

What parents should look for in schools

Expectations

Please, don't judge a school by its students' academic results alone. Many factors besides these contribute to a school's overall success. State wide tests results should be used to help find students' strengths and weaknesses, not to determine the quality of a school. If the results concern you, talk to the Principal about them and find out how the test results are being used to improve the teaching program. What's most important, though, is that all children – including yours – are expected to do their best.

Class Size

Smaller classes are better for young learners. Most educational systems are moving towards reducing class sizes, especially in the first years of school. Ask what the class sizes are meant to be – the smaller, the better. The closer a school can come to their target numbers, the better.

School Size

The overall number of students in a school is not as important as class size. What is important is how your child is cared for within the school and to whom you can turn for assistance. The larger the school, the less contact a parent is likely to have with the Principal. Some very large schools ensure a warm, inviting atmosphere by creating smaller "schools within schools".

Reading Program

A good, balanced reading program is essential. Most Principals agree that blending the teaching of "whole language" and phonics works best.

Learning Styles

Children learn in many different ways. Schools should encourage teachers to use a variety of approaches to teaching, including hands-on activities and group work. If you know how your child learns best – by listening, touching or hearing; while at a desk or not; with soft or bright light, etc. – let the teacher know.

Behaviour Management (Discipline):

A clear, fair, and consistently enforced behaviour management program minimises disruptive behaviour and makes it easier for teachers to teach and students to learn. Find out how this is handled. Schools will have a behaviour management policy so ask if they will make them available to parents. Parents should insist that their children follow the school's rules.

Reports:

Schools use a variety of reporting methods and schools reports are very diverse. Few primary schools use letter grades as they do not necessarily tell the whole story of a child's progress. The Principal or teacher can explain the school's 'grading' process and whether it's set by the school or the education department. Parents should always ask about their child's overall performance – including class participation, attitude, and respect for others – during meetings with teachers.

Parent – Teacher Meetings:

Most schools schedule two formal meetings each year for parents to discuss their child's progress with the teacher. Sometimes children are included, sometimes not. As these may be months away, parents need to tell the teacher immediately of any educational concerns or problems. If children need extra attention, parents should be alerted as early as possible. However, if parents sense a problem and have not been contacted, they should call the teacher immediately. Many schools try to schedule meetings in the late afternoon or evenings or other convenient times for parents to attend. However, this is not always possible.

Transportation:

Whether children walk, catch public transport, or ride bikes to school, there are rules that they need to follow. Walkers and bikers should be aware of traffic safety. Behaviour expectations on public transport should be clear and enforced by parents and school officials.

Extra Services

An on-site counsellor, even if only available part-time, is a real asset to a school. Some schools may have parent liaison officers who can assist families in a variety of ways.

Special Needs

Both academically gifted students and those with learning difficulties benefit from specialised activities to help them achieve their fullest potential. The Principal can discuss how the school approaches students with special needs, including those with physical or emotional disabilities and speech/language needs. How much time do students with disabilities spend in the regular classrooms? Are all children with similar abilities or disabilities concentrated at specialised schools? Does the school offer parents support materials or groups?

English as a Second Language:

Children who are not fluent in English need to attend a school that offers specialised instruction, tutoring, or other programs in English as a Second language (ESL). Ask what assistance there is for compulsory tests. The Principal can explain how the school works with children who are not proficient in English, and whether there are opportunities for parents to help – or get help – in their native language.

Computers/Technology

Most primary schools now teach basic computer skills and use educational software, though some schools use more technology than others. If your K-3 child isn't computer literate, don't worry; the main job of young students is to master reading!

Internet Access

While the Internet offers schools wonderful resources, it also can expose children to inappropriate materials. If the school has Internet access for students, parents should be informed as to how it is controlled and supervised. Before children are allowed to use the Internet, they should sign an "acceptable use" form, promising not to go to any unacceptable Web sites. Parents may be asked to sign a form giving their permission.

