



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

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

**INCLUDES**  
Easy to Use  
Tool Kit



religious?  
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Which School?



public?  
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Bryan C. Hassel, Ph.D. & Emily Ayscue Hassel



# **Step Three: Chapter 12**

## ***Great School Quality Factors 1-4: The Core Four***

**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 12***

- ***The Core Four Great School Quality Factors*** are essential to the teaching and learning that make a Great School great.
- ***Great School Quality Factor #1 is Clear Mission Guiding School Activities.***  
The litmus test is this: the school has a clear purpose and approach to education that you understand. The principal, teachers and other 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, and not wasted on "window dressing."
- ***Great School Quality Factor #2 is High Expectations for All Students.*** The litmus test is this: it is clear to you that the school will expect a lot of your child and challenge your child to learn in core subjects every day. Great Schools have:
  - ✓ High minimum academic standards ("grade level") that prepare all children for independent adulthood in our society.
  - ✓ Higher, individualized standards for children who are ready to excel beyond grade level.
- ***Great School Quality Factor #3 is Monitoring Progress and Adjusting Teaching.*** The litmus test: the school will have a handle on what your child knows in core subjects at all times and will make sure your child learns what's needed, even if it takes back flips to do it. Great Schools monitor each child's individual progress frequently during the school year, often weekly. Teachers change their teaching approaches as needed, to address individual children's needs. Barriers to learning, even non-academic ones, are addressed. When a child falls behind, the school takes immediate action, accepting no excuses for failure.
- ***Great School Quality Factor #4 is Focus on Effective Learning Tasks.*** The litmus test is this: the principal and teachers in the school can tell you how they know that they are doing what works best in the classroom, and they make frequent changes to improve. Teachers use well-planned, well-tested approaches to instruction. More important subjects receive more time and better materials and facilities. Classroom interruptions are minimal. Materials and curriculum are frequently reviewed, and altered, to ensure they are working as planned.
- ***The indicators of the Core Four*** in a school are included in the Great School Quality Checklist on page 200.

## Chapter 12

# Great School Quality Factors #1 – 4: The Core Four

### Great School Quality Factor #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, and not wasted on “window dressing” – things that may look good but that don't further the school's mission.



*When Liza and Harrison Olson began their hunt, they identified three schools as possibilities for various reasons – one based on friends' recommendations, one a school Liza herself had attended, one their assigned district public school (we won't say which is which). They first investigated **Great School Elementary**, whose motto was “Every Child Achieving, Every Child Challenged To Learn More.” Every conversation they had – with the principal, three teachers and several parents of current students – made clear that this school met the learning needs of a wide variety of students, while also gunning hard for the highest levels of learning in academics. They talked with parents of gifted, typical and dyslexic children, and every parent claimed that the school was “just right for my child.” When they investigated **Good Try Elementary**, which also had many different kinds of students, they were impressed by the nurturing posters and social charm of the staff they met. The school motto was “We Love Kids.” But everyone Liza and Harry met at Good Try seemed to have*

*a very different vision of the school, and they really never could get the principal to say what she saw as the school's mission. Teachers seemed to be using very different materials and teaching methods in the classes, mainly according to their personal preferences. One parent summed it up: "It hasn't been just right for our child academically, but we love the friendly atmosphere of the school." A popular third school they considered, **Yesteryear Elementary**, had a professionally-written mission statement that talked a lot about "nurturing all children" and "preparing them for the international world in which we live." The facilities, grounds and class equipment were impressive. But it was unclear to Liza and Harrison after an open house and tour how their children would benefit. The school used a one-size-fits-all curriculum and teaching method ("Perhaps O.K. for Elan?" they thought), plus a "guidance program" to help struggling students get appropriate tutoring elsewhere.*



### **"Clear" Means Clear to You**

Great School Quality Factor #1 evokes that old saying that "if you don't know where you're going, you probably won't get there." A school must have a clear purpose and goals that *everyone* understands. That includes the school leadership, teachers, other staff and most certainly you as parents. If the people directly responsible for ensuring that a child learns lack a common understanding of *what the child should be learning and why*, it is ever so much harder for parent or teacher to bring a child along. But if everyone is aiming for the same target and reinforcing each other's efforts, more children will learn more of the targeted skills, knowledge and abilities.

When you start to consider schools available to your child, your litmus test for Great School Quality Factor #1 will be this: the school has a clear purpose and approach to education that *you* understand.

### **Clear, Consistent Communication**

Having a school mission, goals or other guideposts written down in a desk drawer is not enough (but it is certainly an essential starting point). Instead, you should see and hear the mission throughout the school.

- If you are getting tired of hearing the same message spouting forth from the principal's, teachers' and parents' lips about the school's aim and approach to teaching, then that school is doing it right.

- If you hear what you need to hear when you interview the principal during your decision process – but then never again – then the school is only partway there.
- If you have to dig, dig, dig, to get even a hint of the school’s goals and approach from the principal and teachers, then you can be sure that teachers in that school are all over the map when it comes to teaching and learning. Look for a very tired principal running around to fill the gaps caused by the lack of clarity. Listen for parents complaining about the inconsistent approach among teachers from year to year and within each grade.

### ***Activities Support the Mission***

Money, time and activities in a school must follow the mission or the mission will go unmet. Many schools start in the right place with a clear mission and plan for enacting it. But they veer off course – spending too much time and money on popular, easy or visible things. Great Schools constantly review to make sure that resources follow the mission, and they make tough decisions – about what to do and what *not* to do – to achieve the school’s goals. They communicate their decisions to the whole school community, including parents, and explain how decisions will help meet the mission.

