CHOOSING A HIGH SCHOOL IN AMSTERDAM

A dozen factors in deciding which school is best for you

Introduction
The choice of a suitable school after elementary school is a growing issue in discussions between parents of elementary school students. Children visit elementary school from age 4 until 12 and then go to a high school which fits their level of competence. During their stay at elementary school all pupils take tests, by means of which the teachers determine their capacities and their level of entry in high school education. Apart from the assessment of the teacher there is also a national test as an independent second data point, but the opinion of the teacher is more influential by law.

There are three levels in high school education with a few sublevels at the lowest level (VMBO).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Name (abbrev.)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest level</td>
<td>VWO</td>
<td>Pre-university level</td>
<td>6 years (12-18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate level</td>
<td>HAVO</td>
<td>Leads to higher vocational education</td>
<td>5 years (12-17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lowest level</td>
<td>VMBO</td>
<td>Lower vocational education</td>
<td>4 years (12-16)</td>
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Individual schools can offer one, some or all levels of high school education. So there are for instance VWO-HAVO-schools, there are VWO-only-schools and also HAVO-VMBO-schools.

Most parents with children of around 9 or 10 years old, already start looking at the available options for high school. That is about two years before they have to make their final choice. Why so long before?
The answer is that many of them are tensed about that choice. In a way they are right: the age of 12 to 18 is a very important age, as youngsters are being prepped to study and for their general role in society. It is also the age at which some of them will get to know the love of their life and where decisions are made which are crucial for their professional development and personal career.

By constitution everyone is free to choose a school, but being accepted by a school is a different thing. There are two factors that pay a role in admission:
  1. A child can only be admitted at a school when the level of the child (determined by the elementary school) fits to the level of the school.
  2. Some schools are very popular, so some schools can only admit a limited number of the students who want to go to that school.

Every school board and every principal wants their school to be popular. For several reasons it is nicer to work at a popular school than at a school that has to fight for its existence.
Since 29 years I am now the principal of a high school in the city of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). When I became principal, my school had to fight for its existence: the number of students was much too low according to the limits that were drawn by law (and the number was getting smaller every year), the building had many problems, the financial situation was terrible and the school had a bad reputation in a lot of ways. Cooperation between many people changed that situation; many things were done to improve every aspect. Now it is a school with only the highest level of education and it is the most popular school in Amsterdam in that highest level (report of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, 2013). We have gained a lot of experience in making a school popular through a strong understanding of the factors that lead to choosing a school.

I will discuss these factors in the following part of this paper. The first four factors are more or less objective factors.

1. **Distance**
   In areas where there are small schools (in villages etc.) people hardly make an issue of school choice: in some areas there is only one school that fits the level of the child. In cities, however, distances to schools are always short, there is a lot of choice of schools for all levels and there are good means of transportation (buses, trams, subway and of course: the bike!). So in the city distance is not the most important factor.

2. **Money**
   By law it is forbidden to ask the parents for a fee for attending a state funded school, that means 99% of the schools in The Netherlands, including both public and independent schools. The parents may donate some money to the schools, but it is explicitly voluntarily. At my school for almost every student parents pay around € 200 each year ($ 240), voluntarily, without any obligation. Apart from that, parents of course pay for school trips etc. So money is hardly an issue in choosing a school.

3. **Special needs**
   Quantitatively not a very strong factor, but of course some buildings are more accessible for children with special needs. And some schools pay more attention
to facilitating needs for things such as dyslexia, ADHD etc. For some people it is an important factor.

4. The levels offered by the school
As mentioned in the introduction, there are three levels and (in the lowest level) a few sublevels. Every child gets an advice from elementary school. That advice is decisive for the schools that the child can be admitted. And of course that gives the following mechanism:

- Most parents think their child is stimulated most when he/she attends a school where the level of the other students is high.
- So when a child gets a HAVO label, the parents will try to convince the elementary school that the child really deserves a VWO label. To convince the school they sometimes have their children tested by an expert, trying to prove that they are smarter than the elementary school says he/she is.
- Not every elementary school teacher is strong enough to resist that pressure.
- As a result, high schools have raised their “thresholds” by more thoroughly investigating the child’s results in elementary school.

