



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

Choose your child's school with **CONFIDENCE**

INCLUDES
Easy to Use
Tool Kit



religious?
magnet?
home?



Which School?



public?
private?
charter?



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PUBLIC IMPACT



Step Three: Chapter 11

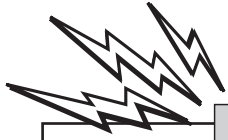
What Really Separates the Best from the Rest?

This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:

Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School with CONFIDENCE

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LIGHTNING LIST

What To Know from Chapter 11

- **You can learn to compare the quality of schools** with accuracy and confidence.
- **Great Schools** are ones in which children learn dramatically more in core academic subjects than similar students in other schools.
- **More than thirty years of repeated research** has revealed seven consistent characteristics of the highest quality schools. We call these seven school characteristics the **Great School Quality Factors**:
 1. Clear Mission Guiding School Activities
 2. High Expectations for All Students
 3. Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching
 4. Focus on Effective Learning Tasks
 5. Home-School Connection
 6. Safe and Orderly Environment
 7. Strong Instructional Leadership
- **Seeking the Great School Quality Factors** is the most reliable way to choose the school where your child will learn the most in core subjects.
- **If you need a short cut, seek Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3.** A school pursuing these rigorously and vigorously will be forced to address other factors over the long haul. And it more likely will be a Great Fit for your child: quality supports fit.
- **Don't be fooled in your hunt for a Great School:**
 - ✓ **Comparing overall test scores** of schools with very different kinds of students can be misleading and often reveals little about school quality.
 - ✓ **Individual great teachers** working alone cannot make a whole school great. Even great teachers need support from a Great School to produce the best results with your child.
 - ✓ **How happy your friends are with a school is not a quality indicator**, unless your friends know about school quality, have fit needs similar to your child's and family's and know about more than their own children's particular teachers.
- **We provide a Great School Quality Checklist** on page 200 for you to use when you are ready to investigate schools.

Chapter 11

What *Really* Separates the Best from the Rest?

Liza and Harrison Olson, after trying for four years to have a second child, had twins, a boy, Elan, and a girl, Heidi. The twins were moving from a private preschool to “big kid” kindergarten in the fall. Their older son Colter, now in second grade, would move to third grade. Colter had repeated first grade when he was unable to read near grade level. Finally, he was diagnosed with dyslexia at the end of the repeat year and allowed to advance to second grade only if his parents paid for outside “treatment” of his disability. Liza and Harrison were not pleased with Colter’s school for failing to notice his special challenge for so long, but also mad at themselves for not getting a private assessment sooner. They were determined to make the right decision for their twins and even willing to switch Colter to a new school if a better one could be found. Elan, true to his name, brimmed with personal energy and could charm children and grownups alike with his engaging smile and friendly manner. In preschool, he was right on target in his learning so far. Heidi, more serious in her demeanor and more challenged making friends than her twin, was reading at a first grade level, full of ideas and questions and “very advanced,” her teachers said. Liza and Harrison knew she’d make any school look good, but wanted one that would actively challenge her and not just leave her to work by herself all day. The Olsons’ questions: Could they send all three children to the same school? What if Elan or Heidi grew to have a special need like Colter? How could they make this decision with confidence? With these uncertainties, the Olsons began their school hunt.



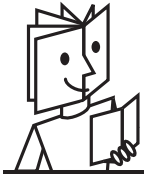
The Seven Great School Quality Factors

You know what makes a Great Fit, now. And if you've been working while you whittle away at this book, you have a sense of your own child's and family's unique needs. That's really important for choosing the right school. Aren't you glad you took time to think and learn about that? We hope you're feeling confident. "What more could I want?" you say.

Well, would you buy a house with a shaky foundation just because it had the right number of bedrooms? Would you purchase a car with the right headroom for your tall family if you knew it would break down a lot or wouldn't accelerate fast enough to get you onto the highway without a mild heart attack?

Fit matters, but quality counts, too. *We define high quality or "great" schools as ones in which students of all kinds learn dramatically more in core academic subjects than similar students in other schools.* That's what Great Schools accomplish. Great Schools meet the needs of more children and families more of the time. The results show both in "soft" measures, like parent satisfaction, and "hard" ones, like student test scores in the basics. This book will show you how to look for the signs of a Great School, one that you can count on to educate your child in core academics, year in and year out.

Definition



Great School: *A high quality or "great" school is one in which children of all abilities and types learn dramatically more and perform better in core academic subjects than similar students in other schools.*

Core Subjects: *Core subjects are ones that all elementary students must master in preparation for independent adult life and further education in our society, including at least reading, writing and math.*

But what are Great Schools made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails? Wouldn't it be nice if you could rely on simple clichés – for raising your child and choosing a school? But parents of spunky girls and good-as-gold boys know that what seems true at a glance doesn't always hold true.

So how do you find these Great Schools? What's the magic ingredient to seek on the label so that you know you're getting real quality? Test scores, individual teacher quality and other parents' opinions are frequent *misleading* indicators.

- **Test scores alone** reveal little unless you know whether you are comparing schools with similar kinds of students: ones of similar starting capabilities or from families with similar parent education levels and incomes.

