

THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

# Choose your child's school with CONFIDENCE



religious? magnet?

home?



Which School?

public?

private?

charter?







# Step Six: Chapter 18 Get the Best Results (Whatever School Your Child Attends)

This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:

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

Get all the chapters in electronic form, for free, at *PickyParent.com*, or purchase the paperback at Amazon.com.

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#### **LIGHT'NING LIST**

#### What To Know from Chapter 18

- ➤ All parents contribute to their children's development outside of school, whether by plan or default. Choose how your child spends precious non-school time.
- **You can compensate for many school weaknesses,** once you know what they are.
- **Your Great School Quality Checklist and Personalized Great Fit Checklist** completed for the school your child attends will help you understand the school's strengths and weaknesses.
- ➤ If you take action before and during each school year, you can
  - ✔ Prepare your child for school and
  - ✓ *Prepare the school* for your child.
- ➤ Useful actions you can take during the school year include these:
  - ✓ Work with your child's school
  - ✓ Work with your child
  - ✓ Invest time and money in your child's school
  - ✓ Make up for school shortcomings at home
- **Take responsibility for keeping communication flowing** with your child's teacher.
- ➤ **Help your child learn** to organize school work and make her best effort.
- **When major changes occur** in your family, your child or your child's school, you should re-evaluate school quality and fit.
- ➤ Life's too short: mend fences with friends and family if choosing an unexpected school has left relationships fragile.

## Chapter 18

## Get the Best Results (Whatever School Your Child Attends)

#### Make the Most of What You've Got

Whether or not you got your top pick, and whether or not you found a Great School that's a Great Fit, you surely will feel the relief of certainty about where your child will be going. A perfect school and perfect fit are rare, and nearly all parents must do at least a bit of gap-filling on the side. Whatever your circumstance, you will want to do what needs to be done to round out your child's development. Knowing your chosen school's strengths and weaknesses – in quality and fit – will allow you to do just that. Your pickiness will be rewarded not only in how your child spends time at school, but in how well you are able to parent your child the rest of the time.

Look back at your assessment of the school your child attends. Notice the school's quality and fit strengths, and take delight in them. But also plan ahead to make up for weaknesses, this year and in the future, with your child's home and non-school experiences. Specifically, you can:

- > Prepare to begin the next year of school,
- ➤ Partner with your child's school during the school year, and
- ➤ Watch for changes that might require a school switch later.

For decades, parents have done wonders for their children attending schools that fall short in quality and fit. You, too, can find other ways to educate and develop your child when needed.

#### Prepare to Begin the Next Year of School

The first stops are your *Great School Quality Checklist* and *Personalized Great Fit Checklist* – completed for the school your child will attend. Use these to refresh your own memory about what you need and expect and to help you communicate clearly and concisely with your child's school.

#### Prepare the School for Your Child

Regardless of how responsive you expect your child's school to be, you can carry your child's principal and teachers far down the road towards understanding your child and family by communicating your needs in advance. Even the best of schools and teachers will benefit from a heads up in this regard.

Try the following steps during the spring and summer before your child begins or switches schools. Even if your child is staying put at the same school, you can strengthen your school relationship, information flow and the school's work with your child by taking some of these steps:

- ➤ Help the *principal* get to know your child and family
  - Schedule a brief meeting
  - ✓ Write a brief letter
  - Attend an open house
  - ✓ Share your child's testing results
  - ✓ Share your child's previous years' report cards
- ➤ Help your child's *teacher*(s) get to know your child and family
  - ✔ Write a brief letter
  - ✓ Schedule a brief meeting
  - ✓ Share your child's previous years' report cards

*Help the principal.* Introduce your child and family to the school's leader ahead of time, ideally starting in April or May before your child starts (assuming an August/September school start date):

➤ Schedule a brief meeting alone with the principal if you didn't already do so. In this meeting communicate your child's and family's Must Haves, and ask how you can work with the school to ensure that your needs are met. Let the principal know you made a proactive choice among schools, and that you've noticed the school's strengths and challenges. If the school was not your top choice, you will feel better starting your child's career there if you've expressed your concerns. Your input might even help the school initiate changes. If you already had this meeting during the school hunt (and we hope you did), go ahead to the next step: a reminder letter. If you do not already have a rela-

