

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SCHOOL?

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS SEEKING EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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For as many years as there has been a place called “school,” we’ve all been seeking ways to fashion the best educational experience for our children – the place that would provide students with the best possible education and send them forth fully prepared to meet life’s challenges.

Every American generation has desired quality education for its children and in many ways the system has responded by expanding opportunities to historically under-represented students, updating curriculum, and improving teaching techniques.

Yet, for all the changes implemented in the American classroom, parents and the community in general are ill-prepared to measure the quality of the schools that serve them. As consumers of education, parents and other taxpayers have a right to know if their schools are doing a good job.

In the search for a good school, many parents have moved to new locations; many have applied for permits that would allow their children to attend a school in their neighborhood, district or city; and many have opted for private schools.

School districts and private schools, aware of parents’ search for quality education, have explored many innovative ways of accomplishing this aim and have tried many different configurations. There are now alternative schools, schools of choice, magnet schools, schools without walls, and countless numbers of educational centers. None of these schools, however, comes with a certificate of quality. What we do know is that quality education comes from a real partnership between parents and professionals working together.

So, how do we know what makes a good school? Fortunately, that question can be answered based upon sound research findings that make it possible to measure the quality of the education a school offers.

What makes a good school has less to do with the configuration of the school or the socioeconomic standard of the neighborhood. There are successful schools in the inner cities of America, just as there are unsuccessful ones in the country's wealthy suburbs.

What makes the difference between success and failure? We can identify several qualities of successful schools that set them apart. A good school has:

- Strong and professional administrators and teachers
- A broad curriculum available to all students.
- A philosophy that says all children can learn if taught, coupled with high expectations for all students.
- A school climate that is conducive to learning. A good school is safe, clean, caring, and well-organized.
- An ongoing assessment system that supports good instruction.
- A high level of parent and community involvement and support.

Let's look at each of these qualities.

ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS

Good schools have a strong administrator who:

- Leads instruction at the school and knows in depth the school's curriculum and instruction provided in each grade level.
- Helps teachers develop instructional strategies and techniques and encourages teamwork.
- Makes time for in-service training, and seminars for the school's entire staff.
- Marshals resources and distributes them to benefit the greatest number of students.
- Communicates with parents and provides sufficient time for such dialogues.
- Establishes goals for the school and articulates those goals with clarity, conviction and understanding.

- Maintains a well-balanced staff with multiple skills and competencies and knows the staff's strengths and special capabilities.
- Works to maintain high morale which contributes to great stability and limited teacher turnover.
- Strives to keep class sizes appropriate for the subject and grade being taught and within state guidelines.
- Develops with staff and parents a clearly defined policy on discipline, grading, attendance, testing, promotions and retention.
- Knows the community and is equipped to work cooperatively with teachers and parents to provide support services to students encountering problems.
- Maintains a good relationship with the district and makes wise use of district resources.

Good schools have strong professional teachers who:

- Hold current certification in the classes they are teaching and have mastered the subject matter they are teaching.
- Maintain high expectations for student achievement that is evident in every aspect of classroom work.
- Teach students how to learn.
- Provide students with ample opportunities to practice skills taught in order to grasp concepts.
- Create consistency in learning methods that include problem- solving, thinking and creative activities.
- Hold students responsible for completion of work assigned within established standards for quality.
- Set challenging and interesting classroom assignments that are appropriate to the subject and that clearly relate to other lessons taught.
- Use a wealth of materials and many different approaches to teaching concept.
- Relate, as often as possible, the objectives of lessons taught to students' backgrounds, communities, and cultures.

- Maintain discipline in the classroom to foster the optimal learning environment.
- Keep students consistently informed on how they are doing and what they will be doing next, and discuss the significance of each step and its relationship to concepts previously taught.
- Keep students informed as to how well they are doing.
- Use testing and evaluation as a tool to measure student progress as well as determine curriculum changes and teaching strategies in order to accommodate the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of students.

Good schools have counselors who:

- Know the school and its community and understand the strengths, assets, and goals of each.
- Serve as a bridge between students, parents, and school personnel.
- Assist students in class selection.
- Understand the system of testing and assessment, and explain it to parents, teachers and staff.
- Play a significant role in interpreting test results to staff, teachers, administrators and parents and analyze test results in order to make informed recommendations when changes in testing procedures are appropriate.
- Keep themselves and their schools up to date on state testing requirements.
- Understand and use a combination of strategies to determine student progress.
- Provide information concerning college, career and vocational options available to students.
- Provide all students with access to appropriate counseling and give students timely advice on program planning, requirements for graduation, and requirements for college.

Good schools often have regular access to additional support staff geared toward meeting the needs of a diverse student body:

- A School Psychologist
- A School Doctor

- A School Nurse
- An Attendance and Adjustment Counselor
- A Child Abuse Counselor
- Bilingual Education Assistant
- Proficiency in English Services
- Resource Teachers who are prepared in a wide range of subjects and who can offer assistance to new teachers.