- **Great teachers** are, well, great. But absent a Great School behind them, they are less likely to stay and spread their good work to other classrooms. Like all stars, they are likely to “burn out” over time without a fuel source for their challenging work. And you never know whether your child will be assigned to more than one or two star teachers over the years.
- **Your friends’ glowing reports** of their own children’s school experiences mean little unless your friends know about the real indicators of school quality, have fit needs similar to your child’s and family’s, and know about more than their own children’s particular teachers.

Fortunately, decades of research by many different experts of differing perspectives have shown that a few consistent features of schools make them great. Not just for your one child – but for all of your children, and for the kids on the other side of the railroad tracks, too. Not just for today, but for tomorrow and the next year, too.

We call these consistent features the **Great School Quality Factors**. When compared to typical schools, Great Schools consistently demonstrate these seven pillars of school quality. You may recall them from Chapter 1. But we don’t expect you to be an expert *yet* (though you’re on your way), so here they are again:

1. **Clear Mission Guiding School Activities:** The school has a clear purpose and approach to education that *you* understand. The principal, teachers and parents understand this mission, and it guides all decisions and activities in the school. Precious resources like money and classroom time are focused to achieve the school’s goals, not wasted on “window dressing” – things that may look good but don’t further the school’s mission.
2. **High Expectations for All Students:**
 - ✓ The school has *high* minimum academic standards (“grade level”) that prepare *all children* for independent adulthood in our society. Grade level standards may include both specific skills and knowledge a child should have in core subjects, as well as “thinking” skills. In a Great School, all students are expected to achieve at least grade level.
 - ✓ The school also has higher, individualized standards for children who are ready to excel beyond grade level. No matter how bright the average child in a school and how high “grade level” goals are set, every school has students who are ready to learn beyond these goals. In Great Schools, these students are expected to meet increasingly difficult goals in core subjects.
3. **Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching.** Each child’s individual progress is monitored frequently during the school year. Teachers change their teaching approaches as needed – adapting to individual student inter-

ests, learning styles and other differences – to ensure that students meet their goals, both grade level and higher. When a child falls behind, the school takes immediate action, accepting no excuses for failure.

4. ***Focus on Effective Learning Tasks.*** Teachers use well-planned, well-tested approaches to instruction. Class time, material purchases and facilities are all allocated according to the school's mission; more important subjects are given more time and the best materials and facilities. Classroom interruptions are minimal. Materials and curriculum are frequently reviewed, and altered, to ensure they are working as planned.
5. ***Home-School Connection.*** Parents are told what their children will be learning, how to help at home, how their children are progressing during the year (frequently), and how to work with the school to solve any problems their children might face.
6. ***Safe and Orderly Environment.*** Students are kept safe from harm by other people, facilities and equipment. Students know how they are expected to behave in and out of the classroom, and they behave as expected because consequences are clear and consistent.
7. ***Strong Instructional Leadership.*** School leaders maintain clear, high expectations for teachers, recruit and keep great teachers, organize teachers to work together, monitor and improve teacher performance, and act on high and low teacher performance (ridding school of low performers, recognizing and rewarding high performers).

If you've already had a child in school, you may find yourself saying, "I knew it!" to several of the seven Great School Quality Factors. They each affect real, tangible activities in the classroom that you and your child cherish when they're present and sorely miss when a school is lacking.

Quality Supports Fit, Fit Supports Quality

Many parents feel guilty asking for elements of quality, because they think that school shortcomings affect only their own individual children. But Great Schools make it their business to fit many children, while keeping academic expectations high, because that's how they ensure that everyone achieves and makes progress in core subjects.

In fact, if you need a short cut to assess the quality of schools you consider, seek Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3. A school that pursues these rigorously and vigorously will be forced to address other Great School Quality Factors over the long haul. A school that doggedly sets and pursues challenging

Quality Supports Fit



A Great School
will consistently
deliver what
your child and
family need

goals for every child, monitors individual progress and does back flips to ensure learning for individual students will succeed for almost every child in core academics. Such a school will be forced to seek the most effective planning methods, teaching practices, learning environment, communication and management practices inherent in the other Great School Quality Factors. Indeed, we see “Rigor and Vigor” becoming the watchwords of schools that choose to be great.

In contrast, a school that focuses only on a clearer mission, the latest and greatest reading program, leadership training, better classroom behavior and the like is making a start. But without a clear expectation that all children will reach challenging goals, frequent measurement of how well individual students are learning and individualized responses to learning barriers, a school will leave many students, of all abilities, behind their academic potential. The school won’t know that the latest, greatest reading program isn’t working or is too easy for three out of every ten kids. And so on. What lost time and joy for those children left out!

With a one-size-fits-all approach, it’s nearly impossible to fit even a carefully selected group of children all the time, year in and year out. Great Schools build many bridges to carry children from far-flung places to lofty destinations.

Meeting Individual Needs: Mission Impossible?

Thirty years ago, “great” schools offered a more challenging one-size-fits-all curriculum. Today, Great Schools challenge all children and respond to their individual needs.