A school must live and breathe its mission for that mission to impact your child. If you read and hear that a school addresses children’s various learning styles, but most teaching in a school is done with teacher standing and talking at the front of the class, something’s wrong. If a school says no child will be left behind grade level, but does not monitor progress or quickly change the teaching approach for struggling students, something’s wrong. If a school says it challenges every child, but then does not monitor student progress and raise goals for students who are ahead, something’s wrong. If a school says its core values include exposing children to a diversity of people and perspectives, but the students and teachers are mostly quite similar, something’s wrong. If a school’s mission is to develop the “whole child,” but all class time is spent on individual academic work, something’s wrong.

If a school cannot tell you – the current or prospective parent – how and why it spends time and money the way it does, then it remains far from living its mission. Most frustrating for you, your child will not have the school experience you anticipated. In a Great School, the principal, teachers and most parents can tell you not only what the mission is, but how well the school is living up to its own standard and what changes are afoot to better meet the mission. In a Great School, you will get exactly what you expected – if you bothered to choose. And when you don’t get what’s expected, you will know that your comments and feedback are welcome by school leadership ever ready to make improvements.

By no means are we implying that schools should have any particular mission. All Great Schools commit to achieving strong academic results for all students. Beyond that, we have observed a wide variety of missions-in-action that work well for kids. Whether a school's mission focuses on "global awareness" or "engaging students in community service" is less important than whether the mission is clear, understood by all, and used as a daily guide to decision and action.

## Great School Quality Factor #2: High Expectations for All Students

- 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.
- Higher, individualized standards for children who are ready to excel beyond grade level.



*The Olsons learned more about the three schools they were considering. At **Great School Elementary**, the school used a set of continuous, step-by-step learning goals in core subjects and "critical thinking skills." Each subject and thinking area had a target minimum for each grade (which looked similar to grade level at Good Try, they noticed). Liza and Harrison were surprised to hear the principal and teachers call this level the "bare minimum" rather than "grade level." The staff told parents at the open house that most children would exceed the target in at least one subject each year. "This is what we tell our students, and we find that most children, even struggling ones, pick a favorite subject and really go for it," the principal stated with pride. The learning goals extended several grade levels above the sixth grade, even though this was the highest grade in the school. At **Good Try Elementary**, the teachers used a basic set of grade level standards used by many schools in the state. These standards stated end of grade goals only, but stated those quite clearly. After talking with several parents, it was clear that the school would provide extra help for struggling students and enrichment for advanced students if a child's parent requested it. "We do have a fair number of students with learning and family challenges, and we just know those kids won't meet grade level some years – but we love them anyway," the principal stated with pride. The Olsons wondered what that would mean for Colter. Or even Elan, if he too began to struggle. At **Yesteryear Elementary**, teachers stated with*

*an air of pride that “our standards are higher than most schools in our area,” and parents seemed to think the same thing. But the work the Olsons saw was well below Heidi’s level. They asked a teacher, and she said, “Oh, don’t worry. We always have a few kids like that, and they seem to take care of themselves! Plus, they always love our enriching mini-courses in January.”*



### **How High is High?**

We know from research that the more a teacher expects from a child, the more the child will expect of herself. And many parents considering multiple schools are seeking high expectations for their children. But even the brainiest child need not cram for calculus in kindergarten. So . . .

- How high should you expect a school to aim for “grade level”?
- How do you tell whether a school raises expectations for children who are ahead?
- And how do you tell whether teachers *really* expect students to reach the goals, whether grade level or higher?

If those seem like tough questions to answer, they are. While states, some national organizations, and many individual schools have clear, written learning standards, the rationale for them is not always clear. Most have been developed with the collective wisdom of teachers and other school staff who have a sense of what the typical student can master at each age. Yet we know that many children – fast or motivated learners, not just the supernova bright ones – go unchallenged in basic subjects for part of the school year. Furthermore, many children aren’t making the grade even in schools with low-wattage standards. Standards are part of the solution, but clearly not the whole story.

You may not know much about grade level standards, but you know when your child isn’t challenged or is academically lost at school. With a little effort, you can learn enough to make an accurate comparison among schools available to your child. The litmus test for you is this: it is clear to you that a school will expect a lot of *your child* and challenge *your child* to learn in core subjects every day.

Now let’s dig deeper by making the term “high expectations” a little more real. Expectations are communicated in three ways:

1. **Grade Level Standards:** The minimum skills, knowledge and abilities required for all students to move from one grade to the next, often called “grade level standards” or “learning goals.”

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*Even if you don’t know much about grade level standards, you know when your child isn’t challenged or is academically lost at school.*

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2. **Higher Goals When Students are Ready:** A clear, established process for setting higher goals to challenge individual children who are ahead of grade level in a subject.
3. **Words and Deeds:** The words and actions teachers use to communicate, formally and informally, that all children are *actually* expected to meet their goals, whether grade level or higher.

### **Grade Level Standards**

Think of grade level standards and the next steps beyond for advanced students as a road map. If the school's mission is the ultimate destination, then the grade level learning goals should, all together, form a map to take your child through all of the school's grades (and beyond, for advanced students). The teaching methods and materials are the vehicles used to get from point to point on the map. Indeed, the very best of standards are constructed like a map, which allows teachers to focus on teaching and keeping students headed towards the destination.

