



Looking for a Great School? Look for Collaboration

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As an educational consultant, the one statement I frequently hear from parents is- 'My child's school is great!' My response is always- 'How do you know it's great?' After some hesitation, most parents respond with 'my realtor told us when we were buying', 'the school has the highest SAT scores' and my personal favorite- 'my taxes are high enough, so it better be good!' If you really want to know if your school is great, look for collaboration.

Let's start with the person most responsible for your child's education during the school day- the classroom teacher. The expectations of classroom teachers have increased dramatically over the past ten years. 'Classroom teachers have been asked to teach higher-order literacy skills and strategies, implement process-based approaches to writing, teach math as problem solving, reduce reliance on homogeneous groupings, include children with disabilities in the classroom social and instructional milieu, help children develop technological proficiency, integrate the curriculum, use more instructionally useful assessment strategies, work collaboratively with special teachers and become involved in shared decision making.' (Allington & Cunningham, 2002) How does one teacher do all this? Not well...but when working collaboratively with the entire school staff- expert teaching is accomplished. While visiting your school, look to see where your child's teacher is categorized. Is she in survival mode, competent, flexible, expertise, a contributor or a leader? Most teachers fall into the competent or flexible category. A competent teacher completes the assignments usually using the current instructional model (basal) found in the school and habitually uses certain modalities to teach a topic year after year. A flexible teacher alternates her instructional modalities and uses assessments to achieve an intended purpose. However, a collaborative school will have a majority of expert teachers. An expert teacher is achieved when a school values professional conversations, professional development and collegiality & integration are top priority. The next time you visit your child's school, look for a professional resource center that contains professional literature or memberships that promote further learning for the teachers. Do the teachers have support groups to share literature, new ways of teaching or offer support to new teachers? How are professional development days approached in your school? Are parents informed of the workshops being conducted, how this knowledge will be used in the classroom, and why it is of importance? How much support and collaboration do the classroom teachers receive from the other specialist in the schools? Is there a set planning time for the classroom teacher to meet with all specialists who are involved with the students in her room? Is the schools emphasis to 'pull-out' students identified with special needs, and release the teacher from accepting academic responsibility for the child? 'But creating schools where all children

are educated together is not necessarily an easy task, especially when accountability standards offer little recognition of the extraordinary efforts needed to educate some children. When public displays of a school's student performance are posted or published in the local paper, it is not surprising that teachers become less willing to voluntarily accept low-achieving children as their responsibility.' (Allington & Cunningham, 2002)

I believe schools get the teachers they create, so if you want to understand what kind of teachers your child's school has- look at the administrator. To quote Fullan and Hargreaves (1996): 'One or two exemplary classrooms in a building are examples of individual initiative, but a school with many exemplary classrooms is the result of leadership.' Many studies have shown that administrative support and teacher quality are much more important than any other classroom materials. How can one expect a teacher to educate children on material that he/she has not received professional training on? How can a teacher integrate all the requirements of her grade level and meet the needs of each child, if she is not giving time to collaborate with staff members and receive an adequate amount of planning time? 'The ideal elementary principal is an experienced elementary educator who focuses on the quality of classroom instruction, facilitates collecting information on school programs, advocates for teachers and for children and fosters reflection and collaboration...' (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson & Rodriguez, 2005) It is the administrator's role to ensure all staff members are working towards the same goal: to develop classroom teacher's expertise and support collaborative problem solving. What kind of administrator do you have?

The most important factor that exemplifies a collaborative school is how parental concerns/involvement are received. An expertise teacher will be able to answer any questions about your child's curriculum or direct you to another specialist whom she collaborates with during her weekly planning sessions. Does your child's school send home questionnaire forms? Does the PTO have a meeting with the superintendent or principal to discuss school concerns? Do you receive newsletters or phone calls from your child's teacher on a monthly basis? What types of volunteer programs are offered at your child's school? When communicating with your school- how are your concerns received? As a parent, have your questions been answered with the following responses: 'We aren't allowed to give that information out', 'It will cost you three dollars for each page', 'We have a policy against that' (Kuykendall, 1992) Is a school that is reluctant to share information about your child a great school? If parents aren't welcomed during the academic decision process, is it fair for schools to ask parents for their support with learning at home?

In conclusion, a great school is that where teachers and administrators collaborate to develop their expertise, in a community that supports professional growth. It is a collaborative school that, upon accomplishing this goal, states- 'We have done it ourselves.' (Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher)