Parents' Handbook for Successful Schools

by
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TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

National Experts' Praise for
The Parent's Handbook for Successful Schools

Here's what the experts are saying about the *Handbook*...

"This handbook condenses into fewer than twenty pages many volumes of wisdom about what makes a good school."
-Dr. Lynne Cheney, Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute.

"The Parents' Handbook gives parents the information they need to determine if their schools are academically oriented."
- Dr. Joseph Horn, Professor of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin and President, Texas Association of Scholars.

Science

"I wish I could have had a handbook such as this when searching for a school for my daughter."
- Dr. Stan Metzenberg, Assistant Professor of Biology, California State University at Northridge and co-chairman, California Associated Scientists.

Social Studies

"A fine handbook that will be helpful for parents."
- Dr. John Fonte, Senior Fellow, Alexis de Tocqueville Institution.

Language Arts

"Complete, reasonable and usable."
- Dr. Sandra Stotsky, Research Associate at both the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Boston University School of Education.

Mathematics

"This handbook can help parents identify critical aspects of mathematics instruction."
- Dr. Mike McKeown, Molecular Biologist, Salk Institute and Founder, Mathematically Correct.

PARENTS' HANDBOOK FOR SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is furnished to help parents learn more about what is taking place in the schools their children attend and to help parents evaluate the effectiveness of a school's academic program. It offers tips for locating important information and identifies where assistance can be obtained. This handbook also recommends publications and web sites for more information about educational issues.

A checklist is provided to help parents identify what activities are important to academic success and to help determine the extent to which these activities are present in their school.

Items on the checklist are questions about:

(1) curricula (*what* is taught) and,
(2) instructional practices (*how* students are taught).

They represent elements that are known to raise academic achievement or are characteristic of academically successful programs and are based upon <u>two principles</u>.

THE TWO PRINCIPLES:

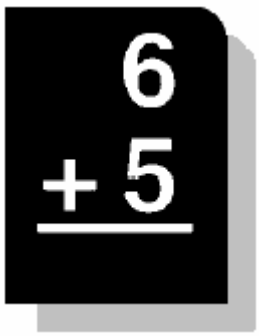
First, the purposes of education should be intellectual development and high academic achievement. Second, elements of curricula and instruction should be based upon scientific research showing that the practices increase academic achievement. Our checklist can serve as a simple gauge to determine the degree to which a school is using effective academic strategies. It is important to recognize that no school should be expected to demonstrate all of the elements listed in the checklist because this checklist identifies the components of ideal educational programs. It is also important to recognize that a program with few of the elements identified by this checklist may, nonetheless, be academically successful due to the efforts of an extraordinary teacher. The checklist cannot be used to "score" a school based upon the number of components found in a school because some of the components are more critical to success than others. Used with these understandings, this checklist offers an effective tool to evaluate schools and to identify changes a school may require to improve academic success.

The importance of learning about and evaluating schools

Over the past twenty years, Americans have become increasingly anxious about the failure of public schools to educate children well. In response, schools have introduced dramatic changes in curriculum and instruction which have radically changed the entire fabric of education. Even the purpose of education has been changed in many schools from *academic* learning to instruction in *life skills.* Although education reform has rendered the classroom of today virtually unrecognizable by today's adults, the public remains largely unaware of the radical scope of education reform.

Who makes decisions determines what decisions are made

Changes in public education have largely been introduced top-down. Federal and state governments, as well as national foundations, have used funding to stimulate specific reforms. Professional education associations and educational vendors have promoted specific changes. Local communities or parents, however, have initiated few changes in how schools work or what students are taught. Unsurprisingly, many educational reforms are not the changes desired by the public. In fact, according to several national studies, schools and the public have some very different opinions about what should happen in schools. According to research published by Public Agenda[1], parents want schools to focus more on academics, teach traditional knowledge and skills (i.e., math facts, mental computation, grammar, spelling, etc.), raise standards for learning, and base promotion on standardized tests. Schools, however, take the opposing position. Public Agenda indicates that educators think that academic attainment is not important, schools should focus on developing social skills, learning concepts is more important than learning facts, emphasis on traditional learning (i.e., grammar, spelling, math facts, etc.) interferes with creativity and appreciation, standardized tests should be eliminated, and higher standards will make students dislike school (increasing the drop-out problem). According to a study conducted by the Education Commission of the States[2], few parents support the new educational methods introduced to schools and most parents believe school reform is on the "wrong track".



Clearly, public schools and the public experience a severe disconnection. To seek better education for their children, a significant number of parents have chosen home or private schooling. A growing number of parents are now seeking to improve public education by engaging themselves in their children's schools. These parents seek meaningful involvement in decision-making to shape schools according to their values and goals.

Information is a powerful tool

The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) has published this handbook to assist parents in obtaining the knowledge necessary to act as informed participants in educational decisions. This information will allow parents to develop both more and more meaningful involvement in their children's schools.