If you compare schools' grade level standards (the minimum they expect all students to master) most likely you will find that the content varies in two ways:

- **How high?** *How difficult* are the skills and knowledge that all children are expected to master in each subject?
- **How broad?** *How many* academic subjects and topics are covered? How much of a child's overall development is addressed, not just academic, but also social, physical, emotional and spiritual?

Researchers have found that Great Schools have "high" standards in this way: students are expected to master more difficult material in the core subjects of reading, writing, math and, in later grades, science and social studies. In these basic subjects, teachers push students to learn more and think harder, not just memorizing more facts (although that has its place) but also solving problems, making logical arguments, comparing and contrasting ideas and creating new ones. (See box **To Think or Not To Think** on page 213 for more on the role of thinking skills.) Research, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, consistently shows that it is this push for higher levels of learning in core subjects, not breadth, that propels students to greater long-term academic performance.

Studies on breadth in education are few and inconsistent. Great Schools know this and do not confuse breadth with higher levels of learning in core subjects. They include breadth to reinforce core academic subjects, or because they value other subjects in their own right. However, they do not use greater breadth as an excuse for lowering expectations in basic academic subjects, nor as an alternative



to raising expectations for children who are ahead in the basics. (See the box *Breadth: When Does More Do More for Your Child?*)

### **Breadth: When Does More Do More for Your Child?**

Breadth – more subjects, more topics, more of the “whole child” – has value, regardless of its impact on performance in core academic areas. Breadth communicates to students the richness of the world we inhabit – from the microscopic world of atoms to the outer reaches of space, from the English language to tongues that shaped the modern world but are no longer spoken, from the cultures we know and grew up enjoying to those with radically different values, religion, dress and behaviors. Breadth can engage the otherwise unengaged child, because it often captures what is lost when basic subjects are taught without imagination: the real experiences of people, the tangible and visible objects around us, the magic of things too far away or too small to see for ourselves. Breadth can help a child in the middle of the pack find special interests and talents that distinguish her from peers. Breadth in school can help children develop their social, emotional, physical and spiritual selves, especially important when family life is too busy to serve these traditional roles.

Breadth also can be used to reinforce and bring to life the basic subjects, when teachers collaborate to ensure that this happens. Indeed, breadth can become essential in a school that does not ensure children ahead of grade level are challenged in the basic subjects, preventing bored rebellion in an otherwise unengaged child.

In some circumstances, breadth may actually increase overall academic achievement, even in the basics. For example, there is some research evidence that language immersion programs – teaching the basic subjects in a foreign language – increase academic performance in the basics, particularly for non-native English speakers. For now, though, these studies are dwarfed by the seven Great School Quality Factors, which have appeared repeatedly over a long period of time as the major indicators of long-term achievement in students of all backgrounds. If you can find both quality and breadth in one school, go for it. If not, opt for quality and broaden your child’s experiences outside of school.

You or your child may place special value on subjects or topics of particular personal interest, regardless of impact on overall academic achievement. The fit chapters (2-10) help you sort this out and include your personal favorites in your school hunt.

Many parents and their children value the content of broadening courses and will need to consider this in choosing a school (the fit chapters help you with this). However, breadth generally is not a substitute for ensuring that every child is challenged to greater heights of learning in the core subjects.

### ***Higher Goals When Students are Ready***

Children learn best when they are continually challenged to the next level of learning. Schools that focus entirely on making sure students reach grade level – even when grade level standards are set high – neglect any student who might be ready to progress further. Not only do “grade level only” schools fail bright and highly gifted learners, who may come into a grade already having mastered the material not expected until year end; they also fail the more typical “fast learners” and academically middling but highly motivated students, who may start in the middle of the pack but quickly learn the new material and are ready for more.

One mark of Great Schools is that all of their students, even the brightest and most academically capable, achieve more than similar students elsewhere. This is not by accident, but by design. These schools build in a consistent process for ensuring that “high” is as high as an individual child is ready to go. While the grade level standards form a firm floor, no individual child faces a ceiling beyond which the school stops offering academic challenge in the core subjects. Great Schools reflect this combined commitment to a firm floor and boundless ceiling in their written expectations, or “standards.” They also reflect it in how they use the standards and in the actions of teachers.

### ***Words and Deeds***

***Words: Comparing What’s Written.*** Many parents will just accept a school’s claim of “higher standards.” But a school may mean higher in core subjects, broader, or just clearer. A school may have vague standards that the teachers don’t understand, or ones crystal clear even to you. You won’t know unless you take at least a little peek.

Almost all states have adopted a single system of standards for all of their *public* schools. Some public school districts have customized or raised these standards for all of *their* schools. Some individual public schools raise their standards beyond the district’s, too. So if your search is limited to public schools within a single school district, the written state standards are a bare minimum.

You can obtain the basic standards for public schools in your area through your state department of education’s website or your school district’s website. You should also be able to look at an individual school’s written standards in-person;

just ask at the school office. (If you aren't allowed to look, that's a sign that standards aren't used greatly in the school's daily life.)

If you're casting a wider net – considering private schools or a move to one of several districts or states – your job gets more complicated. You might want to get a free expert opinion about each state's or school's standards. Many state and national standards have been rated by teams of experts. You can assess a school's standards with help of the experts if the school uses recognized state or national standards as a base. If you are considering private schools, start by asking each school what standards it expects its students to meet. As with a public school, this can be useful in its own right: it will tell you whether each school uses its standards in everyday work. To find up-to-date websites that compile and evaluate state and national standards used by public and private schools, see our Resources for Parents section on page 354 or visit **PickyParent.com**.

