

PickyParent

GUIDE



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

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

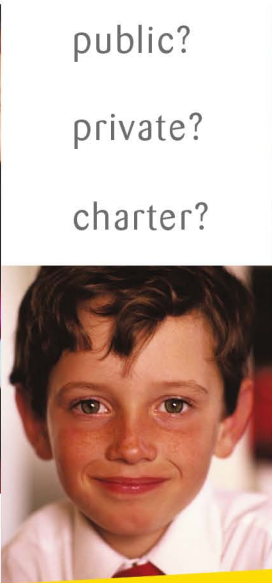
INCLUDES
Easy to Use
Tool Kit



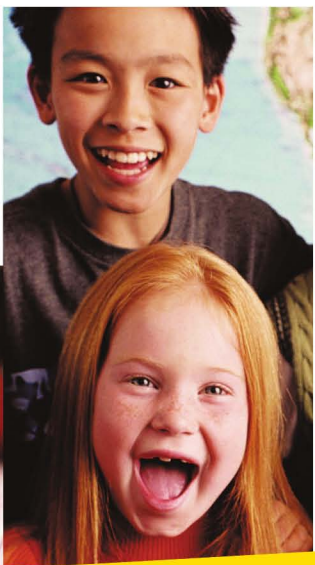
religious?
magnet?
home?



Which School?



public?
private?
charter?



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Step Three: Chapter 13
Great School Quality Factors 5,6:
The Supporting Two

This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:

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

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LIGHT'NING LIST

What To Know from Chapter 13

- **The Supporting Two Great School Quality Factors** enable children, teachers and parents to focus on the work of the school.
- **Great School Quality Factor #5 is Home-School Connection.** The litmus test is this: a school has a clear, consistent method for telling you what's what. In a Great School, parents are told what their children will be learning, what to do at home, what progress each child has made during the year (frequently) and how to work with the school to solve any problems their children might face.
- **Great School Quality Factor # 6 is Safe and Orderly Environment.** The litmus test is this: it is abundantly apparent that a school will keep your child and others safe and focused on learning. 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.
- **The indicators of the Supporting Two Great School Quality Factors** in a school are included in the *Great School Quality Checklist* (page 200).

Chapter 13

Great School Quality Factors #5 and 6: The Supporting Two

Great School Quality Factor #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.



*Because of the delay detecting Colter's disability, and also because Liza was considering going back to work, the Olsons were concerned about communicating well with their children's teachers. At **Great School Elementary**, they didn't even have to ask about this, since the principal mentioned in the open house speech and the teachers they met all mentioned the school's required parent-teacher communication policy. Mini report cards were sent home every two weeks school wide. Not as comprehensive as the end of semester reports, they covered behavior, academics (broken down by subject), social development with peers and teachers, and physical development. Asked if this wasn't a huge burden, one teacher said, "This is O.K. for us, really, because we are keeping track of these things weekly, anyway. It's a bit of a scramble when they're due, but, frankly, we know you can help us more if you know where things stand. We often attach a sheet about the topics we'll be tackling with your child in the next few weeks. Standard instructions about how to help (and not*

help) children with homework were sent at the beginning of the year, with periodic reminders. At **Good Try Elementary**, when they asked, the Olsons found that the main communication occurred at the September class open house and the twice yearly parent conferences in November and April. “Some of our mothers, and occasionally fathers, volunteer to read stories in the classroom. Of course, we get to know those parents quite well,” one teacher noted with a smile. Liza’s stomach lurched as she worried whether that meant she shouldn’t start working again – she wouldn’t want to miss out on communicating with the teachers. At **Yesteryear Elementary**, when asked, the principal said with knowing certainty, “Oh, we have our first conferences in October, a whole month before most schools. And again in April, of course. And many of our parents help plan the January Chill, a fabulous party for parents and a great fundraiser for our school. We really get to know parents who participate that way.” When Liza stuck her neck out and asked how teachers would let her know if Elan began to show the same disability as Colter, the principal said, “Don’t worry, if your child is not going to make grade level, our guidance staff will help you find the right tutoring service for the next year.”



Your Child’s First Teacher is You

Parent involvement has gotten a lot of press, political and popular attention in recent decades. As parents, you want your child to enjoy and succeed in school. As adults with other commitments – work, a household to run and other obligations – it is hard to help your child as much as you might like. The challenge is doubled if you don’t know what your child is learning in school, much less have any idea how to help.

Great Schools recognize the pressures facing parents. These schools clarify what is expected of parents and shower them with helpful advice and materials throughout the year. They let parents know *what* their children are learning, before, during and after the learning occurs. They tell parents up front and during the year how to help their children at home.

So, when you are prospecting for your child’s school, teachers should be able to tell you the specific process or steps that will occur for communicating with you and engaging you in your child’s education. In addition, they should be able to give you an overview of the content most children will be learning in their grade (as well as a summary of next steps for children who are advanced, if you need this). If they can’t tell you what your child would learn when they are “selling” the school to you, chances are slim that they will do it when your child is a student.

What you should hear about from principal, teachers and parents are clear and consistent:

- Steps and materials for telling parents what their children will be learning
- Process for frequently informing parents of each child's progress during the year (note that this is difficult if the school is weak on Great School Quality Factor #3: Monitoring)
- Expectations for how parents should help their children at home, and
- Process for dealing with problems, academic or behavioral, should they arise.

Many schools rely on a combination of quick parent-teacher chats at carpool pick-up and once-or-twice-per-year parent conferences. Schools in which most children ride buses may use one or two conferences per year only! But one-minute chat sessions and one or two meetings with the lead teacher are not enough to prepare you for helping your child at home and keep you informed of your child's progress. Great Schools are more planful and thorough about informing parents and getting them actively involved in their own children's education.

For example, in a Great School you might see a combination of these activities and materials:

Beginning of year:

- "Open house" gathering of all parents and teacher to give verbal overview of what children will be learning, teaching method and materials
- Short written descriptions of year-end goals (grade level), how struggling children will be helped, and how children who are advanced will be challenged. The teacher might show or give you a list of progressively more advanced learning goals for core subjects, not just year-end goals
- Meetings between parents and teacher to discuss each individual child's previous school experiences and important individual characteristics
- Clear invitation to communicate with teacher in a *variety* of ways accessible to parents (notes, phone calls, voice mail, email, special meetings, two or more regular conferences, drop off and pick up)

During year:

- Weekly written updates about what children learned last week and will learn next week, along with specific actions parents should take at home to support child
- Frequent homework overviews and descriptions of how parents should – and should not – help

You shouldn't have to beg to know what your child is learning. It's far harder to support your child's learning if you don't know what's being taught.

- Child’s school work sent home in small, frequent batches, with explanations from teacher of assignment goals (if needed)
- At least two parent-teacher conferences to discuss child’s progress (more is better and is essential if problems arise between conferences)
- Occasional parent-only classes to educate about key areas of children’s learning, especially topics where parents may be less knowledgeable (e.g., computer skills, English as second language)
- Efforts to connect parents with social services they may need to build strong families and support their children’s learning, when needed

End of Year:

- Written summary of child’s progress and achievement in all major learning areas
- Discussion of suggested developmental goals for following year, assistance for parents considering school changes

The traditional celebratory family parties at the beginning and end of year are valuable, too, but they do not affect how much your child learns. They build a sense of community, help parents feel comfortable with the teachers and help parents meet each other. They can affect fit in many ways, but have little effect on quality. Since these do not help your child’s academic progress and performance, they are not substitutes for the other steps that provide information about your child’s learning in the classroom.

Great School Quality Factor #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.



