

Grading a School: A parent's guide

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Attention, school shoppers: *U.S. News* spent the past two years studying high schools and has learned a lot about the best ways to size up a school. We've distilled that knowledge so parents can take advantage of our findings. You've got four jobs ahead of you. Figure out if a school's policies and priorities match those of the schools we cite as outstanding. Study the school's statistics. Talk to the principal. Take a tour. Even if your child is already in high school, our research is valuable if you're eager to press school officials for change.

The character of the school

Traits that great institutions share

Outstanding schools do not all look alike, but they do have certain traits in common, according to the U.S. News analysis of 1,053 schools in six metro areas. Ask about the topics below—the hallmarks of our exemplary schools—and you'll see how your child's high school measures up.

A challenging core curriculum.

The core curriculum is the minimum number of courses a student must pass to graduate—these requirements are set by your state's department of education. The U.S. Department of Education recommends three years of math, science, and social studies, and four years of English. At the very least, such a curriculum should prepare students for acceptance at state universities. Some schools offer a tougher track—for example, a “scholar's diploma” with more credits than the norm and more difficult courses. In schools that *U.S. News* identified as outstanding, many students opt for rigor, taking four years of math and science and three years of a foreign language.

High standards and high expectations.

Great schools push all students—not just the academic elite—to do well. A school with high expectations for everyone will let an ambitious child take an honors or Advanced Placement course, even if the student doesn't meet all the requirements, and the school will make available ample tutorial help. Think of it this way: Lots of kids won't have to languish in Mickey Mouse courses like “general math” for four years if they are given opportunities and encouragement like this. Ask to see the proportion of ninth graders in different math tracks, from basic to advanced algebra. You're looking for a large proportion in the college-oriented algebra track, says former principal Judy Coddling, now vice president for programs at the National Center on Education and the Economy. And ask if the same instructors who teach elite sections also teach other levels. These are typically the school's best teachers.

Highly qualified and well-trained teachers.

“Probably the most important determinant of student learning,” says Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University, “is teacher expertise.” Her research shows that teachers with more education and more classroom experience get higher marks on their evaluations, and produce students who score better on standardized tests. Ask if instructors all teach in the field they studied in college, and how many have a master's degree in their subject. Many of the outstanding schools in the *U.S. News* survey also have mentor programs that pair experienced teachers with rookies. An effective program will last all year, with the veteran observing in the newcomer's classroom and vice versa.

Family-school partnerships

They may no longer require daily bus-stop send-offs, but your high school students still need you. “Students' report-card grades, attendance levels, and aspirations all increase if parents [are] involved at the high school level,” says Joyce Epstein, director of Johns Hopkins University's Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships. With the support and involvement of parents, the group of outstanding schools cited by *U.S. News* inspire students to do better. High schools should schedule regular parent-teacher conferences. A school's readiness to tout high

attendance rates at such gatherings suggests that officials care about connecting to parents. In addition, great schools respond quickly to parents' inquiries. When a parent leaves a message for a teacher, how long before a callback? Principals who value the parent-teacher relationship insist on a response within 24 to 48 hours; if that doesn't happen the parent is invited to call the principal to follow up. A school that has a healthy relationship with its parents will also invite plenty of parental input: At Novi High School in Detroit, for example, parents sit on 16 of the school's 20 policy and procedure committees. For the parents' perspective on the school's attitude, "get on a parent grapevine," suggests education reform guru Theodore Sizer, a former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The guidance counselor or a PTA representative can give you a few phone numbers of parents.

Mentors to motivate students

Mentoring programs ensure that students don't pass through school unnoticed and untended. Ideally, a teacher, counselor, or coach will have a weekly, hour long session with 20 or so kids to talk about study skills, college applications, and social issues. If the school does not have adult mentors, the next best thing are peer counselors. "There's plenty of peer counseling going on in the bathrooms," laughs education expert Sizer. Progressive schools have professional counselors train students to serve as mentors, tutors, and confidantes.

High attendance

It doesn't equal high achievement—a principal might just be really tough about prosecuting truants. A low attendance rate, however, means that either a school doesn't care whether kids show up or that kids don't care to come. The daily attendance rate should not be lower than 95 percent. If it is, ask why. It's better to hear that a small, hard-core group of students is the cause than that a school has lots of kids breezing in and out.

Principal principles

As the parent of a prospective student, you should get at least 15 minutes with the school's leader. Here are some issues to probe. It doesn't hurt to note if the principal's door is open or closed when you arrive. And even in public schools, principals should make you feel as if they're recruiting your child.

Mission. The principal should have one, and it shouldn't be making sure students are in class on time. If the mission is to "prepare every student to go to college without remediation," at least the principal has the right vocabulary.

Staff motivation. Good principals, says education Prof. Larry Cuban of Stanford University, give teachers a say in crafting the school agenda. Ask, "How many teachers serve on committees that influence academics?"

Autonomy. Does the principal know how to get what he or she needs—grant money for peer mediation programs, parent volunteers to fill in staff gaps, strong new teachers? Press for details.

Style. What kind of classroom does the principal champion: for example, teacher-centric (lectures and discussion) or cooperative (kids learning in small groups)? There's no right answer. It depends on what's best for your child—lots of structure or lots of hands-on work.

Greatest accomplishment. A new gym? The number of borderline students who succeed in AP courses? Probe.

Night terrors. Even PR-savvy principals might reveal some of their schools' serious problems if you ask what keeps them awake at night.