If a school has detailed standards flowing continuously over many grades, then the expense may be too great for a school to share complete sets with prospective parents. Some schools break standards into grade-by-grade sections for sharing with parents, something they can easily share with the prospective parent as well. Ask for the samples you need, or offer to make copies at your own expense. If the grade level standards are available only in a 4-inch binder or not at all, you might ask how the school shares these learning goals with parents of students (chances are good that they don't).

Try looking at a limited sample to save time: two basic subjects in the grade your child would enter next year and in a grade two to four years above that. That's four sets to compare – all (or more than) most of you will have time to weigh! You might compare standards for math and reading (sometimes combined with writing into “language arts”), plus any subjects critical to you or your child after reading the fit chapters.

***What Does a Grade Level Standard Look Like?*** Written standards will vary. The better they are, the more likely it is that a school *uses* them. Look for differences in Clarity, Continuity, Completeness, and Difficulty.

Continuous standards, with ever more difficult steps of learning, are more helpful in the classroom than end-of-year goals alone. For struggling and right-in-the-middle students, such a set of written standards makes tracking individual students' progress clear and consistent across classrooms. For advanced students, continuous standards make it far easier for teachers to challenge every child without regard to grade. Individual teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to defining the next-step learning goals. Instead, they can focus on other Great School Quality Factors, like monitoring progress and adjusting teaching methods.

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***Shortcut:***  
*ask yourself,*  
*“Will this*  
*school’s grade*  
*level goals*  
*challenge my*  
*child?”*  
*If so, go to Great*  
*School Quality*  
*Factor #3. If*  
*not, ask if*  
*goals are raised*  
*for advanced*  
*students.*

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### Comparing Standards

	GOOD	BETTER	BEST
<b>CLARITY</b>	Standards are written for teachers to use, but are not simple or clear enough for most parents to understand	Standards are written for teachers, but are in simple form and clear language that most parents can understand	Standards are written with parents in mind, so that both teachers and nearly all parents can understand and use them
<b>CONTINUITY</b>	Written list of minimum skills, knowledge and abilities that children are required to master by end of school year ("grade level standards")	Written progression of ever more difficult skills, knowledge and abilities covering the typical range of students within each grade, with minimum year-end goals	Written progression of ever more difficult skills, knowledge and abilities that is continuous from grade to grade, with minimum year-end goals for each grade
<b>COMPLETENESS</b>	Written standards cover the basic subjects only: reading, writing, and math	Written standards cover more subjects that are taught in the school, not just the basics	Written standards cover all subjects included in the curriculum
<b>DIFFICULTY</b>	Skills, knowledge and abilities required for each grade level appear reasonable and achievable for typical children	Skills, knowledge and abilities required for each grade level are challenging for most typical children	Skills, knowledge and abilities required for each grade level are challenging for most typical children, and written goals extend well beyond even the highest grade level for ready children

**Deeds: Comparing What's Done.** Even when schools do not differ in their basic, *written* standards, they may differ enormously in their actual, day-to-day expectations. Studying Great Schools – that get great results with all kinds of students – has made two things clear. First, whatever the grade level standards may be, Great Schools pursue them relentlessly as a *bare minimum for all students*. What's more, Great Schools don't stop there; once a child masters a grade level target, he is asked to learn still more.

As with the school mission in Great School Quality Factor #1, a school must walk its talk. The school must truly *expect* all students to achieve challenging goals and must take *action* to ensure it. Within a given state, public schools will generally use the same written standards. Yet, if you ask, you will find that the principal and teachers in some schools make excuses for students not achieving this bar. At other schools, the state standards are treated as the absolute minimum, the bare bones bottom, the very least they expect. You can be sure that while the written standards are the same, more students will achieve more in the school with higher expectations.



### To Think or Not to Think? What Are “Thinking Skills”?

Great Schools stretch higher into the most essential subjects, which is one reason why even their students at “the bottom” perform better overall. Stretching higher does not mean just learning more facts, but also learning how to use facts to solve problems, make comparisons and think of new ideas. Many parents and educators worry that schools in the United States do not focus enough on teaching “critical” or “higher order” thinking skills. You might be thinking: “what does that mean?!” The most important “thinking skills” include these:

- **Analytical thinking** – solving problems that must be broken down into logical, orderly steps. A simple home example: how do you get five family members, luggage and the dog into your small station wagon for a trip? If you throw all the people and things in there, you run out of room and the dog sits on Mom’s lap. If you make a plan about what goes where and when, taking all the different factors into account, that’s analytical thinking: people need seats, dogs don’t; the driver needs to see through the rearview mirror, so luggage can be stacked only so high; heavy suitcases on the bottom, food bags on top; bags we don’t need on the road go in first; some of this luggage can stay home; etc. That’s analytical thinking.
- **Conceptual thinking** – making comparisons between things not obviously related, seeing similarities and large patterns in a collection of smaller events. A home life example: you live in a beautiful neighborhood. But you never get as much exercise as you’d like. You rarely see your neighbors except through a car window. And even though you live within blocks of several great, reasonably priced restaurants, you always drive to them (and come to think of it, so do your neighbors). Though there are ways to address each problem individually and differently, it occurs to you that sidewalks would solve all three problems at once. That’s conceptual thinking.
- **Creative thinking** – coming up with new ideas or new ways to use old ideas. A simple home example: your latest decorating project on a minimum budget means using grandma’s knick knacks in ways you hadn’t imagined before. That old butter churner becomes an umbrella stand, that potting table from her garage makes a charming entry way greeting table, her scarf collection sewn together makes snappy curtains for the den. That’s creative thinking.