- tionship with the principal, take this step even if your child is staying in the same school (especially if your child's needs have been poorly met there in the past).
- ➤ Write a brief letter (two pages at most) describing your child's and family's Must Haves. The more your principal knows, the more likely it is that your child will be assigned the most appropriate teacher and offered other appropriate assistance. Make clear that you expect your child to be assigned a lead teacher who can deal with his needs effectively. Be sure to include a description of the kinds of teaching approaches that have been effective and ineffective with your child in the past. Reiterate both what you like about the school and any concerns you have about quality or fit. You may write this letter in advance of your meeting with the principal to set the agenda or after your meeting to clarify what you discussed − whichever makes you feel more comfortable expressing your needs. You do not need to be a star author. Any good principal will appreciate your effort regardless of your penmanship and prose (they know that children of choosy parents perform better!). Take this step even if your child is staying at the same school, if you are concerned about teacher assignment or if your child's needs have not been well met in the past.
- ➤ Attend an open house or other school social event, and introduce yourself and your child to the principal, assistant principal and teachers (especially those from the grade your child will attend next year). If you have already met the principal or others, be sure to reintroduce yourself and say a quick hello. This is not the time for a prolonged discussion of your child's needs, as the principal will have many other parents to meet and greet, as well. If you haven't formed even the barest of relationships with your child's current principal, and your child is staying at the same school, it is never too late: make an effort to meet your child's principal now.
- ➤ Share your child's testing results, if any, from private assessments and even assessments conducted by other schools for admissions. Do this particularly if these tests cover an area not covered by your chosen school's own preadmission testing. Attach copies of these to your letter or bring to your meeting with the principal. Do this even if your child is staying at the same school, if the information might shed light on previous challenges with your child.
- ➤ Share your child's previous years' report cards or progress reports from school or child care, if any. If your child has had behavioral or academic problems, you might be worried about biasing your child's principal. But your child's principal cannot help your child's teacher prepare or respond to a challenge they don't know exists. You should speak clearly and directly to your child's principal about past problems and future solutions. On the other hand, if your child's report card indicates that she's been a bright academic and behavioral star, you'll want to share this as well. At the very least, it will

imply that you expect similar results from your child's new school. If you disagree with previous teachers' assessments – for example if your child's needs have been grossly unmet, leading to poor school behavior and performance – you should discuss your thoughts and feelings with your child's new principal. You need not take this step if your child is staying at the same school, unless you think highlighting some aspects of the report might aid your discussions with the principal.

*Help your child's teacher(s)*. As soon as you know which teacher has been assigned to your child, and certainly by the end of the first week of school, take time to introduce your child and family:

- ➤ Write a brief letter (two pages at most) describing your child's and family's Must Haves. Use the letter you sent to the principal as a guide (indeed the principal may have shared this letter with your child's teacher already), but omit items referring to teacher selection. Summarize your child's school hunt testing results, if any. Let the teacher know you made a proactive choice among schools (unless of course this was your last-choice school). Include any descriptions of teaching tactics that have been effective and ineffective with your child in the past. Say that you look forward to working with your child's teacher (music to a teacher's ears). Write and send this letter as soon as you know who your child's lead teacher will be. As with the principal, the letter need not be perfect. Nearly all teachers will appreciate the information you provide.
- Schedule a brief meeting alone with the lead teacher soon before or after school starts. Many schools provide this time for all parents. It is a helpful way to begin building the parent-teacher relationship, and it is very helpful for those parents who are uncomfortable writing about their children's needs. If such a meeting is not routine, you may feel uncomfortable asking your child's busy teacher for special time. Consider setting up a phone call instead, if this is more convenient for all. In this meeting by phone or in person communicate your child's and family's Must Haves, and ask how you can work with the teacher to ensure that your child's needs are met. Ask how your child's teacher prefers for you to keep in touch informally during the year by sending notes in your child's backpack, phone calls, e-mail, chats at carpool pickup, etc.
- > Share your child's previous years' report cards or progress reports from school or child care, if any (make a copy and keep the original). If your child has had behavioral or academic problems, you might be worried about biasing your child's teachers. But your child's teachers cannot prepare for or respond to a challenge they don't know exists. You should speak clearly and directly to your child's lead teacher about past problems and future solutions. On the other hand, if your child's report card indicates that she's been a bright academic and

behavioral star, you'll want to share this as well. If you disagree with previous teachers' assessments – for example if your child's needs have been grossly unmet, leading to poor school behavior and performance – you should discuss your thoughts and feelings with your child's teacher. You need not take this step if your child is staying at the same school, unless you think highlighting some aspects of the report might aid your discussions with your child's new teacher.

#### Choosing Not Just a School, But a Teacher

If you have followed the steps above with your child's principal, you'll be well on the way to an appropriate teacher match. It is in the school's interest to get this right, as your child's success on measures important to most schools – student achievement, teacher and parent satisfaction – may depend upon it. If you have found a spot for your child in a truly Great School with a Great Fit, you will have less work to do, as fitting teacher and child will undoubtedly be part of the principal's strategy for ensuring that individual students' needs are met. Alas, until schools catch up with parents' growing expectations for great quality and fit, you may have a bit of cajoling to do.

Some principals will say, "All of our teachers are good." But you, wise parent that you are from reading this book, know that both quality and fit are important. This is true for school and teacher. All teachers – just like all professionals of any kind – are going to have strengths and weaknesses. It is the principal's job to ensure that teachers are assigned to students with whom the *teachers* can be successful. It is also the principal's job to ensure that as many students as possible are assigned to the teacher with whom each *child* can be successful. It is a fine balancing act for the principal. Push to ensure your child's need are met, but know that principals sometimes must include other factors in their assignment decisions, such as balancing the number of girls and boys, and so on. Your child might not be matched with the very best fit teacher every year, but you should expect every assigned teacher to be at least a good, solid fit for your child.

Your school may have a form for you to complete to help with teacher assignment (we hope this will become standard). Be sure to shoe-horn in key Must Have information about your child and family, even if what you need to say does not fit the form precisely.

Some principals do not mind if you request a specific teacher. If you are very certain of the teachers' strengths and weaknesses and how they will meet your child's needs, that's fine. If you do not know the teachers well and have not had the chance to observe them, a general letter that will help your principal pick the best one is the better route. Most principals, especially the ones very savvy about fitting child and teacher, will appreciate the flexibility of making assignments for fit, not teacher popularity.

If your child is stuck in a school with little appreciation for the idea of "child fit," then the principal may resist any effort to match your child to the best-fit teacher. This is astonishingly, if unintentionally, cruel to those children who end up in an unfortunate mismatch. But this is the way of some principals, no doubt. You are more likely to end up in this situation if you have chosen a school with a strong one-size-fits-all approach that works for a *limited* set of children, and if that approach is not a good fit for your child (for example if you have chosen one school for all of your children, but their needs are quite different, and the school is inflexible).

If you *know* your child has been poorly matched with a teacher, make one more effort at pointing out to the principal the possible consequences to your child, the teacher, and you. Use your *Confident Choice Tools* to help you communicate clearly and specifically. Know, though, that once school has started, moving your child to a different class may have a domino effect on other children. Many principals would be hesitant to make a change at this point.

In the worst case, you might check around to see if many other parents and children are in the same situation. Consider organizing other parents to lobby the principal to change the teacher assignment policy. Failing this (and assuming you have no other schools to which you might switch), lobby the school board or board of directors to insist that the principal change the policy – or that the principal be changed for one who will better serve the interests of students. Meanwhile, you the parent may have more gaps to fill for your child this year. Get out your parental caulk and spackling. *Child Needs: Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School* (page 416) is a start.

#### Prepare Your Child for the School

Seize every opportunity to make a new school old hat. Prepare your child for school by making the new environment seem as familiar as possible ahead of time. The environment includes facilities and grounds, the child's future classroom, other students, parents, teachers, other school staff and school work.

Meet the Place and People. Help your child meet other same-age children and their parents, teachers and other school staff. During the spring and summer before school starts (assuming an August/September start date), take your child to at least one – more if possible – social events at the school. These are great chances to meet other newcomers as well as old timers. You need not work the room, and it is true that many of these folks won't be your best friends nor your child's. But you and your child will feel more comfortable once school begins if a few familiar faces pop up here and there.

If your chosen school does not have organized events, take the initiative. Starting the spring before your child will begin at a new school, take your child to play on the playground and just to walk the halls. Attend a spring musical performance or other organized public events at the school. Even consider organizing an event yourself, such as a picnic or afternoon playground stomp. Ask the school if it would support you in this endeavor (you will need a list of new children or children who will be in your child's grade, with phone numbers or addresses).

In the month before school starts, get together with one or more children and parents from your child's new class (or at least the same grade, if you do not know teachers' assignments yet). You might meet at the school playground for a picnic, go out for pizza, or enjoy another activity that will allow the children to interact informally. If you do not know other families who will attend the same school, call the school and ask if they can play matchmaker by giving you names and phone numbers of families who live nearby.

Meeting new schoolmates is a *big deal* to many children. Some will be nervous about even a low-key meeting of their new schoolmates, so do not be surprised if your child acts shy or clingy the first time out. Rather than shove your child away and increase his anxiety, you simply must make additional efforts to meet up with classmates just before and during the initial weeks of school. Eventually, your child will know other children and will feel at home. Of course, you may be lucky and have a child who will jump right in to play with strangers. If this is your child, encourage him to reach out to the shy ones and invite them to play along, too.

Even if you do not attend a social event, take your child to the school during the daytime to peek in on the classrooms for his future grade. You might do this at the end of a school day the spring before, and again the week before, school starts. It is comforting for many children to see the physical layout without the hubbub of other students. Your child can imagine himself pecking at that computer, working at that table or reading in that corner. With permission, your child might even spend a few minutes using the learning materials.

Get Ready for the Work. If your child's schoolwork will be significantly different from her previous school-like experiences, you may want to help her prepare. Talk about how the activities, teaching and work materials might be different. If the new school will be a great academic stretch for your child, you might consider weekly tutoring in basic subjects over the summer to prepare your child (the school may have recommended this already). Particularly in higher grades where other students will be walking a well-worn path, it is better for your child to be slightly over-prepared academically than under-prepared. Then, she may spend the first few weeks on other harrowing tasks, like making friends and learning the way to the bathroom.

**Recognize Your Child's Worries.** It is normal to face a new situation with a mixture of excitement and fear. Ask your child about any concerns he or she might

have. Whatever they are, help your child think about how to address the reason for the worries. If your child is worried about leaving friends, commit to having old friends over to play in the afternoons or on weekends. If your child is worried about making new friends, commit to helping your child by inviting new friends over in the first few months of school. If your child is concerned that school will be too hard, commit to keeping up with your child's work and finding help if the going gets tough. If your child is worried that the school won't be challenging enough, commit to providing extra stimulation outside of school. If your child is worried about being teased, commit to helping your child develop the skills to forge new friendships and inner confidence that will insulate her from the words of rude classmates. Let your child's teacher know about your child's worries so she can help you monitor for any difficulties.

#### Partner with Your Child's Teachers During the School Year

Education is a partnership between child, family and school, and you can choose to form an effective partnership or not. You can coordinate with teachers, share information and work towards the same goals for your child together – or not. You and your child's teachers can plan together to use each of your strengths, or you can spend your time whining about each other's shortcomings and pointing fingers.

If you were fortunate enough to find a Great School with a Great Fit for your child, kudos. If not, what can you expect from your child's teachers? Can you expect a teacher to do it all, providing Great School quality without a Great School to back her up? In most cases, the answer is no (although some teachers perform backbreaking miracles, no doubt). But even without a Great School, you can initiate strong parent-teacher partnerships to develop your child at home and school. You simply will have more gaps to fill and more work to do than you would at a better quality and fit school.

Discuss your child's needs with teachers; let them know what you are doing at home. Share your ideas with them, and, in turn, listen to their ideas. Make the most of what you've got – in parenting skill and in your school pick. Just as a Great School can make up for many parental shortcomings, a great parent can make up for many school shortcomings.

#### **Keep Communication Flowing**

When it comes to communication between parent and teacher, too much is better than none. It is better to say too much and ask too much than to say and ask too little. The better you keep teachers informed about life at home, the better they can adapt to your child in the classroom. The better you understand what your child is experiencing at school, the better you can adapt to your child at home.

It is your job to ensure that this communication happens. Yes, it is the school's job too, but your child and family will suffer when there's a problem. So take responsibility even when, especially when, your child's teacher does not. What kinds of things should you communicate to your child's teacher between conferences and other formal meetings? Start here:

- ➤ Your family situation has changed in a concrete way (a move, a divorce, a very ill parent, a job change or loss for parent and so on)
- ➤ Your family situation has changed in a smaller, temporary way that may bother your child (living through renovations, parent traveling a lot this month and so on)
- ➤ You have noticed negative changes in your child (symptoms of depression, fatigue, loss of interest in school or friends, violent or angry behavior and so on)
- ➤ You have noticed positive changes in your child (happier, more excited about school work, making new friends and so on)
- ➤ You child has begun a new activity that will absorb a fair amount of time or energy
- Your child has made consistent positive or negative comments about school
- ➤ Any other noticeable change, for better or worse, in your child's academic, social, emotional or physical well-being

What questions might you ask to get communication flowing *from* your child's teacher? Start here:

- ➤ How are things going in your class this year?
- ➤ How are things going at the school in general this year? Any big changes?
- ➤ How is my child doing? Is (s)he \_\_\_\_\_\_ (the thing you fear your child is doing)? Is (s)he \_\_\_\_\_ (the thing you hope your child is doing)?
- ➤ Is there anything different I should be doing at home with my child?
- ➤ What can I do to help?

