

PickyParent

GUIDE



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

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INCLUDES
Easy to Use
Tool Kit



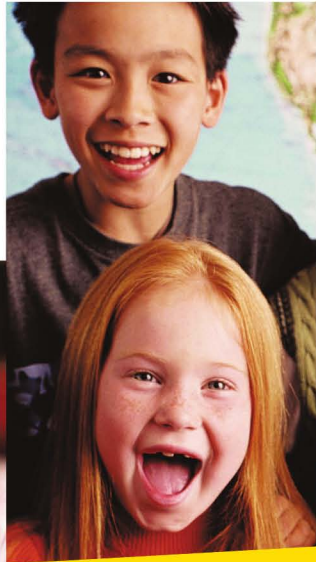
religious?
magnet?
home?



Which School?



public?
private?
charter?



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



Step Three: Chapter 13
Great School Quality Factor 7:
The Bedrock

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 14

- ▶ **Great School Quality Factor #7 is Strong Instructional Leadership.** The litmus tests are these: the best teachers and other staff stay, the worst leave, and the efforts of all staff are consistently focused on the other six Great School Quality Factors. In a Great 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 the school of low performers, recognizing and rewarding high performers).

- ▶ **This is the Bedrock Great School Quality Factor.** Instructional leadership is the foundation upon which a Great School is built. Without leadership, fewer great teachers will stay, fewer teachers will perform their best, and the efforts of teachers will not consistently support the school mission, including both quality and fit.

- ▶ **If leadership changes, the school will change, too** – perhaps for better or worse – and often rapidly so.
 - ✓ *Falling Stars are schools that have been great but fail to keep up* with the changing world or experience a decline in leadership. Great plans and practices put in place by former leadership can carry a school for a while, but not forever. Seek to avoid Falling Stars.
 - ✓ *Rising Stars are schools making rapid quality improvements*, with new leadership committed to and capable of implementing the seven Great School Quality Factors. Seek Rising Stars to increase your range of options among potential Great Schools with a potential Great Fit.

- ▶ **The indicators of Strong Instructional Leadership** in a school are included in the *Great School Quality Checklist* (p. 200).

Chapter 14

Great School Quality Factor #7: The Bedrock

Great School Quality Factor #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).



*Harrison and Liza were very interested in what the principals had to say. “After all, they ought to know what really goes on around there,” Harrison noted. At **Great School Elementary**, the principal was intense (“not the most relaxed woman I’ve ever met,” laughed Liza), but she ticked right through the matters that most concerned the Olsons. After they heard her open house speech, they didn’t just feel inspired, they felt that they really knew what to expect in that school. They were not disappointed when what they saw in the classrooms on their tour confirmed every claim the principal made. “I’m blown away,” said Harrison. Despite his positive response to the principal’s speech, Harrison still felt that he needed to grill her about her management. He, a manager himself, knew that a lot of blemishes could be masked by a motivating speech. The principal reminded him that the expectations for staff were included in the parent handbook. Later he looked and saw not just staff behaviors expected, but expectations about ensuring that 100% of kids met grade level, individualizing goals for kids who got ahead, weekly monitoring of each child’s progress, as-soon-as-*