When we tell parents to focus on Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3, they often ask: how on earth can a teacher respond to the *individual* needs of 20 or 30 students? So we thought we should take a moment here and explain what Great Schools *really* do.

Meeting individual needs is nearly impossible when students are taught cookie-cutter style in a big group all day. Thirty years ago, a school could be “great” (compared to others) if it simply offered a more challenging one-size-fits-all curriculum to all students. Now we know that this is only one half of one factor (#2). Today, Great Schools offer a challenging curriculum, and they help teachers understand and respond to individual children better.

They accomplish this in many ways, but always set aside a significant part of the school day for children to work at their current achievement levels with teachers in small groups or one-on-one. Small group and individualized attention do not guarantee success: staff must use that contact to assess what each child knows and push each child to the next level. But that’s nearly impossible if all contact happens in a big group. Smaller class sizes might help, but they are no guaran-

tee. You must know exactly how teachers keep up with individual children – as impossible when treating 16 children the same as when treating 28 the same.

Great Schools provide staff, materials and time to help teachers individualize teaching and learning. These supports help teachers more easily grasp and respond to each child's current learning level, interests, motivation, learning styles and other differences.

For example, some Great Schools...

Use additional staff wisely:

- Provide skilled staff to assess students' progress frequently, so teachers know exactly where each child stands and who needs a different approach to learn the material.
- Provide learning specialists (e.g., math, reading, writing) to conduct small-group or one-on-one instruction.
- Provide assistant teachers to supervise large group or individual work in the classroom while lead teachers conduct small-group or one-on-one instruction.
- Provide staff learning coordinators in core subjects to help teachers across classes and grades move students around into groups that fit their current learning levels.

Use teaching methods and tools that help teachers identify and respond to differing needs:

- Pull small groups out of the classroom, but many Great Schools accomplish individualized work in the classroom.
- Have self-paced materials children can use on their own.
- Have clear, ladder-like learning goals and teaching materials, so that it's always clear what a child should learn next, even above grade level.
- Individualize homework assignments, or offer layers of more difficult homework as an alternative available to any child willing to take the challenge.

Help teachers make the most of time and technology:

- Provide time during the school day for teachers to think, plan and make instructional changes to address the varying needs of students.
- Do school-wide scheduling to allow students to move from group to group in core subjects with ease.
- Provide time for teachers across grades and subjects to do joint scheduling and moving of students to the right current learning groups.
- Provide computer technology for tracking and reporting student progress, so teachers can see in a blink where kids stand.

Many Great Schools use a combination of these and other tactics to individualize instruction. This approach has more than one name, most commonly "differentiation," or "individualized learning." But some schools sling those terms around

*Great Schools
help lead
teachers
determine what
each child
knows and how
each child
learns best.*

Great Schools do not just let children learn at their own paces. They also ensure that every child has challenging academic goals and actively monitor individual progress.

without actually making sure the rubber meets the road. In evaluating a given school, you need to know that teachers are clearly expected to take this approach and have school support to do it. Appropriate support will likely include many of the tactics listed above. Otherwise, your child will experience the teacher-by-teacher quality rollercoaster so common in mediocre and weak schools.

In a Great School, an individualized approach leads teachers to *raise* standards for children who are ahead, but *never to lower* what is expected of a child. Instead, teachers use close contact with students to figure out how to help each individual reach grade level and beyond. Some children need more repetition of the basics. Some need hands-on objects rather than words on a page. Others need to learn in the context of a topic that is personally interesting. Still others just need personal contact with a firm, caring grownup to get motivated. But nearly all children – even those who face learning challenges – can meet grade level standards. Great Schools believe that every child can achieve grade level, and teachers and support staff do back flips to make it happen.

Tracking versus Current Capability Grouping

When we were in school, many of our classes were divided, from the beginning of the year to the end, into two groups. Maybe you were a member of the Ponies, the kids across the aisle the Penguins. One group was ahead, the other behind – all year. When we talk about how Great Schools group for instruction, this kind of “tracking” is emphatically *not* what works best. Instead, Great Schools organize groups by *current* knowledge or skill levels. Children make learning leaps at different times throughout the school year, and so the grouping of children should change frequently, too – even weekly. We call this “Current Capability Grouping,” but whatever you call it, it’s what Great Schools do.

So, Can I Pick and Choose Great School Quality Factors?

To be great, not just good, a school must achieve or actively strive for *all* of the Great School Quality Factors. None alone will make a school great. Without any one Factor, a school and the learning your child does at school will suffer. True, a school that pursues both Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3 with rigor and vigor will be forced to improve the other factors *over time*. And if your time is short, or you must make tradeoffs, these are the two to pursue. But meanwhile, you’ll not want your child to suffer from great, gaping holes in the other Great School Quality Factors.

Smart
à la
Carte

How Small Should a Small Group Be?

Students in many Great Schools do a lot of learning in small groups. But how small is small enough to be effective? Research in reading instruction – one of the better researched curriculum areas – indicates that groups of up to four students are as effective as one-on-one (more may be fine if the students are very similar).