If a problem arises, try the steps outlined in the box *Resolving Parent-Teacher Conflicts* on page 330. This approach may help you address the challenge quickly. But not always. You may have to involve the school principal to get results. A

principal who is a good problem-solver and facilitator will focus both on solving the problem at hand and helping you and the teacher figure out how to communicate and work together. But don't be shocked if the principal is defensive or tries to sweep your concerns under the rug (especially if you had the same experience with the same person in your school hunt). This is poor principal performance, but do not let it rattle you. As in your school hunt, stand strong (and think of the other parents who undoubtedly have had the same experience with this principal). If you cannot resolve communication issues, or the problems beneath, start looking for a new school or see the box *Changing a School*.



#### **Resolving Parent-Teacher Conflicts**

Is your child's teacher just not working out? Is she so far down on the quality scale, and so different from what you expected, that you're in shock? Does your child bring out the worst in his teacher? Does your child's teacher seem to bring out the worst in your child? Or is something just not right – your child is showing a loss of interest in school, boredom, decreased performance or stress related to school? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," do not wait to take action. Act now. After one month of school, the transition period should be over (give it six weeks for kindergarten and pre-K). Your goal is to get action, which starts with an understanding of the problem, continues with a plan for addressing the problem, and ends with changes – at school and home – happening according to plan.

#### Try these steps:

- 1. Schedule a face to face meeting with the teacher as soon as possible. You probably won't be the first, so do not feel like you are alone.
- 2. If you feel more comfortable writing than speaking, write a letter about your concern ahead of time. Either use it as the opener to schedule the meeting, deliver it a few days in advance of the meeting, or bring it to the meeting.
- 3. In the meeting (and letter), follow these tips for effective feedback:
  - ➤ First, spend a moment or paragraph thanking the teacher for her effort. Express positive feedback about things that may be going well or qualities in the teacher that you appreciate.
  - Next, on to the problem. Be very specific about the effects or symptoms you see in your child. ("My child stopped sleeping when school started. My child has lost interest in school work, and this has never happened before." Etc.)
  - ➤ Be very specific about the impact this has on you and/or your family life. ("Her constant whining about school is making my younger children upset. My spouse and I are losing sleep over this now.")

#### Invest in Your Child

In addition to keeping the information flowing between you and teacher (and principal when needed), consider other ways you can boost both your child's and school's performance. The biggest impact you will have on your child is the time you spend with him. You may think of other ways to help your child directly, but here's a start:

- Let your child know that you expect him to make his best effort in school work
- ➤ Teach your child to keep track of homework assignments, due dates and finished work (offer to buy your child a calendar and storage files for finished work)

#### **Resolving Parent-Teacher Conflicts...**continued

- ➤ Tell the teacher directly that you would like to do your part to make things right for your child and want the teacher's input about what to do at home.
- ➤ Do not make global assumptions or accusations about the teacher's short-comings.
- ➤ If you have ideas about what changes might help, you may share them; but...
- ➤ Do not come to definitive conclusions about what changes need to occur; instead ask the teacher what ideas she has to address the situation. She may need time to think about it, get the principal's input and get back to you.
- 4. At the end of the meeting, ask the teacher what she sees as the next step. The goal for you: get the teacher to make a plan for specific changes and communicate the plan to you. The teacher might need a week to think about it. She or he might need to meet with the principal. Or you may need to meet with teacher and principal together. Whatever it takes to help the teacher form an action plan, be sure that that's what happens.
- 5. Schedule a time to talk again, in person or by phone, to decide together what actions each of you will take (one or two weeks later should allow adequate time for planning). Decide together whether and how to communicate with your child about any changes.
- 6. If this does not work (the teacher won't schedule a meeting; the teacher proposes no changes; the teacher proposes changes, but after two more weeks no changes have occurred), call and schedule a meeting with the principal. Let the principal decide how to proceed.
- 7. If your child's needs still are not met, it's time to consider looking for a new school or leading the charge to change the school.