“Critical” thinking means making judgments. “Higher order” thinking is more and more complicated thinking of the types listed above. You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to use thinking skills. Indeed, they are a big help just in navigating home life. More and more, they are not just helpful but essential for navigating a complex and ever-changing work world, too.

In all schools, you'll want to ask whether teachers *expect* all students to meet grade level and what *actions* the school takes to ensure that outcome. You'll want to ask and listen for specific examples of how teachers work with children to achieve grade level, especially if your child may struggle. You'll also want to ask what the school does with a child who masters the material before year end or who starts the year ahead of grade level, especially if your child is advanced or highly motivated. You should hear about a relentless, "no excuses," action-filled pursuit of the minimum grade level standards for every student, and a clear process to set higher goals for students who are ahead. Words of promise are not enough. Listen for a description of specific actions.

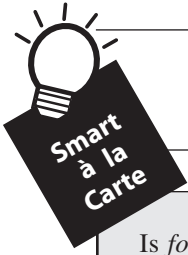
*Do Clear Standards Hamper Great Teachers?* Does so much clarity in standards inhibit the creativity of great teachers? Not really. Instead of devoting their time to clarifying *what* students need to learn, teachers guided by clear standards can focus on *how* the subject matter is taught and on ensuring that every student is challenged and making progress.

## Great School Quality Factor #3: Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching

Each child's individual progress is monitored frequently during the school year, often weekly. Teachers change their teaching approaches as needed – adapting to individual student interests, nonacademic capabilities, 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.



*At Great School Elementary, the principal told the Olsons and other parents at the open house that each child has time either one-on-one or in a group of five or fewer children with the lead teacher in math, reading and writing most days of each school week. "Our lead teachers are trained to use this time to assess each child's mastery of material and to move the child to the next step. Teachers use a combination of interactive teacher-child materials and self-teaching materials appealing to different children's interests and learning styles. You will find this happening most of the day in every classroom. If a student is having persistent difficulty, we have school-wide learning resource teachers who help the lead teacher identify the root of the problem and address it right away." When the Olsons asked, the Great School principal told them that students not working with the lead teacher are shepherded through a variety of large group, individual, and small group activities by the assistant teacher –*



### Does My Child Need a Formal Assessment?

Is *formal* assessment of your child's abilities and learning characteristics, in writing or given orally, ever necessary? Well, yes. In some cases, an informal understanding of a child's work mastery is not enough. Two problems can arise. First, an academically gifted child who also has a mild learning disability, behavioral challenge or mental illness may be up to grade level, but actually capable of much more. This child will raise no red flags unless his academic work slips or his behavior becomes unmanageable in the classroom. For example, a very bright child with mild ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), depression or dyslexia may perform "just fine" in the classroom but fall far short of his academic capability. Once the disability or impairment is addressed, his academic performance can rise to the full level of his capability.

Second, children who are typical in academic capability but who have mild learning disabilities, behavioral impairments or mental illness may be misdiagnosed as academically challenged. "Why isn't John paying attention? Because the material is over his head, so let's get him more repetition." Not the right solution for the depressed or clinically hyperactive child! If a child has certain disabilities or other challenges, even a star teacher working with a small group may not be able to diagnose the *cause* of the problem. And clearly, a child of any academic capability who has a severe learning disability or other impairment (physical or mental) may require formal assessment and significant treatment to learn as well as he is able.

What kind of formal testing might a school do? For starters, a formal test of each child's I.Q. (or similar) compared to performance will help identify that a gap exists between how we'd expect the child to perform academically and reality. Children whose performance lags need further assessment to pinpoint the exact problem – physical, mental or behavioral. In addition, brief formal tests of learning styles, interests and motivation are not essential but can help teachers anticipate individual students' needs.

As long as some children have learning disabilities and physical, mental and behavioral challenges, formal assessment at the beginning of each school year – or at times when academic performance changes suddenly – makes sense. This is a role that the Great School assumes but does not confuse with the three F's: frequent, focused and forward-looking monitoring of student progress (see page 217). If your school does not provide such formal testing, you may find it helpful to have your child tested by an education counselor or psychologist outside of school, to help with either your school choice or your communication with your child's teachers.

*with individual and small group work largely determined by each child's current mastery level. At **Good Try Elementary**, the Olsons learned that student progress is monitored every six weeks. If a child is struggling, and especially if a child's parents have expressed concern, learning resource teachers are available to work with small groups once each week in core subjects, especially reading. Starting in second grade, weekly pullouts for gifted students begin. At **Yesteryear Elementary**, the principal stated, and several teachers and parents confirmed, "Our standards are very challenging, so we really can just stick to our program." In response to the Olson's question about monitoring, one teacher said, "Oh, yes, we do end of grade standardized tests starting in second grade, so we know if there's a problem. And of course there are three report cards each year. And our guidance program funnels kids who aren't cutting the mustard to tutoring programs available in our city, if their parents choose."*



### Testing Feedback: Surviving the Jargon

If you are getting feedback from a testing professional about your child, know that testers may throw a bit of jargon at you. Some jargon you will already recognize, because you, having read this book, are an extra savvy parent. But there is one additional pair of terms you might want to know. There are two types of test scales that may have been used to assess or report on your child. One is called "norm" based testing and the other is called "criterion" based testing. If you feel your eyes glazing, don't sweat skipping this box. But if you are feeling a bit nerdy, read on.

