

The Numbers Parents Want

Do test scores alone provide an adequate yardstick for determining how well a school is really doing? The National Education Association (NEA) and parenting-education expert Dr. Dorothy Rich say No. See what Dr. Rich recommends you look for.

Parents Need More Than Test Scores to Make Smart Schooling Decisions

By Dorothy Rich

Some of the most important items in education – personal motivation, student learning environments, family/home support – don't lend themselves to numbers or letter grades, but there are at least seven other important categories that do. These are the numbers parents want, or ought to want. They count for a lot of what counts at school.

Discipline Incidents

What kind of incidents has the school experienced? Are they the usual student pranks or do they amount to something more serious? Keeping these categories separate is important: When they are put together, they skew the picture of a school as either a safe or less secure place. Plus, parents need to know how schools handle disciplinary problems when they do occur.

Attendance and Tardiness

These numbers say a lot about the morale of the schools *and* the attentiveness of staff to student attitudes and behaviors. These numbers provide the initial clues to later dropout rates.

Class Size

As an experienced teacher and longtime parent, I don't need research to tell me that smaller classes are better. It doesn't take a genius to know that putting more mature adults next to immature children is a good idea. We all want to send our children to schools where they are names and not numbers.

Strength of Parent Involvement

It is vital to know: Is this a school where parents and teachers care about being involved in a cooperative effort? How many parents come to PTA and other school-related meetings? How many parents show up for parent-teacher conferences? How many volunteers are involved with the school?

Experience of Educators

What is the average teacher salary at the school? What is the average number of years these teachers have taught? Are teachers certified? Are professional development and in-service training offered? Ideally, a school has a combination of older and younger staff so that they can learn from – and energize – each other.

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Grading Practices

Is this a school where lots of kids get A's or is this a school where lots of kids get low grades? If there is a significant grading pattern – a paucity of A's and a plethora of F's – what's the reason? Grading patterns can tell a lot about a school.

Test Results

If test results come back to schools in a timely fashion (i.e., before the school year is out), they can be useful. Find out how many months go by between the taking of and the return of the tests. Are the results used to help children master what they have not yet learned before they are moved on? These are questions that a growing number of parents care about, and need to ask. For children to get the benefit of high-priced tests (let's not kid ourselves, tests cost a lot of money), test results need to come back ASAP for teaching and learning purposes.

When parents know the score in these seven categories, there's more learning for everyone and a fairer chance for more schools and children to make the grade.

Dr. Dorothy Rich is the founder and president of the Home and School Institute, and the developer of the MegaSkills© Program for Parent Involvement in Education. MegaSkills (www.MegaSkillsHSI.org) is used by the National Education Association to train and support its 2.6 million members in family involvement education across the nation. For more parent-education tips, check out www.nea.org/parents.

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Jefferson County Education Association

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Colorado Education Association

1500 Grant Street, Denver 80203

303-837-1500 800-332-5939

www.coloradoea.org

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