pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

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Ask Pact

How Do We Choose The Best School?

Q: We are looking at schools in our city to decide where to send our five-year-old African American son who we adopted transracially. We are concerned because our local school is mostly white but it has a much better reputation than the school that has more diversity. We want our son to get a good education. What should we do?

A: Many families grapple with this issue. Looking for an environment that is able to support your child's racial identity and able to nourish your child's spirit is often the beginning of finding that we must make compromises on behalf of our children—a realization that can bring up feelings of real angst. Often no perfect school is available.

Goals and priorities for your child's school experience.
Very often, kindergarten is children's first significant foray out into the world without parents. For transracially or transethnically adopted children, school is the first place where they must answer questions about the nature of their family and understand "who they are" in the context of the color of their skin without their parents available to supply answers for them. School can be a rich environment for these children to learn racial and cultural cues when they interact with other children who are the same race and/or ethnicity as themselves.

What does your child want in school?
The first step in choosing a school is to decide what is most important to and for your child. Make a list of the things he or she considers important. If you aren't certain, it's a great time to sit down and find out. What an esteem- and pride-builder for your children to understand their own responsibility in determining their future. After the list is completed, select the five most important items.

What do you value most in a school for your child?
Make a list for yourself. Write down everything you think is important and then go back and choose the five things you consider most essential. What are the life goals you have for your children? This list should consider your children's needs, not just in the context of school but when they are on their own. What skills and abilities do you hope they will be comfortable with?

Your lists may have some very different priorities and goals. If so, this is a wonderful opportunity to reassess and think about this first school experience in terms of life goals for your child, your children's wishes and your academic expectations. We all succeed in environments where we belong or where there is something we want and desire to acquire. One of the most common things we hear from young transracially-adopted people is their desire for friends or siblings who are "brown like me" or share "eyes that look like mine." This tells us something important about our children's need to fit in and feel comfortable.

Diversity vs. Educational Excellence
Too often schools are assessed in ways that make us believe that better schools are whiter schools.

Sometimes institutional racism makes this true; sometimes-racist assumptions create a knowledge base that says this is true when it isn't. Do your homework first. Make sure that you compare the more diverse school with the less diverse on a level playing field for educational standards, not just the rumors or cultural wisdom of white folks in your area. Visit both schools and ask to speak to parents from the school to see how satisfied they are before you decide.

Every child is an individual and all factors must be weighed. It is essential, however, to count race and diversity among the very important factors when considering a school environment for a child of color.

Transracially-adopted people are particularly susceptible to feeling uncomfortable because of their "differentness." Adoptive parents need to look for a school where difference is valued and where opportunities for comfort exist. At the same time, in a race-conscious society children of color are in particular need of a good educational grounding to counteract some of the stereotyping and bias they are sure to experience in the future. Parents must ask themselves if children who graduate from a given school come away with the skills they need. They must also notice which children do well in a particular school's setting, noting especially the school's record with children of the same race as your child. One school that may very well serve one child can be wrong for another.

One way to think about your choice, which may be useful, is to ask yourself what you can replicate best outside of the school situation? Which will be easier to duplicate elsewhere? If he goes to the more diverse school, will you be able to introduce the intellectual stimulation and learning opportunities you want your child to have outside of the classroom setting by doing things at home or having your child join special activity groups? If he goes to the school with a more complete program are you confident that you will honestly be able to connect your child to significant relationships with other children and adults who share his birth culture outside of the school setting? For most transracial adoptive families it is easier to do the first than the second, especially if they live in a white neighborhood.

You can do this. Remember, no one knows your child better than you. Watch, listen, pay attention and you will find the best solution. Don't take for granted that what you always imagined for your children will necessarily be what's best for your transracially-adopted child. Yours is a family built on difference, commitment and choice. Make it work for all of you.