*possible identification of learning disabilities, and what this school called a “back flips” approach to understanding and motivating every child. The principal said, “Some teachers who think about working at our school think that we prescribe too much for our teachers, that we’re tough on them, that we do not give them enough freedom. But let me tell you that our teachers are focused on your child and making the most of your child’s potential. Yes, we expect a lot from our teachers, but our best performers love it. And they relish solving each other’s problems in their weekly grade level planning meetings. Our turnover, which is low, is primarily teachers who need to leave for performance reasons. Our best teachers stay. Here, they can achieve and change the world one child at a time, and they know that I will do back flips to help them do just that.” “Wow,” thought Harrison, “I could take a few pointers from this woman for my own work at the bank.” At **Good Try Elementary**, the principal was such a nice man that Harrison and Liza started to feel bad asking so many pushy questions. But they did, especially since they had a hard time grasping what the school was like from his open house speech. The principal said, “We have a lot of new teachers this year, so I am expecting things to look up for next year.” When they asked whether it was an extra challenge having so many new teachers and why there were so many, he replied, “Well, the new ones do figure it out eventually. They can always meet with me if they’re worried. Kids like them because they’re young and friendly. And, you know schools just don’t have enough money, so we lose quite a few of our star teachers to that bank of yours, Mr. Harrison.” At **Yesteryear Elementary**, the principal’s speech had focused mostly on the long history and traditions of the school. When asked, she said, “Oh, all of our teachers are great. They pretty much all stay unless somebody has to move out of town. Our teachers are very experienced.” When asked about how teachers stay abreast of new ideas, the principal said, “If a teacher wants to study a new topic, we let them go to one conference per year of their choice.”*



Great School Quality Factor #7 is the bedrock of school quality. Without it, an otherwise Great School will be uncertain as shifting sands. You will see, and your child will experience, inconsistent quality from classroom to classroom and year to year. The stronger a principal, director, leadership team or other leadership, the more consistent and stable you can expect a school’s quality to be. This does not mean that the principal is necessarily an ace teacher herself, but rather that she helps others be great teachers. She sets clear expectations for other staff, helps them reach their goals for the school and rewards them accordingly.

This factor is really about how well the school leader *leads* the teachers. Some principals are good at setting a vision for the school, but poor at interpreting what that

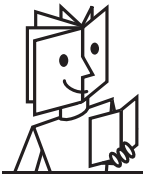
vision means for teachers. Some school leaders are great working with teachers to develop their teaching skills, but lack a vision of how those skills should support the school's mission and goals. The leadership skills required to set high standards for teachers, develop individual teachers' capabilities, lead group efforts to improve the school, and reward performance are rare to find all together in one person. The best of school leaders recognize their own strengths and weaknesses and form leadership teams to fill the gaps. Leadership teams may include teachers (e.g., grade level or subject matter leaders), parents (often in an advisory capacity) and others.

Some parents feel more comfortable asking about the quality of individual teachers than the performance of school leaders. But you cannot know the quality of a *school* by observing one or two teachers. Absent leadership, teaching quality and approaches in a school will be inconsistent and unpredictable. Even the very best teachers need to know what aspects of quality and fit are expected and supported by the school and how that translates into expectations for their work in the classroom.

Strong leadership is essential to the performance and staying power of even the best teachers. Great Schools do not rely merely on hiring great teachers. They support them with school-wide resources (materials, help in the classroom, and so on), reward them (with recognition, perks and money), and spread their good work to others. Nor do Great Schools focus professional improvement only on struggling and average teachers. Even the best teachers need to grow, improve and change with the times as student needs and research about "what works best" change. Great Schools get *all* of their teachers to do their personal best work by encouraging and rewarding improvement, achievement and teamwork. This approach sustains long-term performance of the best teachers and improves the performance of the rest.

You may wonder why *instructional* leadership is so important. After all, in any school, school leaders must take care of much business beyond managing instructional staff. Many leaders must spend time and energy on school finances, facilities and non-educational operations such as cafeteria and janitorial services. Indeed, these non-educational activities are essential for *sound* organization health. They distinguish schools that will survive from those that will fail to survive entirely. But rock solid finances, beautiful buildings and a great lunch menu tell you not one iota about whether your child will be challenged and nurtured to academic success. They tell you nothing about a school's quality in core academics.

Definition



Instructional Leadership: Leadership of a school. Establishing a vision and/or goals and organizing and managing a group of people to implement the vision and goals in a school.

Great School leaders ensure that all school staff members are focused on implementing the first six Great School Quality Factors.