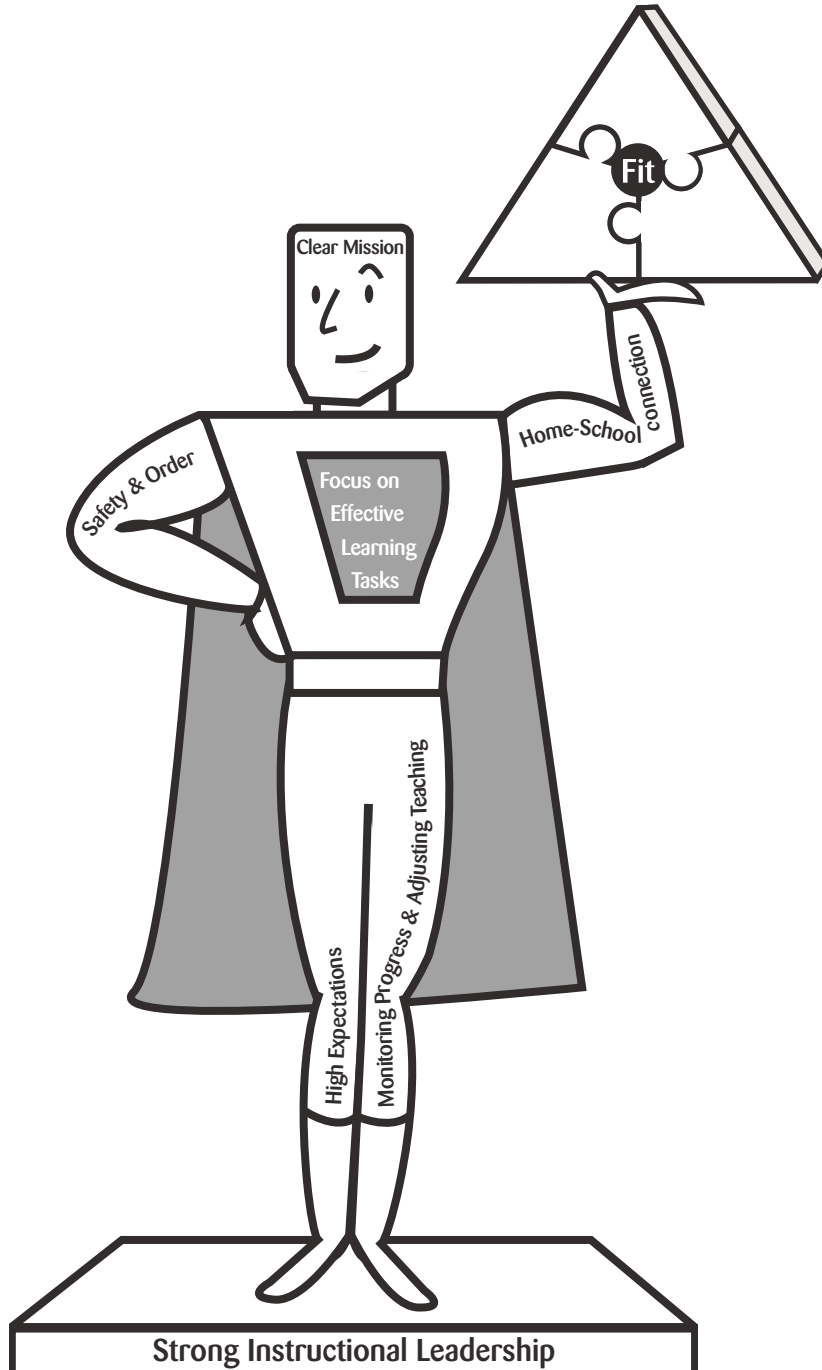
Smart
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Carte

What About This?

Many of you will not be surprised by the seven Great School Quality Factors. But some of you surely will be startled by what's not there. In this box and the *What About That?* and *But, But, But...* boxes are several items that interest many parents. Here's the general scoop: some of these are important, but only if used to support or detract from a Great School Quality Factor or if they address your fit needs.

- **Class size:** some research indicates that classes with 17 or fewer students are better than bigger ones. But teachers must use smaller classes to individualize instruction. Know this: in many classrooms across America, teachers with 17 or fewer students teach the same things to every child using the same approach with no changes for kids who need more help, higher goals, or a different approach. Similarly, many teachers achieve astonishing levels of learning among students in large classes – with the kind of school support detailed on page 187. True, it's easier with fewer children, but small class size is no guarantee and a potentially misleading indicator of quality. Look for Great School Quality Factor #3 instead to get the best results for your child.
- **School Size:** some research indicates that children learn more in small schools. Most likely, it is easier for those school leaders *who are striving for the Great School Quality Factors* to get everyone, staff and students, moving in the same direction in a smaller school. But a smaller school is neither required for academic excellence nor a guarantee of academic excellence. Instead of school size, look for Great School Quality Factors #3 and 7 as more accurate indicators of how “personal” a school will feel to your child and how well-managed it will be.
- **School Year Length:** up to a point, the more time your child spends learning, the more your child will learn. That goes to Great School Quality Factor #4, Focus on Effective Learning Tasks. But how is that time at school being spent? Your child is better off in a high-quality school with a traditional schedule than a mediocre one with a longer school year. That said, your child would likely learn more in a high quality extended year school than a similar quality one with a traditional schedule. Consider, though, whether *your* child might use that time for play with friends, physical activity and other valuable non-academic pursuits.