A CURRICULUM AS BROAD AS THE STUDENTS ARE DIVERSE

A Good School recognizes the great diversity in backgrounds, needs, and aspirations of its students and develops a curriculum that meets these needs. Good Schools:

- Offer a broad curriculum within the guidelines established by both state and local mandates and is appropriate to the students' age and educational background.
- Place a strong emphasis on basic curriculum including Science, Math, and History.
- Have a visual and performing arts curriculum.
- Value the importance of multicultural education and encourage students to experience other cultures.
- Constantly seek ways, wherever possible, to enrich the curriculum by offering more courses that supplement a strong academic program.
- Believe that all children can learn if properly taught.
- Show great flexibility in the presentation of subject matter to maintain interest
- Keep athletics in proper relation to academics.
- Evaluate school offerings on a continuous basis, so as to include studies appropriately related to the social and academic changes in our society.
- Review on a regular basis requirements necessary for students' entry into college or university and make sure needed courses are offered.
- Keep abreast of work-force requirements and incorporate those skills needed in the curriculum of the school.

- Make every effort to help students develop proper interpersonal skills needed for college, workforce or everyday living.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS GO HAND-IN-HAND WITH EQUITY

In good schools, high expectations for students' achievement are observed throughout the school. The surroundings of the school give a message to all who enter that academic achievement is valued in this place. These high expectations for achievement are found on school bulletin board displays, in the hallways, in classroom displays, and in the school newsletter. They are also recognized by the number and quality of awards presented. The overall environment and outreach makes a statement that learning is valued and rewarded. In Good Schools:

- Learning is promoted as the most important reason for attending school.
- High standards for classwork are carefully set with students and are maintained on a consistent basis.
- Each lesson offers a challenge for students, but each also is within the students' ability to attain.
- Class time is used as learning time and few interruptions are permitted.
- Homework is assigned with a purpose, usually to reinforce a concept taught or to give additional practice.
- Homework is always checked, reviewed and feedback is given.
- High standards for classroom behavior are established and adhered to in order to permit classwork to proceed on an established schedule.
- In keeping with the high expectations of each teacher and each class, awards for outstanding work are presented at assemblies and community meetings. This is done to advertise and maintain the goals established for a high achieving student body.
- Improvement in achievement is high on the list of priorities, and resources to assist teachers and students are continuously made available.

In the equitable classroom, fairness is the guiding principle.

- All classrooms in all locations maintain an academic environment that addresses the needs for basic learning.
- All classes receive consistent and appropriate classroom instruction.

- All classes are provided with adequate and updated instructional materials.
- Proper emphasis is placed on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills and the continued use of assessment systems that analyze the quality and quantity of student learning. Included in all of this is the opportunity for change in teaching strategies when warranted.

A SCHOOL CLIMATE CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING

Learning requires time and a conducive atmosphere. Since learning is as much a social activity as it is an individual activity, much of what students learn comes from interacting with other people. Thus the nature of the relationships among the people at the school will have a strong influence on students' learning. Good schools:

- Develop a social and academic climate that gives students a strong feeling of belonging; students feel proud of their school, feel they belong; feel they are wanted and nurtured by the school.
- Have high morale due to the cooperation of teachers, staff and parents who work closely together to provide the best school environment for their students.
- Offer appropriate supervision so that only those persons eligible are found on the school grounds. Students are given, on a continuous basis, instructions as to how to respond to visitors on the school grounds.
- Buildings are kept in good condition, making them safe at all times.
- Students know well the safety drills held at the school and respond with precision when the signal is given.
- Good schools recognize and respond to students who come from many different home environments.
- In good schools, staff expect and accept some divergent responses to school rules and make appropriate preparations for effectively responding in a positive and constructive manner.
- Every effort is made to create an atmosphere in which the student feels the school offers him or her an understanding and a caring response to life's inequities.

Good Schools Are Well Organized

- Good Schools have libraries that are stocked with up-to-date books appropriate for the age and interest level of students; centrally located for ready access by total student body and staff; staffed, where possible, by a full-time librarian on duty daily. All children are taught how to use the library
- In the school office student work and awards are proudly displayed; secretaries and clerical personnel are courteous and knowledgeable about the school and its programs; students' needs are met promptly so as to minimize the amount of time out of their classrooms.
- Halls are neat, clean, free of debris. Traffic patterns are established for safety of incoming and outgoing traffic. Bulletin boards in halls are reflective of the educational programs being promoted at all grade levels.
- Evidence of knowledge, acceptance, and understanding of the diversity of cultures in the school is reflected in art displays and recognition of community success stories of achievement on the part of various students.
- On the school grounds play areas for students are well-defined and well organized; games played give evidence of necessary skill having been taught; safety rules are clearly defined and assiduously followed; lunch areas are clearly defined and properly supervised; school grounds are supervised by competent personnel.