At Great School Elementary, Harrison had heard the same things that Liza heard: the school kept in close touch with parents about their children’s behavior. But Harrison was a “rule guy,” and he wondered just how tough the behavior standards were. “They can report on it all they want, but if they don’t expect much, who cares what they report,” he grumbled. He was humbly surprised by the behavior he observed through the two-way mirrors on the classroom doors during his tour. “Wow, these kids

*are really focused. I look in there and I see all those different kinds of children thrown together, and, well, every kid focused on learning is just not what I'd expect. But that's what I see. I saw this one kid start to goof around – that teacher was all over it. It wasn't 30 seconds before they had him working on something.” When he later looked at the school's “Behavior Policies” he liked the focus on “respect” and the worry-wart nature of the detailed safety procedures: all visitors had to sign in and wear a tag; a parent-staff committee conducted a once monthly walk-through to inspect the property and school equipment. “It would take a pretty crafty person – grownup or kid – to get past these safety rules,” he thought. At **Good Try Elementary**, the handbook had a safety and behavior policy, too. But the principal and teachers never brought it up except when they mentioned that the school had some kids from a “tough population.” It seemed that they must deal with safety and behavior problems as they arose – or he just guessed that since they didn't really say much about it. When he asked about the visitor policy (having seen Great School's impressive one), the principal said, “Well, we want everyone to feel welcome here. In fact, on any given day, you'll see lots of adults who support our school visiting. Teachers are used to it.” The principal was right. Harrison did see lots of strangers wandering around. In fact, he didn't have to wear a tag on his tour. “I could be anybody, a predator,” he thought. At **Yesteryear Elementary**, he felt embarrassed after he asked about safety and class order. “Well, we have a great group of parents and kids, so it's not an issue,” one teacher said. In fact, Harrison did think that the kids seemed pretty tame here. Even the ones who looked bored and tuned out in class seemed to be sitting still and not bothering other kids. “That's something,” he thought.*



Many a parent in the past has been wooed by great landscaping and buildings, good manners in the classroom and a crystal clear honor or disciplinary code. And many parents have shied away from sending their children to schools where classrooms are noisy and chaotic, or buildings old and out of style. How can you tell what matters and what doesn't for the experience your child will have and how well she will learn in school?

The litmus test is this: it is abundantly apparent that a school will keep your child and others safe and focused on learning.

Great School Quality Factor #6 has shown up in many but not all studies of Great Schools. While it is a safe bet to say that most Great Schools adhere to Great School Quality Factor #6, it is a certainty that this factor does not guarantee

greatness in the content of your child's learning. Safety and some degree of order are musts for a great educational environment, but they alone are not enough.

You certainly should eliminate schools with clear safety problems. But do not let prim and proper outweigh excellence in the educational basics. Instead, look for rock-solid safety basics and an environment where children can focus on learning. Then, use other elements of quality and fit to choose your child's school. Because safety is the more straightforward of the two matters, let's start there.

Safety

Your child needs both to be safe and feel safe to stay focused on learning. You should eliminate schools with serious safety problems, but do not choose a school solely for its safe environment. In reality, most schools are very safe for students – safer, often, than other places where children spend time. But as grim headlines have shockingly reminded us over the years, many schools also are lax about safety problems until a specific situation makes people aware of gaps.

You will need to consider not just the policies and practices of the schools you consider, but also the environment in which they operate. Schools located in suburban and rural areas may have less stringent safety policies for visitors because crime rates are generally low. Since the odds of a safety problem are low, these schools may choose to spend fewer resources to make the schools safer than they already are. In contrast, a school located in a higher crime area may need to be more stringent about certain safety procedures (e.g., visitors, screening for weapons) to meet the minimum bar for a safe school. You will have to make a judgment about how well the safety policies fit each school environment. Note that safety policies should cover all school-sponsored events and locations, including the school bus, athletic activities, etc.

How can you tell if a school meets the basic test for Safety? Look for these positive signs:

- The school has a clear policy for suspension, and ultimately expulsion, of any *student who threatens the safety of other students or staff with words or actions*. Even habitual pranksters who go too far are removed for the safety of others if they do not keep their behavior within safe boundaries.
- The school has a clear policy for suspension and ultimately expulsion of *students and staff caught using or selling illegal drugs* (or drugs with age requirements) at school or elsewhere.
- The school has a clear policy for suspension and ultimately expulsion of *students and staff caught in possession of weapons* on school grounds.