- ➤ Teach your child to make sure he understands homework assignments before leaving school
- ➤ If your child needs help understanding homework, help him but let him do the final assignments himself
- ➤ Hire a tutor or seek a free school-based one if you are uncomfortable in the teaching role (ask your child's teacher about this)
- ➤ Check over your child's homework and school work when teachers send it home; discuss corrections with your child to make sure he understands them
- Let your child know that you have a willing ear for his thoughts and concerns about school (and reinforce this by asking how things are going every day)
- ➤ Praise your child for great effort that leads to great results, in academic and other pursuits
- ➤ Accept that your child might not excel in every area

#### Invest in Your Child's School

In addition to communicating with your child's teachers and helping your own child directly, you can help boost the school's performance by volunteering and contributing money to activities that *directly support the school's mission and goals*. In many schools, ill-focused parent volunteer efforts have little impact on educational results. Just as with school staff efforts, parent efforts should be well-planned to support the mission of the school, the goals of the school, and to fill gaps related to these. If you are disappointed by limited opportunities to make a meaningful contribution, consider getting involved in the PTA board and making changes. Even if you like what you see, consider getting involved in school parent leadership to press for continued changes and improvements.

Meanwhile, start by getting the lay of the land:

- ➤ Attend one or more Parent-Teacher Association meetings to learn what parents are already doing in your school
- ➤ Look and listen for opportunities to use your skills and knowledge to replace services the school might have to purchase otherwise (saving the school funds for other purposes)
- ➤ Ask your child's teacher what role you might play that would help with student learning in the classroom (e.g., tutoring a struggling child, tending even teaching a small group of children while the teachers focus on another small group)

Of course, some of your time may be spent just learning about the school and building a comfortable relationship with staff and other parents. And some of your time may be spent just having fun with staff, students and other parents, regardless of the impact on student learning. Indeed, if you chose a school largely for its values and family community, these activities may be the most personally rewarding for you.



#### **Changing a School**

You may feel inspired to dig in and improve your chosen school once your child starts there. We hope that frustration will lead to action, and that parents' voices will be heard. Rather than dismissing parents as too personally motivated, we hope school leaders will hear the united voice of parents who want better quality and better fit choices among both public and private schools.

Changing a school, of course, is a tall order. Here are a few helpful tips to jump-start your thinking:

- ➤ Pinpoint the specific quality issues you want to address. Vague calls for "change" have little chance of success. Use our Great School Quality Factors to zero in on what matters most.
- ➤ Look for the source of the problem. Does the school lack a commitment to do what needs to be done? Or is there a commitment, but no plan? Or is there a plan, but no follow-through? Can the existing leadership make the needed change, or is new leadership what's needed?
- ➤ Build a case. Gather hard data, specific examples, and other evidence of the problems you see. Research solutions so you can back up your proposals for change with solid information.
- ➤ Understand how decisions are made about your issues. Do individual teachers make the call? The principal? The school leadership council or governing board? The district? You need to know where to focus your efforts.
- ➤ Gather a broad base of support. Include many different kinds of parents. Individual teachers can also be allies. If the problem comes from outside the school (like a bad school district policy), the principal may well agree with you and welcome your involvement. The less the issue gets framed as you vs. the school, the better.
- ➤ Include people who the decision-makers trust, respect, and want to please (e.g., parents who give much money or time to school; parents of high-performing students).
- ➤ Work through the channels first. If there's an established way to bring new ideas to the table, start there.
- ➤ Realize the usual channels may not work. Successful efforts to change schools sometimes require more than an amicable meeting in the principal's office. They often take considerable time and require something like a campaign to achieve results.
- ➤ Be honest with yourself are you up for this? You're more likely to be if you build a team that can work together.

They may include:

- ➤ Attending (and helping to organize) school social functions
- ➤ Attending school fundraisers
- ➤ Attending school athletic events
- ➤ Volunteering for activities that make the school pleasant but that are unrelated to school quality, such as landscaping and decorating

If you have money you would like to contribute to your child's school, you may do so in several ways. Your money is best spent on items and activities that directly support the mission of the school or that directly improve the school's quality and fit for your child. Some ways to contribute money include these:

- Give to your school's annual fundraising campaigns
- ➤ Give to your school's capital campaigns (which typically fund big investments like new or better buildings and equipment)
- ➤ Make a gift to your child's teacher for supplies and equipment either of your choosing or hers (write the check to your child's school with the purpose designated on the check and accompanying note); deliver to your child's teacher directly
- ➤ Sponsor a field trip or other special event for your child's class (ask your child's teacher in advance)

#### Make Up for School Shortcomings at Home

Start with the sections that pertain to you in the *Quality, Child, and Family Needs: Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School* tables starting on page 416. You, lively parent that you are, will undoubtedly have much to add to this for your child. As you are thinking through your options, you can use the *Getting What You Don't Get at School Parenting Planner* on page 339 to keep you focused on what counts most. In general, consider these sources of non-school development for your *child*:

