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ENDPAPER

Taking the Measure of a School

By JOHN MERROW

HOW do you tell if a school is good -- really good? By its reputation, of course, and its test scores (very often one is based on the other). Each of these is revealing, but they don't tell everything. In truth, there is no standardized, multiple-choice test of school quality. The enterprise of education is far too complex for such bottom-line reductionism. Taking the measure of a school involves time and energy, but not much more of either than most parents spend buying a car or a home.

Here are 10 questions parents should ask:

1. Can administrators explain the school's mission in plain language?

Good schools are "transparent," meaning their operations -- everything from rules to curriculum to assessment -- are open for inspection and discussion. That does not mean these matters are up for grabs, only that those who run the school have faith in their approach and are willing to display it openly.

Good schools have a strong sense of purpose, with a focus on the development of individuals and their intellectual life, what Deborah Meier, the co-director of the Mission Hill Elementary School in Boston, calls serious and thoughtful "habits of mind." Schools do not exist just to help students adjust socially or learn a trade or profession. Purposeful schools aid in "building a self," in the phrase of the philosopher Jacques Barzun.

2. Do teachers know their subject matter?

Expect blank stares or hostile looks when asking this question, but about 25 percent of all public school English and history teachers and 30 percent of mathematics and science teachers neither majored nor minored in their subjects. Although most states have regulations prohibiting out-of-field teaching, it continues.

3. How are tests administered?

American elementary and secondary school students are tested far more than their counterparts in other industrial nations. More than 140 million standardized, machine-scored, multiple-choice tests were taken in 1998. The new federal plan requiring that all students in third through eighth grade be assessed every year means even more testing in their future.

How much time should be devoted to preparation is difficult to determine. E.D. Hirsch Jr., the founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, whose curriculum spells out what students should know and when, believes that a day or two of "test readiness" work ought to be sufficient. "The best preparation for reading tests is reading and talking and writing about the stories, not drilling for the reading test," he says. When schools abandon the curriculum to spend weeks on tests, "it's an admission that the children haven't been taught the basics they should have been taught long ago."

Certainly, well-made tests can be a useful yardstick, providing information that enables teachers to diagnose students' weaknesses. Ideally, these tests are drawn up by the

teachers themselves, promptly graded and returned. But if the teacher-made tests are mostly "fill in the blanks" or "circle the answer," ask why.

4. What's the school's academic record?

While parents will want to know about academic standing, the first question is not "What are scores on standardized multiple-choice tests?" Ask instead, "How does the school measure learning?" Scores often dominate conversations about school quality because there are no easy-to-understand alternatives. But most parents understand that such measures are overemphasized and overrated. In a recent poll by Phi Delta Kappa, the education honor society, 71 percent of public school parents said that classroom work and homework were the best measure of student achievement.

5. What's on the walls?

Be wary of schools whose walls are bare cinderblock. Good schools will display a wide variety of children's work, showing creativity and expression -- and an academic purpose, not just teacher-designed bulletin boards. You may see young children working enthusiastically on tasks that are basically of the cookie-cutter variety, but look farther. The students may have gotten used to easy work that earns them smiley faces or gold stars. If all they are doing is following directions, then someone is pouring a weak foundation for intellectual growth.

6. Who does the talking in classes?

If the teacher's voice dominates, that limits and perhaps eclipses opportunities for students to be active participants in making sense of things. When children talk, are they listened to? Is there competition for the teacher's attention? If children treat one another respectfully, it is a sign that what they are doing is important and interesting. Good teachers ask questions and bring everyone into the conversation.

7. Is the school safe?

You'll want to know if the school is physically safe (most are). But is it emotionally safe? Adults in charge need to take a firm stand against teasing, bullying and harassment. And is the school intellectually safe? A student should feel it's acceptable to be smart, and at the same time to make mistakes, to take intellectual risks. "There can't be a climate where kids laugh at the wrong answer," says Theodore R.Sizer, the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools. "When that happens, a kid will shut down and refuse to participate, and that's when learning stops."

8. Is the principal on the move?

When I recently spent a day at the Alice Deal Junior High School in Washington, I kept bumping into the principal, Reginald Moss. He was constantly walking the halls, talking with students and teachers, even picking up stray pieces of paper. "Is keeping the halls clean part of your job?" I asked. "It's everybody's job," he said, "beginning with mine, because when kids see me cleaning up, they will begin to care, too. At least some of them will."

According to Dr. Sizer, good principals will drop in on classes, too, "not just for a minute or two, but to really get the feel of what's going on."

9. How large are classes?

Smaller classes, 20 students or fewer, are just about everybody's favorite educational reform, and research supports their benefits, particularly in lower grades and if the class has no more than 15 or 17 students. But don't rely on figures from school districts to determine class size. Counting name tags on classroom doors or the heads in classes will

be more precise.

Albert Shanker, who led the American Federation of Teachers, once said that if the principal knew only the top students and the troublemakers, the school was too big. Ms. Meier believes elementary schools should be small enough so that all the teachers can have a serious conversation together at the same time. "Twenty faculty members is about the upper limit, which means a school probably should have no more than 300 or 400 kids," she says. John I. Goodlad, the dean of American education researchers, says the upper limit for high schools should be 800 students

10. How dedicated are the teachers?

If the faculty parking lot is empty at the end of the day, it may be that teachers can't wait to get away. It's not an encouraging sign. Nor is taking too many sick days. How many are teachers entitled to in their contract, and how many use their quota each year?

Listen to the tone of the teachers' voices when they talk to students. Is it respectful? "I'd rather have my grandchildren in a classroom whose curriculum and pedagogy I'm not so crazy about, as long as the teacher likes and respects them," Ms. Meier says.

Parents cannot expect teachers to love their children or give them straight A's, but teachers should enjoy being around youngsters, and they must see them as individuals and value their potential.

John Merrow won a 2001 Peabody Award for his PBS documentary "School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School" and is the author of "Choosing Excellence" (Scarecrow).