- The school has a clear policy of screening and identifying *all* visitors, not just those who *choose* to sign in. When you visit the school, you are subject to the policy and can observe that it is enforced. This is one policy that is infrequently followed in low-incident suburban schools until a problem occurs.
- Staff members are pre-screened for criminal records in all 50 states of the U.S. The school has and follows a policy about what previous crimes will exclude a staff member.
- Buildings, walkways, playgrounds, athletic fields, parking lot, buses and any other school facilities and grounds appear clean and in good repair.
- Equipment in the classrooms – from chairs and desks to science lab equipment – appears clean and in good repair.
- Cafeteria tables, chairs, kitchen and serving areas appear clean and in good repair.

Remember that flashy is not necessary. Do not choose a school because it has sparkling play sets or the best manicured lawn (unless it also shines in quality). But do eliminate schools that do not appear sanitary and safe.

Perhaps the most important contribution you can make to safety is teaching your own child to recognize, avoid and report unsafe situations. This is a developing field, and more and more advice is available to parents wanting to help their children get smart about personal safety.

Order

As with safety, you should eliminate schools with extreme disorder in the classrooms, but do not choose a school solely for its orderly environment. The most important aspect of “order” is not whether children are completely quiet and still, but whether they are engaged in learning.

Let us give a quick example. Many of the highest quality elementary schools – in which students of all kinds outperform similar peers elsewhere – use a combination of small group and individual work. If you step into a well-managed classroom like this, you will likely hear a low buzz of students and teachers interacting as they work. Nearly all students will be focused on their work, but you may at any moment observe a few staring into space or talking out of turn. You should see teachers redirecting those students towards their work.

To the casual observer, especially one who has a strong sense of order herself, the multiple groups doing different kinds of work, along with the buzz of activity, may look and sound chaotic. But to each child in the classroom, the work

will feel great, because each child will be closely engaged in a task. Keep this school on your list!

Contrast this to a classroom in which young children are all in desks facing the teacher, potentially one of the most orderly arrangements (from the grownup perspective). But suppose that the teacher's words are clearly of little interest to many of the students. Many are looking off into space or doodling without looking at the teacher. This classroom also has a buzz, but it is caused by the rustling of the doodlers, the bumping of desks by bored (or lost), wiggly children, and the giggling of those in the back of the class! Few children are engaged in learning. The teacher does and says nothing about the situation, until a child makes a noise so loud that the teacher can't hear herself. Clearly, expectations for classroom behavior are low, and the students know this. The teacher, having but one set of material to teach in one way, has little in her arsenal to engage the children for whom the material is too easy, too hard or just plain boring. Yes, higher behavioral expectations, and consequences, might shape up the classroom, but the learning will not likely improve for many.

In another school, order is part and parcel of the school's approach, which includes lots of repetition and drilling in the basic subjects. In one of these classrooms, students are held fast by the teacher's gaze from the front of the classroom. The teacher holds up visual cue cards and drills the students on English sentence structure. The teacher asks a question, the students answer in unison. This classroom – indeed the whole school – is highly orderly. Don't eliminate it for lack of order. But is it the right place for your child? Maybe. You should not choose it for its order, but you should keep it on your list until you find out how it compares on other quality and fit items.

How can you tell if a school meets the basic test for Order? Look for these positive signs:

- The school has a clear, written policy about how students are expected to act toward each other, teachers and other school staff.
- When you visit the school, the behavior you see – in classrooms, hallways and elsewhere – matches the policy. In classrooms, all students appear focused on their work, whether working alone, in small groups or large groups. Teachers quickly, calmly redirect students who are not focused on work.
- School policy makes it clear that students who violate behavior rules face immediate, consistent consequences. Punishments are mild for minor offenses, but more severe for worse behavior and repeat offenders, including suspension and ultimately expulsion from the school (yes, even in public schools).

**SNAP TO IT****What To Do**

- **Skim *Great School Quality Factors #5 and 6 on the Great School Quality Checklist*** (page 200). Estimated Time: 5 minutes
- **Use the *Quality: What to Look for in a School table*** sections for Great School Quality Factors #5 and 6 (page 409) 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*** on page 433 to help you decide what school weaknesses on Great School Quality Factors #5 and 6 would be 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 Factors #5 and 6 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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