- ➤ Free, unstructured time at home for your child to pursue own interests (materials supplied by you the parent). A no TV policy or clear limits helps with this.
- ➤ Suggest that your child take homework assignments an extra step, or in a different direction of interest (after completing the required assignment, of course)
- Extracurricular group activities (clubs, sports, group lessons)
- ➤ Extracurricular individual activities
- Tutoring, to broaden your child's knowledge in a new area
- ➤ Tutoring, to challenge your child with more difficult material or to reinforce the basics
- ➤ Computer activities to broaden or strengthen your child's knowledge or to challenge your child with harder material
- > Self-study at a library, museums and other public learning areas
- > Youth and family activities at your religious organization

Make your child a partner in this process. Help her to pick and choose from among activities that will meet the needs unmet by school. Help your child learn to prioritize by considering lots of possibilities, but choosing only the most meaningful and high-impact activities. Plan for a year at a time so that you feel more at liberty to spread out structured activities over time, rather than cramming every afternoon full. If you over schedule your child, even with his consent, you will surely begin to see waning interest and symptoms of stress. Take a clue and cut back thoughtfully if this happens.

# Oops! Something's Gone Wrong! When is it Time to Make a Change?

Wouldn't it be nice if things stayed the same so you could choose a school that you could count on forever, no questions asked? Yes. But in reality, changes happen that affect school quality and fit, some for the better and some for the worse.

When do changes mean you need to change schools? Sure, you'll want to make a change when your child's current school tanks in quality or fit. But you might want to consider making a change if you suspect that there's a better quality, better fit school available to your child, and a little research proves you right. Perhaps another school has made tremendous improvements, perhaps yours has slipped a bit, or perhaps your needs have changed. Keep your ear to the ground, *especially* if your chosen school was not of great quality or fit from the start.

Here are obvious signs that it might be time for a school change:

#### ➤ The School Has Changed

- ✓ Your child's school leadership has changed, and your quality demands or fit needs won't be well met any longer
- ✓ The quality of your child's school has taken a nosedive
- ✓ Your child's school has made changes that do not fit your child's or family's important needs
- ✓ You were duped your child's school does not fit as you thought it would or is not of the quality you thought

### ➤ Your Family, Your Child, or What You Know About Your Child, Has Changed

- ✓ Your family's needs have changed and the school no longer fits
- ✓ Your child's needs have changed, and the school no longer fits
- ✓ You have learned something new about your child's needs, and now understand that the school does not fit (e.g., your child has a previously undetected disability)

#### > Something is Wrong . . . But What?

- ✓ Your child is not happy at school for an extended period of time, and efforts to solve the problem have not worked
- ✓ Your child is not learning or performing at grade level in basic subjects
- ✓ Your child is not learning or performing above grade level, despite better previous performance or above average Basic Learning Capability
- ✓ You are not happy with your child's school for quality or fit reasons now that you have learned more about it

Now, you won't want to put your child through the stress of change for a minor improvement. You and your child are better off trying to improve the school or accommodate your needs outside of school. In fact, if you can successfully initiate school improvements, you'll be serving a whole community of children and families in one fell swoop. (See box on *Changing a School* on page 333.) But there is no need to suffer, and certainly no need to make your child suffer, if change is needed. And you will be oh, so much better equipped to choose a school the second time around.

# Fixing Fences: When You've Flown in the Face of Friends and Family

If you have chosen a school different from the one friends, family or neighbors expected, you may be on the receiving end of cold shoulders, tongue lashings or gapes of disbelief. But you know now that you are not alone in bucking a trend or two in your child's best interest. Parents of all kinds – all kinds of viewpoints, all kinds of incomes – are getting picky when it counts, just like you. Parents who are themselves children of '60s radicals but who choose private schools. Parents who are themselves children of big givers to private schools but who opt against the family favorite for better quality and fit. Parents in neighborhoods dominated by private school attenders but who find astonishingly good quality in their assigned public schools. Parents in neighborhoods where everyone goes to the assigned public schools but who choose an alternative. Devout Catholics who rebel and go secular. You, and others like you, are all parents in search of something better and more fitting for your child and family. Your child will spend thousands of childhood hours in school. Getting picky about the school you choose should be a point of pride, not scorn.