**Norm** based testing compares your child to a large group of other children who've scored the full range of scores. On most characteristics, humans tend to fall on what's called a "normal" distribution: most of us are lumped pretty close together in the middle, a few of us struggle way below at the bottom, and a few of us score really high. Your child's score on such a test will probably be reported as a "percentile," indicating where she stands relative to other children. If your child scores at the "70th percentile," for example, she scored higher than 70% of children (7 out of every 10) her age.

**Criterion** based tests compare your child to a pre-set standard or criterion. For example, determining whether or not your kindergartener can count to three is a criterion-based test. But you'd also want to know, well, "Is that typical? How high can most kindergarteners count?" And "Can she count higher? How high? Are many other kids like that?" In the best of worlds, criterion tests are based on some real research about what is "typical," and they do not stop at the simple question "can you count to three" but go on to find out more about what your child knows and can do.

### ***The Three F's That Keep Your Child Moving in Fast Forward***

You might think that end-of-year testing is all it takes (and indeed many mediocre schools rely on this.) But the monitoring needed for Great School Quality Factor #3 need not be formal. Just *frequent*, *focused* on your child, and *forward-looking*:

- ***Frequent*** enough that your child does not languish for long not “getting it” before the teacher tries another approach to make the material stick; and frequent enough that your child moves on to more challenging material when she’s ready.
- ***Focused*** on your child’s current level of learning and individual learning characteristics:
  - ✓ Focused on your child’s current learning level so that teachers can know how fully a child has mastered material he’s currently pursuing, and
  - ✓ Focused on understanding your child’s characteristics – interests, learning styles, social and emotional development, and other needs and preferences – to help teachers ensure that your child learns.
- ***Forward-looking*** because monitoring is useless unless used to make changes – either to push a child to the next level of learning or to try a new approach for mastering the current material. Changes should happen as frequently as needed as a result of monitoring, in response to children struggling with new material and those mastering it earlier than expected.

The litmus test for Great School Quality Factor #3 is this: the school will have a handle on *what your child knows* in core subjects at all times and will *make sure your child learns* what’s needed, even if it takes back flips to do it.

In a Great School, it is the teacher’s job to know what level of learning each student has mastered and where each child struggles. Students start each school year at different levels of learning. Why? They will have learned at different rates during the previous school years. Some will remember what they learned, others will have forgotten and need review. Some will have been ahead from the start, others have always struggled.

It is the Great School’s job to provide the resources – assistant teachers, learning specialists or other staff – that allow all lead teachers to have contact with students and keep track of individual progress. (Great *teachers* have organized volunteers to serve this role for years.) As long as she has small group or individual exposure to each child, even an average teacher should be able to determine the current level of mastery and appropriate next steps throughout the year. This is far easier, by the way, if the school also provides the kind of continuous learning goals or standards described in Great School Quality Factor #2. Great Schools also enhance teachers’ ability to keep tabs on students by providing them with state-of-the-art data and data-tracking systems.

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*Great Schools do not leave teachers in the lurch. Instead, they provide teachers with consistent, well-planned support to identify and respond to each child’s learning needs.*

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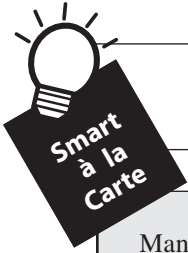
*Teachers in Great Schools learn to do backflips to help all kinds of children learn challenging material. Even great teachers need school support to achieve this consistently.*

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It is also the teacher's job to identify and respond to individual learning characteristics in each child. Each student has his own academic and nonacademic capabilities, interests, preferred learning styles, and motivations. In a Great School, teachers are assisted in *understanding and using* these characteristics of individual children to foster learning. A Great School may weave this understanding of individual children's needs into daily learning. But at the very least, if your child is not making progress in an academic area despite repeated attempts using the school's standard tools and methods, you might see the teacher and school:

- Asking if there are any changes or recent stresses at home and helping you deal with the situation as it relates to your child
- Assessing your child's social, emotional and physical development; then working with you to design a strategy for addressing weaknesses that are impacting academic learning (see *Viewpoint: Whole Child* on page 34).
- Considering your child's overall brain development and trying new tactics to overcome weaknesses that are inhibiting your child's learning (see *Viewpoint: All Kinds of Minds* on page 81)
- Considering your child's "multiple intelligences" and trying a teaching approach that uses your child's strengths to promote academic learning (see *Viewpoint: Multiple Intelligences* on page 47)
- Assessing your child's learning styles and then using activities that play to your child's dominant style (see *Viewpoint: Learning Styles* on page 67)
- Suggesting and providing assessment for learning disabilities; if one is found, working with you to design a strategy for helping your child cope with or even overcome the disability
- Giving your child assignments that relate to a strong interest area (e.g., writing about interest, reading and researching about interest, doing math problems related to interest)
- Appealing to your child's motivations; for example, if your child needs to bond interpersonally with teachers, often sitting with your child at lunch or spending a few minutes of one-on-one teaching time with your child weekly
- Involving you in the process of understanding and helping your child learn

Each child's social, emotional and physical development can enhance or diminish academic learning. In addition, many children will at some point face a mental challenge of some kind, such as a disability, disorder or mental illness that diminishes learning. When teachers are expected and helped to identify and address all of these potential barriers to learning, children learn more.



