

Opinion

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4 best signs of a good school

By ROBERT MARANTO

IT'S BACK-to-school time, and many parents are wondering if their child's school is really a good one. After a decade of research in more than three dozen public schools, I can usually tell in an hour if a school is one I would want to send my kids.

And contrary to what policy-makers think, school quality doesn't have much to do with fancy buildings, big budgets, certified personnel or even high test scores as such - though good schools do legitimately improve their scores over time, while bad schools fake it or founder.

Good schools, like good businesses, good houses of worship, good organizations of any kind, have four key characteristics.

First, a good school is an open school. If I'm allowed to wander around the building without a minder and talk to whomever I want, and if the people I talk with speak freely without looking around to see who's listening, then I'm in a good school.

It's a school where the principal is not worried about what I might find out, and where people are secure enough to let me snoop around. In short, a good public school is a good *public* school.

Second, a good school is an honest school. If I ask the principal what problems the school has, and he or she says everything is great, I know that they are lying - perhaps even lying to themselves.

I know they're lying to me. In the real world, real people in real organizations have real problems. Any organization will do some things well and some things not so well, sometimes for reasons beyond anyone's immediate control. But if the people in charge fail to recognize problems, things will never improve.

Good schools live in reality, while bad schools live in denial.

Third, the teachers and administrators in a good school put their work ahead of themselves.

If people talk a lot about pay, benefits, titles, procedures, rules, jurisdictions, union contracts and state appropriations, and very little about the kids or the books, that's a very bad sign.

One of my maxims is to seek out a workplace where people's talents are bigger than their egos: I've tried the other kind and just don't like them. And I wouldn't want to send my kids to one.

Finally, a good school is a positive school. When I'm doing research on school reform, I often find myself in schools whose administrators spend hours telling me all the reasons that their students are so flawed that they simply can't be educated.

AS FORMER Milwaukee superintendent of schools Howard Fuller sarcastically quips, the parents must be keeping their best kids at home and sending the rejects off to those schools.

At some point in those conversations, I'm always tempted to reach into my briefcase, hand the person I'm interviewing the want ads, and say, "Gosh, you've just told me you can't do your job, so why don't you look for a job that you can do and give someone else a chance to teach these children, because they deserve better than this."

In a good school, a good business, any good organization, people are looking up, they're flexible, they're copying others with good ideas and trying new things until they find what works for their clients or customers. They aren't whining about their lot.

So four things - openness, honesty, service ahead of self and positive outlook - define the good school. Both parents and policymakers should note that none of these has anything to do with money, or certification, or in-service training, or the quality of the buildings, or how many reports get filed.

In short the good school, like the good life, focuses on creating something for others. And, unfortunately, that attitude seems to be something they don't teach in school. *

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