Choosing your child's school is your first really public parenting statement, and it may be the first time that seeming wedges between you and others are revealed. You wish those wedges could be benign, but sometimes they are raw like a wound with no protective skin. We won't pretend to be family relationship experts. So let

us just speak as parents, friends, neighbors, colleagues and family members. We tell our own children all the time that they can have many different kinds of friends – friends with whom they like to work, friends with whom they like to "just play," friends with whom they like to do sports, friends whom they teach, friends who teach them, friends of whom they take care, friends who take care of them, friends who really understand them, and friends with whom they are friendly but not close.

All of these relationships are important. We are all best off if we have some of each kind, whether with family, neighbors, colleagues or others. The mere fact that you have one difference – even one on which you've grown to place much importance – does not mean that you cannot continue to have a positive relationship. You need not be identical to be friends, and you need not be cut from the same mold to be family. You will be a better parent, indeed a better person, if you are a great you rather than a watered down version of your friends, neighbors, colleagues or family members. You, in turn, must accept that they may have other values, needs and wants that lead them to decisions different from yours, regarding school and other matters. (Or you can accept that they just may be mindless lemmings, dingbats or shameless self-promoters who don't give a hoot about their children's welfare. But they are *still* your friends and family. Give them a copy of this book before you give up on them.)

Your job as a parent is to see the big picture and make sure you provide the kind of environment, at school and elsewhere, that your child needs to become the terrific person he is meant to be.

#### **Parting Words**

One thing is true for certain: much of what your child needs to know to become a happy, healthy, loving, achieving, contributing adult will not be learned in school. Your child's core values – about how to interact with other people and how to spend time, effort, and money – will be learned largely at home, at friends' homes and in other meaningful non-school experiences. Your job as a parent is to look at the big picture and make sure you are providing the kind of environment your child needs to become the terrific person he is meant to be. Above all, enjoy your child and the unique person he or she becomes.



- > Review your chosen school's strengths and weaknesses, in both fit and quality, using the Great School Quality Checklist and your Personalized Great Fit Checklist that you completed for the school. Estimated Time: 15 minutes
- For each school weakness, think of concrete actions you can take to fill the gap outside of school. Use our Quality, Child, and Family: Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School tables starting on page 416 as well as your own ideas. Use our Getting What You Don't Get at School Parenting Planner on page 339 to help you plan. Estimated Time: as needed (more for a poorer quality and poorer fit school, less for a Great School that's a Great Fit)
- Prepare the school for your child.
  - ✓ Help your child's principal get to know your child and family by sharing Must Haves, previously effective teaching tactics, testing results and report cards. Share with your child's principal any information that will help assign a good-fit teacher:
    - Schedule a brief meeting (in late Spring before school begins)
    - Write a brief letter (in late Spring before school begins)
    - Attend an open house
    - Share your child's testing results, if any (with letter or at meeting)
    - Share your child's previous years' report cards (if changing schools) Estimated Time: as needed
  - ✓ Help your child's teacher(s) get to know your child and family by sharing Must Haves, previously effective teaching tactics, and report cards:
    - Write a brief letter (as soon as you know teacher assignment)
    - Schedule a brief meeting (just before or during first week of school)
    - Share your child's previous years' report cards (if changing schools)

Estimated Time: as needed

- > Prepare your child for school by helping him or her get familiar with school facilities and grounds, the child's future classroom, other students, parents, teachers, other school staff, and school work in advance. Seize every opportunity to make a new school old hat. Estimated Time: as needed (1 - 2 hours plus organized events)
- During the school year, consider these actions:
  - ✓ Work with your child's school
  - ✓ Work with your child
  - ✓ Invest time and money in your child's school
  - ✓ Make up for school shortcomings at home

Estimated Time: as needed

- **Re-evaluate school quality and fit when major changes occur** in your family, your child's life or your child's school. Estimated Time: as needed
- Life's too short: you must mend fences with friends and family, if choosing an unexpected school has left relationships fragile. Estimated Time: all the time you need

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

#### **Getting What You Don't Get at School**

#### **Parenting Planner**

- > Fill in the quality and fit weaknesses of the school your child will attend.
- > Decide and fill in what you plan to do to overcome those shortcomings. Use your own ideas and the Ways to Get What You Don't Get at School tables.
- > Try not to over schedule your child in non-school hours. Use less structured, at-home materials and activities as well as more formal arrangements.
- > Remember that trying to encourage changes in your child's school may be an option.

School's Quality or Fit <i>Weakness</i>	What will I do to make up for this weakness?	Next Steps (Research, Determine Cost, Schedule, etc.)
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