Great School Super Hero



Take these other thoughts into consideration when you're ready to examine schools available to your child: Some quality elements, such as basic safety and focusing class time on learning, are needed just to keep a school from being a colossal failure. Others, like high expectations, monitoring student progress, and adjusting teaching approaches for different children, are essential for taking a school from good to great. But all seven Great School Quality Factors are ingredients that distinguish Great Schools from the rest.

As our Great School Superhero shows, each factor plays an important role in maintaining the strong body of the school. Clear Mission is the brains, High Expectations plus Monitoring Progress & Adjusting Teaching the ever-busy legs, Focus on Effective Learning Tasks the heart and body, Safety & Order along with Home-School Connection the supporting arms, and Strong Instructional Leadership the steady foundation.

As important as any of these Great School Quality Factors alone is that they are consistent with each other. "Healthy Body, Sound Mind" your child's school motto? Then facilities adequate for vigorous exercise – a playground, a big field, an indoor gym – are musts, along with time in the school day for exercise and some part of the curriculum addressing life balance. "Each Child Stretched to Individual Potential" the motto? Then a wide range of classroom materials and individual or small-group activities that allow children to push beyond "grade level" are musts, along with frequent monitoring of student progress and upward goal adjustment. Look for consistent, well-planned effort throughout the school to know if it is likely to achieve its stated mission and goals.

Also know that some Great School Quality Factors are somewhat more important for certain children and families. Few schools are perfect in quality, and almost none is perfect for everyone. You'll want to make sure your child's school is strong in the quality areas most important for your child and family. For example, academically gifted children *must have* schools that set higher, individualized goals for students who are ready. Academically challenged students and those with learning disabilities *must have* schools that frequently monitor student progress and make teaching changes to ensure that students grasp challenging material. Single parents, families in which both parents work and children with low motivation *must have* schools with strong home-school connections. Children with extreme behavioral challenges *must have* very orderly environments for learning the discipline to make their own decisions later.

But you need not translate quality into fit, because we've done it for you. Special quality considerations are already included in *Child Needs: What to Look for in a School* (page 380) and *Family Needs: What to Look for in a School* (page 400).



What About That?

- ***Multi-age Groups, Staying with Same Teachers:*** a multi-age classroom lets your child play varying social roles over the years and often keep the same teacher, too. Having the same teacher for more than one year can help that teacher better keep up with your child's learning and get to know your child's needs better (especially in the absence of other school support to help her do this). But many a child has been stuck with a poor quality teacher or one whose one-size-fits-all approach was not a good fit with the child's needs – for two or more years! If you choose multi-age, ensure that your older student will be challenged and your younger one not left in the social and academic dust. Choose multi-age if you value the potential social benefit or if the school also is of high quality.
- ***Academic Awards and Recognition:*** yes these are a great way to express the value a school community places on academic striving and achievement, which can support Great School Quality Factor # 2, High Expectations. Look for progressively more prestigious honors within a school that reward kids who really go for it in each academic subject. Are mental fitness clubs (e.g., chess, Odyssey of the Mind) more prominent in the school, or are social and athletic ones more prominent? Do all kids who meet grade level make the “honor roll,” or are there ever more prestigious honors that reward kids who really go for it in each academic subject? But public awards and recognition are not a substitute for expecting a lot from individual students day to day, throughout the year.
- ***Grades vs. Portfolios vs. Class Rank:*** grades are simply one way of expressing a teacher's monitoring of your child's learning and performance on a regular schedule. Portfolios the same. Grades are usually on a scale of what's expected for all students, so you can see how your child stacks up compared to the school's grade level standard (and sometimes compared to other students if teachers must limit how many students get As and Bs). Portfolios are collections of your child's work product, and they may be graded, simply “passed” or “failed,” scaled in some other way, or just kept as archival proof of learning. Class rank tells you about pecking order, but little about how much anyone actually learned. As long as you are sure that a school will hold your child to high standards and monitor progress, the grading approach should be secondary, unless it is a school culture fit hot-button for you personally. More important than this for academic quality is the type and level of work that is rewarded and recognized in the school.



But, But, But...

- **Homework Policy:** well targeted homework will likely help your child academically by allowing her to spend more time on core subjects (Great School Quality Factor #4). Homework can help keep you informed about what your child is studying in school and whether it is the right level of work for your child (Great School Quality Factor #5). But more homework that's too easy or too hard without a teacher is not helpful. If your child's school is using the long school day well, then homework time will not be hard for the school to limit. And limited it should be, in our opinion, in the elementary years. Your child is not just an academic robot. Homework should support academic learning, but allow time for other aspects of development, too. A homework policy helps you know how much time your child will have for other pursuits, but such a policy should be secondary to overall quality and your top fit needs.
- **Attendance Rates:** this should be an issue only if you are concerned about the social impact on your own child's attendance (family Fit Factor #3) or an accompanying extreme lack of order in a school (Great School Quality Factor #6). If so, eliminate a school with low attendance rates. Otherwise, don't let it outweigh other aspects of quality and fit.
- **Computer Technology:** this can be important in two ways. First, if you value your child learning computer skills and cannot provide tools at home, then make it a fit need to meet at school (family Fit Factor #1). Second, computers can be used to help monitor student progress and keep students challenged at just the right level (Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3). There are some terrific programs designed to do just this. But just as easily, computer time can be used to baby-sit or distract students from important content learning. What's important is how the computer time is used. If it's a fit concern for you, or if you notice that computer time is significant in the class schedule, be sure to ask how that time is used.

