

What makes for an exceptional school?

by Michael Hart

There are a lot more things that go into making a school exceptional than I could include in this brief article. I would like to share some observations based on my 23 years in the classroom that may help you identify that truly exceptional school for your child.

First, look for an administration that both welcomes parents and supports classroom teachers. Most teachers are dedicated, creative professionals. Some are absolutely fantastic! I remember being told in a faculty meeting that we didn't want to have any 'islands of excellence' at our school. The example was given of the teacher who is just holding down the fort and the teacher who is super enthusiastic and doing really creative things in the classroom. Since it's not fair that some students get that really outstanding teacher we are all going to teach the same thing, the same way, at the same time and no one is going to teach outside the box. Great! Instead of islands of excellence we end up with a rising sea of mediocrity and robo-teachers. This surely doesn't make for an exceptional school.

Second, look for a school that has a really low student/teacher ratio. I've taught classes of 35 students and classes of 5 students and believe me the number of students in a classroom does make a difference as far as the kind and quality of education that goes on. In a class of 35, about all I could do was lecture and make assignments. Both the bright and not so bright students got bored with this so I spent too much time just keeping the class under control. As class size drops, there are tipping points at which the class dynamic drastically changes. Jesus only had 12 disciples, one betrayed him and one denied him. Can we expect teachers to do better with twice as many students?

Third, look for a school where students are taught at their own level and are able to progress at their own pace. Most schools try to do this but they usually fail because the teachers are just so overloaded that they can't pull it off. Teaching



should not be determined by 'what's on the test' with everything geared toward pushing students to make higher test scores but rather tests should cover what was taught so teachers know which students are 'getting it' and which are not so that instruction can be modified accordingly.

Fourth, exceptional schools integrate the various academic subjects, make connections between academics and the real world, and make use of

hands on learning. Studies show that many students who are 'problem children' are tactile-kinesthetic learners who learn best by getting their hands on things and doing things rather than just listening and reading about them. What is true for them is also true for the rest of us. "I hear...I forget. I see...and I remember. I do...and I understand."

Fifth and last, if you are looking for a truly exceptional school, look for happiness. What works varies greatly depending on both the teachers and the students but when it is working it produces happiness in both students and teachers. If you go into a school and the teachers and students look either stressed out or bored, something is wrong.

As the new school year approaches, don't settle for less than the best school you can find for your child. Go out. Look them over. Check them out. Ask questions. What you decide will without a doubt make all the difference in your child's life. Good luck and happy hunting.



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