into great detail on how to choose a school (high, middle, or elementary) in Fairfax County based on:

- * **Three kinds of ratings** (SOL, SAT and The Challenge Index)
- * **Special programs available**, and
- * **Grades offered**

Through using this part of The No-Tears Guide to Moving to Fairfax, we feel confident that you can make your decision on which is the right school for your needs.

Because we want you to be successful in ultimately finding the Right Home for your family, we have put together The No-Tears Guide to Moving to Fairfax. This report on "How to choose the Right School" is part of such guide. In this report, we have simply compiled information which is public and freely available on official websites.

However, please know that, by law, we cannot recommend a school over another.

If you have any further questions about this guide, please contact us. We'd be glad to be of help.



Next day:
How to find homes
for sale by school

What's next?

Feel free to dig deep through the resources that we have linked below. Also, the day after receiving this first download, you will receive the second download of The No-Tears Guide to Moving to Fairfax. The second download contains a brief intro on how to find homes for sale by school on our site – and the exclusive link for searching.

Resources

FCPS 2010-2011 Handbook: Building the Future... Child by Child

<http://www.fcps.edu/about.htm>

This handbook includes instructions for:

- * Registering your child for school
- * Before- and after-school care
- * Special programs

SAT and SOL test scores by school for Fairfax County are available through each school's profile:

<http://commweb.fcps.edu/schoolprofile/>

FCPS tables with SAT scores:

<http://www.fcps.edu/testing/scorelist.htm>

The Standards of Learning (SOL) Ratings for Virginia:

<http://www.doe.virginia.gov>

The Washington Post's complete ranking of area High Schools using The Challenge Index:

<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/challengeindex/ranking/2010/>

FCPS Comprehensive list of Special Programs

<http://www.fcps.edu/about/specpro.htm>

FCPS Official Boundary Information System

<http://boundary.fcps.edu/boundary/>

Comprehensive articles on relocating to Fairfax County:

www.HomebySchool.com/Blog

Contact Us

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Happy house hunting!



P.S. If you find anything that bugs you, please click on the bug to send me an email. Nothing is too small or too big. And if I can, I'll be sure to fix it.

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