Don't be fooled into thinking, however, that some Great School Quality Factors aren't at all important for your child's learning. You and your child will sorely miss absent Great School Quality Factors, even the ones less essential for your fit needs today. But you, unlike parents who haven't read this book, will be aware of what you're missing and better able to push for change or close the gaps outside of school.

In summary:

- All seven Great School Quality Factors are important
- If your time is very limited, seek Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3,

- while watching for great gaping holes in the others
- Look for a school with consistent *plans and actions* that cover all the factors
 - Focus on Great School Quality Factors important for your fit needs today (these are already included in the tables about what to seek in a school for each fit need)

What About Test Scores? Don't They Tell Me All I Need to Know?

Standardized tests are just what they say – a standard or consistent way of comparing one child, classroom or whole school to another across a city, state or even nation. They are one measure of what students have learned in core academic subjects and are able to display by year's end.

They can be helpful to parents who are making a school choice. However, they also can be misleading. Why? First, test scores alone are poor indicators of quality if you are *comparing schools with different kinds of students*. A mediocre, one-size-fits-all school with lots of professors' kids may have better overall test scores than a very high-quality school with mostly kids of less educated parents. Yet your child – whether academically gifted or more typical – would probably learn more at the lower-scoring school.

When you've narrowed down the schools you are considering, you'll want to take the starting academic capability of students into consideration. One way you can do this is by examining the "growth" or "gains" of students over time – not just the level of performance at a school. *Growth scores tell you how much students have learned rather than how much they knew from the start*. If this kind of information is available, it tells you more than other test results about *how much learning* is going on in a school – which is what you really want to know.

Growth scores tell you how much students have learned rather than how much they knew from the start.

Another way is to compare a school's performance with that of other schools with *similar student bodies*. If you can, find out the parent education and family income levels of students at the schools you're comparing, or look for information broken down this way. Then see how the students perform and improve compared to similar schools or similar groups of students. If you're comparing schools with very different students, you will choose a better quality school for your child if you give the Great School Quality Factors more weight than *overall* test scores.

The second test score challenge is this: test results reported by your schools or the local newspaper may or may not be helpful for choosing a school for *your* child. You need to get both the right *types of scores*, and you need to get them for *children like yours*. Whatever your child's previous performance, background

and personal characteristics, you'll want a school that has proven it expects and ensures high performance from kids *like yours*.

► *Types of scores include at least these:*

- ✓ **A number score** (sometimes called a “scale score”): the average number scored on a standardized test (e.g., 82 out of 100, or 155 out of 200)
- ✓ **Percent (%) at grade level:** the percent of students who scored the *target* number score or higher for their *grade level* in each subject (or for all subjects averaged together)
- ✓ **Growth or gain scores:** a score that shows of the amount of progress students made over the school year

► *Kids like yours* might include at least these:

- ✓ **Similar previous academic performance.** If you have an inkling that your child may be among the top, middle or bottom scorers, you'll want to compare schools based on scores for kids like yours. If your child may struggle academically, how low is low: do they get *all* kids up to grade level? If your child is likely to be in the middle of the pack: do all kids meet grade level, and do more than just the “gifted” kids score near the top? If your child is gifted academically, how high is high: are top scorers scoring high numbers compared to the top students at other schools?
- ✓ **Your child's race, gender and parent income** might be important, too. Compare scores for children like yours across schools, especially if you think that some schools in your area do better with certain kinds of children.

Not sure which scores to consider for your child? Focus on the scores highlighted in the *Child Needs: What to Look for in a School* table on page 380 for children with current Basic Learning Capability like your child's.

You may feel frustrated if the scores reported by a school are not the ones you need or if a school does not publish its scores. You can try to obtain additional scores on your school district's website, from your state department of education, or simply by asking the schools you are considering. A school may be reluctant to share information with parents, fearing they'll misinterpret the information. If that's the case, tell the principal what you need to know and why.

Know this: multiple measures lead schools to focus on all kinds of kids. The best schools will use many measures. When a school uses only one measure – such as overall percentage of students at grade level – it probably isn't focusing on *all kinds of children* for *all core subjects*. If you just can't get all the test score information you need, fear not. Focus on the Great School Quality Factors, which, over time, will lead to higher test scores for all kinds of children.

Finally, last year's test scores don't tell you when a good school is about to head south (a “Falling Star”) or a bad school is making all the right improvements (a

“Rising Star”). Test scores alone show you a rear-view mirror. You also need to assess your Target Schools on the seven Great School Quality Factors for an accurate read on how a school is likely to perform in the future.