TPPF will be glad to answer any questions or to provide assistance in locating additional information about education. Parents are encouraged to send copies of their handbook's completed checklists to the Foundation. A list of academically successful schools is being developed by TPPF to enhance the recognition of successful efforts in public education.

How to learn about your school

The following pages offer a checklist that poses a series of questions about curricula and instructional practices. To gain the greatest understanding about what is taking place in a school, it is important to seek answers from several different perspectives, including:

- ✓ Reading documents (such as those suggested below);
- ✓ Speaking with teachers, students, and administrators;
- ✓ Reviewing student work; and,
- ✓ Observing classroom activities.

The following list identifies documents that will begin to answer checklist questions. Access to documents can be provided by a teacher, principal or school district official. Free copies of documents should be provided upon request if the school or district routinely distributes the material. A school district may charge photocopy fees for reproduction of other documents. The right to review school documents is established by state and federal Open Records law. If difficulties arise in obtaining information, a written request can be submitted to the school, stating that rights established by these laws to review or photocopy a specific document are being exercised by this notification.

Suggested Documents:

School district mission statement and goals
School improvement plan
School district and school newsletters
Student and teacher handbooks
Course listing and program guidebook
Curriculum standards
Curriculum guidelines
Curriculum policies
Assessment and grading policies
Retention and promotion policies
Textbook and instructional materials policy
Disciplinary policy
Extracurricular & co-curricular policies
Scheduling policy
Minutes of school and district committees or task force meetings
Minutes of School Board meetings
School district grant applications
Professional (teacher) development programs
School and district test scores
School and district attendance and drop-out statistics
School and district course enrollments
Textbooks (both student and teacher)
Instructional materials
Teacher lesson plans and student assignments
Assessments and tests
Course Syllabi

SCHOOL CHECKLIST - QUESTIONS TO ASK

Elements of Good Instructional Practices		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
1.	Are students given clear, written expectations for classroom learning and behavior?			
2.	Are students required to meet these expectations?			
3.	Do teachers maintain orderly classrooms and maintain discipline?			
4.	Are disruptive students removed from the classroom?			
5.	Are teachers (not students) responsible for planning and directing classroom learning?			
6.	Do students have as many opportunities (or more) for individual learning as for group work?			
7.	Is homework assigned regularly which must be completed outside the school?			
8.	Are assignments corrected by the teacher and returned to the student in a timely manner?			
9.	As students progress to higher grades and more advanced courses, is a greater amount of homework assigned?			
10.	Does instruction balance laboratory work or project-based learning with the study of concepts and theories?			
11.	Does instruction focus equally on developing a foundation of facts and skills, as well as concepts (e.g., students must know major dates, battles, and generals of a war, as well as the causes of conflict)?			
12.	Are core subjects (math, social studies, science, and English) taught as separate courses? Or if courses are combined (interdisciplinary courses), does testing show that students learn as much as when the courses are taught separately?			

	Elements of Good Instructional Practices (Cont.)	Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
13.	In core subjects, does instruction focus on the specific subject rather than extraneous matters such as environmentalism in math, gender equity in English and political activism in science?			
14.	Does the school limit block scheduling (non-traditional class lengths) to laboratory sessions and to subjects that are not core foundation courses (such as math, science, social studies and English)?			
15.	If classes are taught in mixed age groups (not specific grades), does testing show that students are learning at their expected grade levels for achievement?			
16.	Is most of the school day (75%) devoted to studying core academics (math, science, English, and social studies)?			
17.	Does the school provide parents the opportunity to identify an academic program best suited to their students and to plan the sequence of courses?			
18.	Must all students take every core academic course that is listed as a graduation requirement (without being able to obtain a course substitution such as "Life Skills Math" instead of "Geometry")?			
19.	Are non-academic activities (such as volunteer service, football practice and yearbook editing) scheduled before or after the academic school day?			
20.	Are non-academic activities such as community service voluntary and not required for graduation?			
21.	Do teachers distribute or make available a syllabus for high school courses (listing learning objectives, units of study, instructional time-lines, assignments, tests, textbooks, and supplementary materials)?			

	Elements of Good Instructional Practices (Cont.)	Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
22.	Is advanced instruction available to students in core academic courses (e.g., honors or pre-advanced placement (AP) courses)?			
23.	Is tutoring or remedial help provided to students who are not achieving on grade level?			
24.	Are high school students provided the opportunity (but not required) to select career and vocational instruction as elective courses?			
25.	Are students encouraged to take Advanced Placement and Dual Credit College Courses?			
26.	Can students meet school requirements on the school campus or at home (without being required to participate in such activities as community events or business functions)?			
27.	Are students encouraged to participate in academic contests (e.g., University Interscholastic League (UIL) competitions and science fairs)?			
28.	Are students recognized and rewarded for winning or placing in academic competitions?			
29.	Are awards given for outstanding or highest academic achievement in core academic subjects?			
30.	Does the school recognize class rankings for salutatorian and valedictorian?			
31.	Does the school's mission statement identify academic learning as its primary function and high academic achievement as its primary goal?			
	Elements of Good Math Instruction	**Present in My School**		
		Yes	**Partially**	**No**
1.	Does the school have clear, explicit expectations for the math knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn for each grade and each course?			