DETERMINING SUCCESS – AN ONGOING ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Good schools are very concerned about the overall achievement of their students and make testing and assessment an integral part of their programs. Assessment measures the level of student achievement; helps schools discover the strengths and weaknesses of their curriculum, and suggests areas where programs need to be modified or added.

- In good schools, clear goals are established as to what students are expected to learn.
- The curriculum is guided by these carefully constructed instructional goals, with texts, resource materials and experiences orchestrated to promote success.
- Good schools use a variety of types of tests and assessments to meet their needs. Some of these may be developed by commercial publishers, some may be developed by state departments of education and districts, and some are constructed by teachers to use in their classrooms.

In good schools teachers prepare students for assessments in many ways:

- Give students suggestions for readying themselves for a test, or assessment -- for example, proper rest, be on time.
- Give tests or assessments under conditions that allay fears and reduce anxiety.
- Do not teach the test, but make sure they teach concepts and skills that reflect the goals of the test or assessment.
- Make sure that students are exposed to and are learning the broad concepts, issues, topics, and skills that are expected to be taught at a particular grade level.
- Let students know what to expect on the test or assessment.

Good teachers use assessment to:

- Hold students to high standards.
- Examine the effectiveness of their teaching strategies, to determine if they are presenting understandable materials
- Diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of a particular class and of individual students with in it.
- Determine whether the class, a group within it, or individual students are ready to go on to the next unit or next class.
- Gather a balanced picture of a student's ability and mastery; do not use the results of one particular pencil-and-paper test as the sole determinant of a student's achievement.

Where assessment results are less than satisfactory, good teachers:

- Help students read and review concepts presented.
- Determine if they have adequately reviewed materials presented, asked questions, shared additional materials to reinforce a given concept.
- Question if they have consistently reviewed and encouraged students to relate class experiences with some of their own personal experiences.
- Determine if the tests used mirror the textbook material used by the class.
- Determine if the tests are testing what was actually taught.

In good schools, students are encouraged to use assessment results.

- It conveys to them the level of success they are meeting.
- It helps them see the continuity in their learning and offers them the encouragement to apply learned skills in one field to other fields and to everyday living experiences.
- They are encouraged by an assessment system that reveals both their growth and areas in which improvement is needed.
- It empowers them to share in the responsibility for their own learning.

In Good Schools, parents use assessment to observe the progress being made by their children.

- Assessment helps parents note progress or lack of progress on the part of their youngster and to determine when to seek assistance.
- Assessment helps parents understand what a given school is seeking to accomplish and whether the school's goals are in sync with the goals they desire.
- Good schools encourage parents to ask questions, to seek clarification of procedures used, and to determine the impact of a given test on their child's future.

**PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT IS
CRITICAL**

Parent Involvement

One of the most prevalent and consistent findings in the research on good schools is that parent involvement makes a difference. Positive parent involvement has a significant impact on student achievement, student school attendance, and the central role of the school in students' lives. In good schools, parents:

- Participate with the school in establishing its organizational goals.
- Actively participate in developing the school's policy on discipline, grading, attendance, testing, promotions and retention.
- Visit with teachers and administrators at the school on regular basis.
- Inquire as to what happened at school on any given day and help children clarify concerns. Inquire about homework assignments, provide a place and time for students to complete their work and offer assistance to students as needed.

- Speak well of the school.
- Take stock periodically to determine if they, their children, and the school are together in their plans for their child's future.
- Recognize that children spend only a portion of the day at school and that much more of their time is spent at home; therefore much can and should be done at home to increase their child's learning.
- Join a school organization if at all possible.
- Listen to their children.

Community Involvement And Support

Good schools are an important part of a community. Recognized leaders of the community often share their talents and experience with a school, thereby projecting positive images and serving as role models for students.

- The utilization of office space by agencies, corporations and businesses to display outstanding work accomplished by students (essays, art work) makes a positive display of the togetherness that exists between the school and the community.
- Good schools know that they and the community are one. Failure on the part of either can bring discredit to the other.
- Good schools receive broad support from their communities and identify with the community and its agencies in multiple ways and on a continuous basis.
- In good schools, the social agencies are active participants in the life of the school, often providing additional counseling, tutoring services, and food and clothing to the needy.
- Members of the community visit the school regularly and participate in assemblies, often addressing some of the critical issues of the community and indicating where and how help can be obtained.
- Good schools make every effort to schedule events at times and places that are convenient for parents and encourage maximum participation by the entire school community.

The Right School is Only the Beginning of a Lifetime of Educational Enjoyment.

Finding a good school for your child is only the initial step. Reaping the benefits of this school requires participation, with constant and continuous involvement. When your child enters a school, it represents a commitment on the part of both you and the child and gives a vote of confidence to the school that you believe it will do its best. The education of your child is above all a cooperative effort that involves the school, teachers, parents and the community.

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