5. Religion
In small communities in rural areas religion may also be a factor, but in the cities it is almost non-existent. 50 years ago religion was a real factor. There were catholic, protestant and non-denominational schools and they still exist, but nowadays they have students of all kinds of religions and of course many non-religious students. There is one exception in Amsterdam: there are two Jewish schools. They are small and they have a special permission from the state to exist, although the number of students is much too low. Of course that has a historical reason.

Until a few years ago there was also an Islamic high school, but the results of that school were below the demanded level (checked by the state inspection), so it had to close.
6. Educational philosophy
There is a wide variety of educational philosophies in the Dutch school world. It more or less corresponds to our national way of doing politics: there are over 30 political parties in the Netherlands, of which there are now 14 represented in our national parliament.

In our country there is much freedom in education. As long as the results are sufficient, every school is free to use its own teaching method. In fact that is also generally true for the teachers in a school.

The educational philosophy is for many parents an important issue. There are three high schools based on the method of Maria Montessori, there is one big Dalton school in Amsterdam, one Steiner school, there are a few bilingual schools (Dutch + English), schools with special focus on science and technical subjects, schools with much focus on art or sports and so on...
My school has special focus on the level of language education: 80% of my students do not only do the national exam in the foreign language, but also a higher level exam for their chosen second language (English, Spanish or Italian).

7. Extracurricular activities
To attract more students, high schools organize all kinds of extracurricular activities in several fields: sports, excursions, exchanges, week trips to other cities (Rome is very popular), school clubs, theater education etc.
8. **Lottery**
Some schools are more popular than others and everybody knows that very well. Parents know which schools have to organize a lottery, supervised by an official notary, because there are more enrollments than the school can accommodate. Of course that knowledge causes strategic behavior. Parents try to convince their kids that other schools also might be interesting and fun, just to avoid the lottery. Understandable, because after a negative result at the lottery of one school, other popular schools may in the meantime also have too many enrollments.

In Amsterdam we try to avoid strategic behavior, by introducing a system of matching starting next year.

9. **Image and status of the school**
Parents find this more important than children. Some parents want to tell proudly at parties to their friends and relatives that their child is attending a school of status, a school with a positive history, with a good reputation.

10. **Friends**
Children don’t want to lose all their friends when they leave elementary school and go to high school. So what your friends do is an important factor for many children. It shouldn’t be, because they make new friends of course, but it is a factor.

11. **Quality of the school: the results**
This should be the most important factor, but it isn’t. Of course parents look at the results of the school: the exam results, the numbers of students leaving before the exam, the average marks, but somehow the next factor is more important to them. It could be interesting to see how many students go to university, but in Holland that is not an important issue and it is not measured. This could be explained because all students have a national exam at the end of the secondary school, which is considered to be very important. So results are not really very important in choosing a school, but of course when there is negative publicity about a school with bad marks, then it’s another thing.
12. The social atmosphere at the school

This is what it’s all about! At every enrollment interview we ask the children and their parents what made them come to us. About 90% says something like “the social atmosphere”. Children and their parents have to feel at home in their future school, everything else is less important. My experience is that the parents decide which 5 or 6 schools are visited during the open days and that they let the child decide more or less which school is finally selected.

So all schools do their best to show a good social atmosphere at their schools during the open days. But of course you cannot hide a bad atmosphere, so it’s really not such a bad instrument to choose a school.

When a board or a principal wants to make his or her school more popular, the best idea is to work on social atmosphere, but that is also one of the most difficult things to do.

The main job in this respect is for the principal: he or she should be active, open and transparent in his or her job. He or she has to make the teachers “accomplices” to the creation of an atmosphere that is open, with a sense of humor, with respect for each other’s opinions and with energy to do the job together.

Amsterdam, winter 2014-15

Roel Schoonveld
Principal of Het Amsterdams Lyceum