### Do Schools Spend Too Much Time on Standardized Tests?

Many parents worry about overemphasis on standardized tests in schools today. Does the narrow focus of multiple choice tests on the basics lead teachers to neglect other subjects? Do these tests lead teachers to give short shrift to thinking skills in favor of rote memorization? Are schools spending too much time prepping kids to take the tests, instead of “really teaching them”? And what about kids who are already at or above “grade level”? What do they get out of constant drilling of material they already know?

Standardized tests – imperfect as they may be – are the best way found so far to compare the learning in *similar core* subjects of large groups of *differing* students attending *differing* schools. This is valuable for determining, for instance, how well students in a school are mastering core knowledge in basic subjects, and how subgroups within a school (by race, income or gender, for example) are faring. For these reasons, standardized testing is here to stay.

As a parent choosing a school, the key question for you is this: *Is the school you’re examining using standardized tests the right way? Here’s what to look for in a Great School:*

- ***Standardized tests are only a small part of the school’s assessment and monitoring system.*** Annual fill-in-the-bubble exams are no substitute for the three F’s. Teachers constantly monitor students’ progress using other means.
- ***The school uses standardized tests to track progress*** of students over time, not just the percentage making grade level. Kids who are already at or above grade level don’t waste time drilling for the exams; they do other work at their current level.
- ***The school reports test results broken out by relevant categories*** of students. It’s common to see breakdowns by race and income. Less common but even more important: how much did kids with your child’s starting performance level improve?
- ***Tests reflect the school mission.*** If a school says its mission is to develop strong critical thinkers, for example, the school should assess critical thinking, not just basic skills. Just as high schools assess critical thinking with Advanced Placement exams, elementary standardized exams can assess these skills, too.
- ***The school tests what’s important to you and your child.*** Look back at your fit needs for what your child learns. Ideally, the school you choose “keeps score” when it comes to the content you think is most valuable. What’s tested is what’s valued, and that’s where money and class time flow.

A Great School provides ongoing education to help teachers recognize and respond to students' individual strengths and weaknesses in all areas that affect learning. Teachers in Great Schools are expected to learn how to do new things they may think they can't do – to help your child learn things that your child may think she can't do. We call this doing “back flips.” Whatever you call it, few teachers can do it consistently without training and intensive support from the school.

## Great School Quality Factor #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 better materials and facilities. Classroom interruptions are minimal. Materials and curriculum are frequently reviewed, and altered, to ensure they are working as planned.



*At **Great School Elementary**, the Olsons heard one teacher say, “Standard educational programs are like fishing nets: a better one will let you catch more fish, but some students always slip through or we miss them entirely. We teachers work together in each grade and subject to make faster guesses about which programs work and what kind of kids need something different. And, well, we have a school-wide research team that reviews the latest curriculum research each summer to see if new materials or approaches have been proven to work.” When asked, the principal pointed out that school rules limit mid-day announcements, visitors and other disruptions to keep the kids focused. She suggested that the Olsons take a look at the daily school schedules in kindergarten and third grade: “You’ll notice that most of the day is spent on reading, writing and math, but we pack in foreign language, science, and critical thinking workshops for everyone, not just our gifted kids. We do more because the core subjects are so focused on individual kids’ levels. There’s not a lot of fluff time here where we’re reaching only half the kids in the class like at a lot of schools.” A mid-day tour (looking through two-way mirrors on classroom doors) showed the Olsons that indeed children seemed to be highly engaged in their work in the classrooms. At **Good Try Elementary**, different teachers seemed to be using different materials, “whatever we each feel most comfortable and familiar with, really,” said one teacher. When the Olsons asked if the different approaches worked for all children, another teacher said, “Well, every classroom is different. I can’t really speak for the other*

*teachers.” The Good Try principal confirmed that she trusted individual teachers to use their past experience and that keeping them happy was her biggest concern: “Good teachers aren’t always easy to recruit, you know!” During their mid-day tour, the Olsons noticed that many children were focused, but several in each class seemed lost. At **Yesteryear Elementary**, several teachers told the Olsons that they’d been using the same reading and math programs for over a decade. “We were the first school in our area to adopt the reading program – the sales rep came here first, knowing that we are educational leaders in our community,” the principal stated with pride. When asked if the program worked for all of their children, one teacher reminded the Olsons that some children “just can’t cut it,” and so ought to get outside tutoring. “But even they like school here, because so much of our school day is spent on enriching activities. We go on one field trip per week most weeks. And we have six playgrounds!”*



### **Focus, and Focus on What Works**

If Great School Quality Factor #4 seems like a catch-all for good classroom instruction, it is. The core operations of a school occur in the classroom, and it is here that your child will experience the direct benefit of attending a Great School. Many schools that have relied only on finding great teachers or on adopting solid, but one-size-fits-all, teaching materials will be strong on this factor, even while being weak on others that require more ongoing support from the whole school. This factor alone is not enough to make a school great, but it is essential if your child is to experience strong learning in the classroom.

The litmus test for Great School Quality Factor #4 is this: the principal and teachers in the school can tell you *how they know that they are doing what works* best in the classroom, and they make frequent changes to improve.

Fortunately, there are simple signs that a school has a strong focus on effective learning tasks:

- Well planned, well-tested approaches are used.
- Class time, material purchases and facilities are allocated according to plan.
- Classroom interruptions are minimal.