Even with a narrow focus on *instructional* leadership, many parents feel uncomfortable evaluating the leadership of a school from afar, and indeed it is easier once you've had more contact with a school as parent of a current student. But there's no reason not to take a stab at it as you investigate schools. Often a school's top leader will jump out at you as "just the thing" or "way off." But sometimes it is hard for parents to put into words and feel confident about their impressions of a principal or other school leader. Nonetheless, you will see the result of those leadership strengths and weaknesses as you look at other Great School Quality Factors.

Assessing School Leadership: Take the Leap

Fortunately for you, there are simple signs that a school's instructional leadership is strong or weak. If you have limited time or are just taking an initial look, probe your targeted schools on questions 1 and 6.

1. *If you ask this...*

Do you have clear expectations of teachers in your school?

You should hear this...

- We have clear, written goals and expectations for all staff
- All goals and expectations for staff were chosen to support our school's mission and quality
- We also expect certain behaviors from teachers when interacting with students, parents, and other staff, and they are...(fill in blank)
- We use these overall goals and behavior expectations to determine each teacher's development and improvement goals every year

Not this...

- Each teacher decides what's important in her class
- All of our teachers are great – they have a lot of experience
- Our teachers are professionals and can figure out what they need to do (true they are professionals, but all professionals in an organization need clear expectations)

2. *If you ask this...*

How do you get and keep great teachers?

You should hear this...

- We recruit for skills, competence and previous performance, not just years of teaching experience
- We recruit people who have already shown that they can meet the expectations we have of current teachers, in teaching or similar pursuits
- We would rather leave a position temporarily unfilled than bring in a teacher we're not sure about
- We don't let the district send us teachers who won't work well here
- Our best teachers stay because they are valued and rewarded
- Top teaching candidates want to teach here, because they know their work will be valued and rewarded
- We work hard to keep our current staff improving, and both our good and great teachers like this

Not this...

- We've tried but haven't had much luck
- We take who we can get and figure it out after they get here
- We recruit teachers with the most experience only
- The district assigns teachers to our school

3. *If you ask this...*

Do teachers work together in your school?

You should hear this...

- We have time set aside weekly for staff in the same grades and subjects to evaluate student progress, identify problems and plan changes together
- Everybody has strengths, and we expect staff to work together to make the most of their strengths
- Our best performers coach or model their work for our other teachers

Not this...

- When we have time
- We have a weekly all-school staff meeting for announcements
- Our teachers meet to chat and support each other personally, which they love (fine if they do, but not a school quality indicator!)
- Our teachers are professionals and can do what they want in their own classrooms

4. *If you ask this...*

What does your school do to help teachers improve their teaching?

You should hear this...

Most Important:

- We monitor individual teachers' strengths and challenges, and we start there to improve
- Teacher improvement is focused on better meeting our school's mission
- Teacher improvement is focused where student performance isn't meeting the school mission
- Teacher improvement is an everyday activity, not just for teacher workdays
- I observe teachers and give feedback about both strengths and challenges

And Also:

- I work with each teacher to develop both strengths and weaknesses
- Teachers observe each other and give feedback
- Teachers "coach" each other
- Development activities vary – workshops, training programs, independent study – but all focus on what teachers need to meet our mission

Not this...

- Teachers focus their development mainly on areas of personal interest
- Our teachers are professionals and they take care of their own development
- We hire only the best and so do not need to worry
- Teachers figure this out for themselves; they don't need help
- Our teachers attend conferences and workshops (fine, but only in combination with other efforts and only if workshops chosen to improve skills related to mission)
- Teaching is a natural talent; some people have it, and some don't

5. *If you ask this...*

Do you reward your high-performing teachers?

You should hear this...

- We reward our high-performing teachers in many ways, such as:
 - ✓ Recognizing their performance publicly
 - ✓ Paying for them to attend conferences
 - ✓ Providing extra funds for special projects
 - ✓ Increased pay (e.g., annual bonus pay or higher salaries)

Not this...

- We provide the same rewards to all teachers, regardless of performance and regardless of how that makes our best performers feel about the school
- We don't want to embarrass our solid performers by recognizing our best performers
- You can't really tell who the best performers are

6. *If you ask this...*

What do you do if a teacher is not performing up to expectations?

You should hear this...

- We quickly focus on the areas that the teacher needs to improve and help her develop. If this does not work, the teacher is asked to leave our school (e.g., no more than 90 days from time problem is detected).
- We do not allow teachers who don't meet the school's performance expectations to stay
- While we respect our employees personally, the education they provide to students is our #1 concern

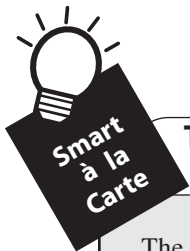
Not this...

- We give teachers a few years to figure this out
- We are a public school, so we cannot get rid of low performing teachers
- We never have low performers
- It is too hard to find replacements, so we just don't let people go
- Employee job security is our #1 concern

Here to Stay? Rising and Falling Stars

Strong instructional leaders will not simply run from class to class telling everyone what to do each day (indeed, such leaders will irritate even mild-mannered teachers). Instead, they will work with staff to establish strong rudders that keep everyone moving in the same direction. Most of these rudders relate to another Great School Quality Factor. They will be *written for clarity* and they will be *practiced* day to day. They might include:

- A clear, written mission
- Clear grade level learning goals for students, and step-by-step progressive learning levels within each grade (ideally stitched together across grades)
- Clear methods and school-wide staff support for raising expectations above grade level when students are ready
- Clear expectations about teaching methods
- Clear direction about materials to use (and the flexibility teachers have to use others)
- Regular processes through which teaching is assessed and improved



The Seven Great School Quality Factors: Make Them Part of You

The more familiar you are with the seven Great School Quality Factors, the more comfortable you may feel asking about them. Again, they are:

The Core Four

1. Clear Mission Guiding School Activities
2. High Expectations for All Students:
 - ✓ High minimum academic standards (“grade level”)
 - ✓ Higher, individualized standards for children who are ready
3. Monitoring of Progress and Adjusting Teaching
4. Focus on Effective Learning Tasks

The Supporting Two

5. Home-School Connection
6. Safe and Orderly Environment

The Bedrock

7. Strong Instructional Leadership

These and other rudders will keep a school steady for some time, even through the stormy seas of a leadership change. But ultimately, if leadership changes, the school will change, too – perhaps for better or worse – and often rapidly so. Falling Stars are schools that have been great but fail to keep up with the changing world or experience a decline in leadership. Great plans and practices put in place by former leadership can carry a school for a while, but not forever. Seek to avoid Falling Stars. Rising Stars are schools making rapid quality improvements, with new leadership committed to and capable of implementing the seven Great School Quality Factors. Seek Rising Stars to increase your range of options among potential Great Schools with a potential Great Fit.



What To Do

- **Skim Great School Quality Factor #7 on the Great School Quality Checklist** (page 200). Estimated Time: 3 minutes
- **Use the Quality: What to Look for in a School table** section for Great School Quality Factor #7 (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** (page 433) to help you decide what school weaknesses on Great School Quality Factor #7 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 #7 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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- ✓ School types, teaching methods and educational lingo explained and demystified
- ✓ Customized questions, targeting your needs, to ask when visiting schools
- ✓ Stress-saving tips on getting in to your favorite schools
- ✓ Plainspoken advice on how to interact with school staff to get what your child needs
- ✓ Dozens of ways to get for your child what you can't get at your current school

... and much more!

"All parents should have this book by the time their kids are 3 years old, if not sooner." -**Johnathan Williams**, Co-Founder and Co-Director, *The Accelerated School*, Los Angeles, *The Time Magazine Elementary School of the Year 2001*

"These tools eased our worries and helped us choose just the right school for our child and family."

-**Gray Dunaway**, Mortgage Broker and Mother of Two

"I love this book!...*Picky Parent Guide* will enable parents to make the best decisions possible for their children."

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