For all of these reasons, test scores should be a starting point only. You might be able to rule out some schools because of their abysmal test scores, or notice others that are consistent high flyers for kids like yours. But to get the real scoop on schools, you need to look for the seven Great School Quality Factors.

And What About Teachers? If They’re All Great, Is That Enough?

Never underestimate the power of a great teacher. The afterglow of a year when your child has had one is nearly incomparable. Indeed, many better schools of yesteryear relied on teacher recruiting alone. Not today. Great Schools have learned that even the best teachers need support and help to *be* their best and *stay* their best.

Great teachers, back then and now, use the seven Great School Quality Factors in their own classrooms: clarifying goals, expecting much of every student, monitoring progress and adjusting their approaches to reach every child, trying new tactics in a never-ending quest for the best, and so on. What tremendous respect we have for teachers who have accomplished these feats without support of the broader school! But teachers – or professionals of any kind, for that matter – who can maintain that level of performance year after year *without support* are rare indeed. And the fact of the matter is that most schools are populated largely with teachers who do not live up to the Great School characteristics, because they cannot or will not without help from the school. They *need* far more support, and you should expect more – for your child’s benefit.

What About Teacher “Qualifications”?

Traditionally, when outsiders have tried to assess school quality teacher-by-teacher, they have looked at teacher “qualifications.” Commonly accepted qualifications include teaching experience, certification, and specialized education. Unfortunately, studies conducted by unbiased, nonpolitical researchers who really just want to know what will work for children are few. And of the few good studies, the findings are inconclusive. In fact, the strongest, easy-to-measure-from-a-far indicator of teacher quality is “verbal ability.” You might be better off knowing your child’s teacher’s verbal SAT score than her experience level, certification or college major! But even knowing that would not

give you the complete picture of how well a teacher would help your child learn.

Chances are that teacher characteristics not defined by *any* of the traditional measures matter most in the classroom. What leads a teacher to push, push and push for all students to achieve the most possible? What makes a teacher willing and able to detect many children's individual learning needs, empathize and connect with even the most challenging child through words and deeds that induce learning? Those are things researchers have begun to study but haven't nailed down yet. Meanwhile, we know that the seven Great School Quality Factors are what Great Schools – and the teachers within – pursue.

That said, here are tidbits to digest from the meager *good* research about traditional measures of teacher quality. "Experience" has been shown through consistent research to be important in this way: teachers with only one or two years of experience, all else being equal, will have lower performance than more experienced ones. Beyond that, the results a teacher achieves with students are due to factors other than time on the job. This is consistent with research about performance results in other professions, so it is not surprising. Avoid schools with large populations of teachers having almost no experience. If your child is assigned an inexperienced teacher, find out exactly how the principal and other staff will push that teacher up the learning curve fast (your child can't wait three years, after all). Great School Quality Factor #7, Strong Instructional Leadership, is critical always, but especially so in a school with many less-experienced teachers. As in many areas, the presence of a Great School to support teachers of *any* experience level matters most.

The importance of teacher certification is even less certain. It is a raging debate, with real results clouded by politics. Some research shows a benefit to certification, but most shows no impact at all. In the studies that do show benefit, the impact is small. And well-designed studies conducted by unbiased researchers are few, despite all the effort, money and political gab time spent on ensuring teacher certification. Go figure.

Finally, a teacher's subject matter expertise can make a difference, at least in math and science. But this is mostly true in higher-level courses, and so it's less relevant at the elementary level.

The impact of all these qualifications on your child's learning is dwarfed by the impact of the seven Great School Quality Factors. A highly experienced staff at a school where teachers are allowed to do the same old thing year after year, using a one-size-fits-all approach and comfortable but disproven techniques, won't do much for your child. In contrast, bright young teachers and professionals switching from other careers who teach in a school that implements only the

best proven practices will do much for your child. A seasoned teaching staff willing to take a Great School approach is ideal.

What you as a parent care about is this: if you choose a particular school, what will a whole series of teachers *do for your child*? You can't tell by looking at experience or degrees of the teachers currently employed at the school. You and your child are better off knowing how well a school hires, expects, develops, supports and requires teachers to perform in the Great School mode.

Your Nagging Doubts: Can You Do This? Should You? Why Bother?

Can you, a parent who may have no expertise except having attended school yourself, judge the quality of schools? Definitely! Even if you focus only on Great School Quality Factors #2 and 3 and those aspects of quality most important for your child and family (after reading Chapters 2 - 10), you can ask and get answers to a few key questions that will let you compare schools and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school you choose. Use the *Great School Quality Checklist* on page 200 and *Quality: What to Look for in a School* on page 409 to guide you. Don't be afraid to ask questions about issues you do not fully understand, as it is the job of Great Schools to explain their approaches to parents and make you a partner in the education process.

Is it possible that you will go through all of this and still find your child in an imperfect school? Yes. As with most things in this world, few schools are truly perfect. Most have areas that need improvement. But once you understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school you choose, you will be far better equipped to work with your child's individual teachers, push for school-wide changes, and organize your family life to fill school quality gaps. Use *Quality: Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School* on page 433 to help.