***Well planned, well-tested approaches are used.*** If a school is doing this, then teachers should be *able to tell you what approach and materials* they use in the core academic areas and why these were chosen. Listen with your common sense ears. You should hear about constant assessing, reworking and trying again of

teaching methods and materials. If you hear that teachers are doing research to find the best current teaching methods and tools, discussing their methods and materials with each other in regular meetings, tossing out approaches that do not work with most children, tailoring proven methods to better fit the school's students, and other similar activities, then the school is doing it right. If you hear teachers complain that an approach is "required" by the school or school district, but that it doesn't seem to work with many students in the school, yet they are still using that approach, beware!

"Well-tested" need not mean "proven by academic researchers in a university." While that would be nice, the reality is that few instructional approaches have



### Learning to Read: My Way or the Highway?

Many parents of elementary age children are highly concerned about the method of reading instruction their children's schools use. Many of our strong feelings about the subject come from our own experiences as students. We may remember the dawning light when phonics was introduced in our own classrooms and we finally were able to figure out the words on a page. Or we may equate phonics with boring, repetitive class sessions.

In the raging debate about reading, you're likely to hear about two popular approaches, phonics and whole language. Phonics instruction includes teaching children not just letter sounds, but the sounds of common letter combinations that, all together, form words. Whole language means exposing children to reading materials so that they become familiar with common words, phrases and contexts of stories and are able to build off of those to read on their own. In reality, most schools don't go exclusively one way or the other. You'll want to get behind the labels and ask, "How, specifically, do teachers in this school help students learn to read?"

Fortunately, reading instruction is one of the best-researched areas of classroom instruction. From this research, we've learned that phonics advocates are right – the most effective reading programs do include explicit instruction in phonics for all students. But the research also tells us that the most effective teachers use a balanced approach. In addition to phonics, teachers should expose students to rich and interesting texts, lead discussions about the content of these texts, teach students to comprehend better by summarizing what they've read, and give students opportunities to read brief texts aloud in order to increase their "fluency." Importantly, Great Schools also give extra help, usually in small groups, to students who are slow to master phonics or read fluently.

been well-researched. That should not stop teachers from using “action research,” or testing different materials and approaches in the classroom. Fortunately, there is a growing push to assess the impact of various instruction techniques and materials. Educators’ understanding of what works for different kinds of children is a fast-moving target.

Meanwhile, it’s clear that the particular materials used are less important than *how* they are used: to meet the school mission, to set high expectations for every child, to raise goals when children are ready and to approach children with differing needs in different ways. Great School Quality Factors #1 – 3 would lead a teacher to terrific teaching with a variety of instructional tools and techniques. **PickyParent.com** lets you delve deeper into the latest and greatest on curriculum and teaching approaches. We’ll help you find out what research has said, if anything, about the particular approaches your prospective schools are using. (See box on *Learning to Read* for more about one raging debate.)

***Class time, material purchases and facilities are allocated according to plan.*** When you visit a targeted school, you should see what you have *heard and read* about. Subjects and activities that are essential to the school’s mission should be highly visible at the school – through top-notch facilities, materials and a large dose of class time. If you read in the school brochure that healthy mind, healthy body is the school mission, look for balanced academic and athletics facilities. If self-initiated, hands-on work is a core part of the school’s agenda, but all you see is students sitting in desks with workbooks, ask how much time is spent doing this each day (it shouldn’t be much). Beware the school that claims a science focus but has no science lab, no specialized science materials and only an hour a week of science. If you can’t see how the school’s priorities are met with the facilities and weekly class schedule, chances are that the school is not allocating resources in line with the mission.

***Classroom interruptions are minimal.*** Just ask and then observe. First, the school should have a clear policy designed to limit classroom disruptions. For example, school wide announcements should be made during home room or the time early in the day before focused school work has begun. Children leaving class for doctor or other appointments should do so at the beginning of academic sessions, not in the middle. Students should be encouraged to use the toilet before and after focused class work (though younger children will certainly need more latitude on this to avoid accidents at school). Second, you should see behavior in classrooms that reflects the school policy. Teachers and students should be focused on class work. Blocks of academic time should go uninterrupted by distractions – visits from office administrators, loudspeaker announcements, toilet breaks, children leaving or reentering the class for reasons unrelated to their work, etc.



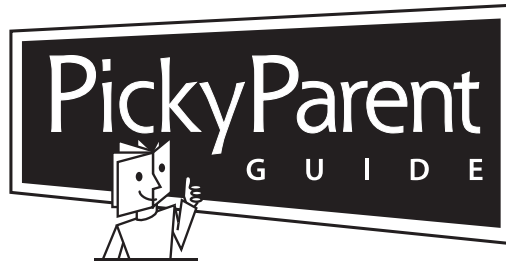
### **What To Do**

- **Skim Great School Quality Factors #1 – 4 on the Great School Quality Checklist** (page 200). Estimated Time: 5 minutes
- **Use the Quality: What to Look for in a School table** sections (page 409) for Great School Quality Factors #1 – 4 to help you think of specific questions about quality to ask principals, teachers and parents. Highlight or jot down the ones that are most informative for you, and record them as needed on your *Interview Forms* (page 273). Estimated Time: 10 minutes
- **Use the Quality: Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School table** (page 433) to help you decide what school weaknesses on Great School Quality Factors #1 – 4 you would find most difficult to make up for at home. Underline these in the left-hand column on your *Great School Quality Checklist*. Time: 10 minutes

### **Optional Activities**

- **If your child is currently in elementary school**, take a few minutes to think about the Great School Quality Factor #1 - 4 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.

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