Library

It's important that the library is well-equipped and well-used. There should be computers, a wide variety of books for all reading levels, as well as recent editions of reference and non fiction materials. Children should have a curriculum that includes regular library visits and skills training. A librarian or resource person on site, whether full-time or part-time, is essential.

Textbooks

The school's textbooks and classroom materials should be reviewed and updated regularly to reflect new discoveries, developments, and improvements in teaching methods. The school or district should have a policy for keeping materials up to date. Some schools choose not to use textbooks extensively, so if your child doesn't bring home books, find out what curriculum material and resources are used.

Beyond the Three Rs

Primary education should include more than the traditional subjects. However, not all schools have equal resources and funding, which often determine how far they can go. How does the school approach art, music, and physical education? How many days per week are each taught? Are there specialised teachers in these areas?

Art: What types of activities does the art program include? Who teaches it? Can it accommodate activities requiring special equipment, such as working with clay or wood?

Music: Often students have both class and instrumental music. Some schools offer instrumental lessons. Are there any school concerts? Does an instrumental or ensemble program exist? Is there a choir?

Physical Education: Is the PE program sport or health oriented? A mix of both is best.

Medical Needs

Most schools do not have a full-time nurse on site. Check to see what the protocol is if a child has a medical need and there is no nurse. If your child has a serious condition such as diabetes or epilepsy, or needs daily medication, find out how the school handles other children with similar needs. They will have a policy. Both parents and the school should know how medication will be delivered, what current emergency numbers for family members are, and who the child's doctor is.

Recess

Primary age children benefit from taking time out in the fresh air every day to unwind. Schools usually have two breaks in a day but these will vary in length.

The first year of schooling

The name for the first year of schooling varies from state to state as does the starting age. Each state also varies in how the school is structured and when children move to high school.

Before – and After – School Care

Many working parents need day care before school begins and after the school day is over. Most schools offer fee-based before-and-after-school care on site, while some are linked to the Federal Government's child care benefit scheme. Some programs may offer breakfast or other meals, so check what is included.

Vacation care

Vacation care may also be offered in addition to before or after school care. Programs and inclusions vary widely.

Family Involvement

A telling sign of a sound school is an active parent organisation working in cooperation with the Principal and teachers. Schools should welcome parent involvement and encourage parents to volunteer in the classroom, the library, and in other activities. If your school doesn't have families involved, ask how you can help make this happen, because research shows that children whose families play a strong role in their education do better in school.

Communication

Good home/school communication is critical to a good school. The school – and teachers – should communicate (through newsletters, etc) with parents regularly. There should be opportunities for parents to give input via a parent association on school-related issues. Newsletters, reports and other home-school communications should be sent to both parents (on their request) if they don't live together.

Staff Availability

It is important for parents to be able to speak with their children's teachers or Principal whenever they have concerns or questions. Some schools today provide e-mail addresses. All schools should respond promptly to calls from parents.

Safety and Security

Schools should have safety plans, rules, and regulations. The Principal should be able to tell parents what the school is doing – before, during, and after the school day – to ensure safety within the school and on the playground.

Take a Look

The best way to understand a school's approach to teaching and learning is to visit classrooms, watch teachers in action, and observe recess or lunch time to get a sense of the school. Parents should be welcome to observe teachers in the classroom, either before deciding on a school or after their child is enrolled. As a courtesy, call first to make sure it's convenient for you and the class.

What to Look For:

1. Do the students seem to be actively interested in and involved in learning?
2. Are the teachers involved in class work and not always lecturing?
3. Does there seem to be order in the classrooms and the playground?
4. Are the classrooms filled with student work?
5. Were you welcomed warmly? Do other visitors seem welcome?
6. Do the school and grounds look clean and well maintained?

Schools are very special places. They vary according to size, age, location, personnel, population, and budget. What's important is that you and the school have high expectations for learning; that you and your children feel welcome, happy, and proud of your school; and that you get in touch, and stay in touch, with your child's teachers and Principal.

The above was adapted with permission from the National Association of Elementary School Principals Association by Roderick Crouch for the Australian Primary Principals Association

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