Will your search improve the quality of your child's school? Without a doubt! The questions you ask, the clear answers you seek, and the demands you make after choosing a school will improve not only your own child's school, but every school you have considered. You have the chance to impact every school where you ask questions about the *real* indicators of quality. By focusing on what counts in your school quest, you will send the signal over and over that these are the things schools need to improve. In this new era of parent choice, parents who take the time to seek real quality are quickly becoming key drivers of change within schools.

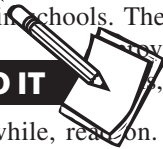
Keep Your Own Expectations High

In summary, you can and should expect a school and its staff to do these common sense things, year in and year out:

- Have a clear plan – that you understand – about what they’ll do and how
- Expect a lot of your *child* and challenge *your child* to make progress in core subjects every day
- Have a handle on what *your child* knows in core subjects at all times and make sure *your child* learns what’s needed, even if it takes back flips to do it
- Do what works best in the classroom, even when that means making changes
- Tell you what’s what: what your child will learn, what to do at home, what your child has learned
- Keep your child safe and focused on learning
- Manage teachers and other staff so that the best stay, the worst leave, the rest learn from the best, and all staff members do their personal best work

Got it? Stay tuned, and you can learn more about each of the seven Great School Quality Factors and how to seek them in a school. If you are tired of filling out worksheets, or you’re feeling guilty about not, get comfy in an armchair for a few quick chapters while you learn more about school quality. We’ve already created a *Great School Quality Checklist* for you (page 200), and you won’t need it until you’re ready to investigate specific schools. This checklist breaks each of the seven Great School Quality Factors into specific actions that you can look for and ask about in schools. The *Quality: What to Look for in a School* table on page 409

SNAP TO IT



provides you with specific questions about quality to ask principals, teachers and parents.

Meanwhile, read on. The more you know, the more confident you’ll feel. The **What To Do**

- **Skim the Great School Quality Checklist** on page 200. Estimated Time: 5 minutes
- Later, if you’re torn between two schools with differing quality strengths or are concerned about the quality of your child’s current school, you’ll be glad you invested some time in knowing what makes a Great School tick.

Optional Activities

- **Skim the Quality: What to Look for in a School table** on page 409 to help you phrase specific questions about quality to ask principals, teachers and parents. Estimated Time: 15 minutes
- **If your child is currently in elementary school**, take a few minutes to think about the quality strengths and weaknesses of the school. Use the *Great School Quality Checklist* as a guide. Discuss your thoughts with your spouse or other parenting partner. You can do a more complete assessment later, if you wish. Estimated Time: As needed.

Need more? Want more? Got more to share? Visit PickyParent.com.

Great School Quality Checklist

PAGE 1

School Name: _____

- Complete a separate *Great School Quality Checklist* for each school you consider.
- In Notes column, make notes about each school. Which factor elements are strengths? Weaknesses?
- After gathering available information, grade each school on each overall Great School Quality Factor:
 - ✓ **A** school has all of the elements
 - ✓ **B** school has most of the elements
 - ✓ **C** school has about half of the elements
 - ✓ **D** most of the elements are missing
 - ✓ **F** school has none or almost none of the elements

GREAT SCHOOL QUALITY FACTORS		NOTES ABOUT THIS SCHOOL	GRADE
1. Clear Mission Guiding School Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Written mission communicating focus and priorities● Staff, parents & written materials state same mission● School-wide goals support mission● Student goals, curriculum & teaching support mission			
2. High Expectations for All Students: <i>High Minimum Expectations for All</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Challenging but achievable student learning goals (standards) for each grade level● School-wide plan and actions ensure that all students achieve at least grade level in basics, no excuses● All or near all children achieve grade level● Progress scores high for all, including lowest scorers <i>Higher Expectations for Students Who are Ready</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Learning goals raised for ready students● Clear, written progression of goals beyond grade level● Plan and actions ensure students meet higher goals● At least gifted students achieve very high test scores● Progress scores are high for top students			

Great School Quality Checklist

PAGE 2

School Name: _____

<p>3. Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School assesses individual student progress (weekly is ideal) ● Teachers change teaching approach to ensure that every child achieves his or her learning goals 		
<p>4. Focus on Effective Learning Tasks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Instruction approach proven to work ● Class time allocated according to subjects' importance ● Materials & facilities allocated in line with importance ● Principal and teachers limit class interruptions 		
<p>5. Home-School Connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School tells parents what children will be learning ● School tells parents how to help own children learn ● School updates parents on own child performance ● School works with parents to resolve problems 		
<p>6. Safe and Orderly Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students know how they are expected to behave ● Students focus on work in the classroom ● Consequences for behavior are clear and consistent ● School keeps students safe from harm 		
<p>7. Strong Instructional Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear performance expectations for teachers ● Principal recruits, keeps great teachers ● Teachers work together within & across grades ● Principal monitors individual teacher performance ● Staff regularly identifies problems, improves school ● Professional development focused on school goals ● Principal acts on high and low teacher performance 		



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