2.	Are students required to master and to automatically use specific facts and processes (e.g., number facts; multi-digit multiplication and division; manipulations with fractions, decimals and percent; computation with positive and negative numbers; use of exponents and logarithms; solving linear equations by transformation; use of letters to represent unknown quantities or variables; converting written descriptions to algebraic expressions or equations; and factoring)?			
3.	Are students required to learn mental computation before using calculators (reserving calculators for middle and/or high school)?			
4.	Are correct solutions to problems required and credited?			
5.	Are students encouraged to use math symbols to represent numbers and solve problems (instead of models or concrete objects)?			
6.	Is immediate remedial instruction provided during each grade and/or course when a student has difficulty?			
7.	Are students expected to master the pre-algebra skills required to study algebra 1 in 8th grade?			
8.	Are students expected to use mathematical reasoning and complete mathematical proofs?			
9.	Does the school hold students responsible for attaining expected levels of math proficiency before promotion to the next grade or course?			
	Elements of Good Math Instruction	**Present in My School**		
	(Cont.)	**Yes**	**Partially**	**No**
10.	Does the math program have an established record of success both in the school and in other schools (based upon objective data from large groups over time)?			
11.	Does the course material (i.e., textbook and hand-outs) provide sufficient explanation and direction so			

	that the student or parents can use it for instruction at home?			
12.	Do teachers have specific training (or certification) in the math course or grade they teach?			
Elements of Good English Language Arts Instruction		**Present in My School**		
		Yes	**Partially**	**No**
1.	Are phonemic awareness and explicit systematic phonics[1] used to teach initial reading skills in kindergarten through 3rd grade?			
2.	Are phonics-based materials provided to students?			
3.	Are students provided direct instruction in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure?			
4.	Are students encouraged to use correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure in first grade?			
5.	Are students provided textbooks or workbooks on spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure?			
6.	Are students expected to read at grade level by 3rd grade?			

[1]Two useful guidelines for identifying effective reading programs are: (1) *How Will I Know a Good Early Reading Program When I See One?* developed by the Governor's Reading Task Force and available upon request from the Texas Public Policy Foundation or the Governor's Office 1 (800) 252-9600. (2) *Beginning Reading Instruction, Practical Ideas for Parents* developed by the Statewide Reading Initiative and distributed by the Publications Office, Texas Education Agency, 1701 N. Congress Ave., Austin, TX, 78701, 1 (800) 832-1221.

Elements of Good English Language Arts Instruction (Cont.)		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
7.	Are informal reading assessments given regularly and frequently to monitor progress, and is intervention provided when necessary?			
8.	Are students required to use English while studying English Language Arts?			
9.	Does the school have a plan for systematic vocabulary and concept development for kindergarten through 12th grade?			
10.	Are students required to read a variety of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and plays (modern and classical)?			
11.	Are students required to read periodicals, instructions, charts, and technical manuals?			
12.	Are students expected to read historically and culturally significant works from the literary and civic heritage of English speaking peoples?			
13.	Are students required to write critical analyses of literature (demonstrating knowledge of themes, plot, character development, genre, symbolism, etc.)?			
14.	Are students required to write research papers?			
15.	Are students required to write in a variety of formats (e.g., notes, outline, and formal/informal correspondence)?			
16.	Are students required to study four English courses in high school (including separate courses in American and World Literature)?			
Elements of Good Science Instruction		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No

1.	Is science teaching based on a foundation of accurate science content?			
2.	Is learning enriched by hands-on participation in experimental projects?			
3.	Are students required to recall facts and procedures specific to science (e.g., atomic table and the operation of a microscope)?			
4.	Are students required to develop a foundation of science content knowledge in earth science, astronomy, biology, chemistry, and physics?			
5.	Are students required to understand the differences between specific hypotheses, theories and laws?			
6.	Are students required to learn the mathematical concepts of science (e.g., determining the elliptical motion of orbiting planets or the proportionality between force and acceleration)?			
7.	Are students encouraged to take earth science or biology in 9th grade?			
8.	Are students required to take 4 science courses in high school (including separate courses in biology and chemistry)?			
Elements of Good Social Studies Instruction		**Present in My School**		
		Yes	**Partially**	**No**
1.	Are students taught to respect their national heritage as Americans as well as the heritage of other nationalities?			
2.	Are students required to recall significant dates, events, places, and individuals?			
3.	Are students required to study the ideas of America's founding fathers?			

Elements of Good Social Studies Instruction (Cont.)		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
4.	Is the primary focus of study devoted to history and geography (not sociology, psychology or environment)?			
5.	Are original documents and sources used as the basis of instruction (such as the Bill of Rights)?			
6.	Do instruction and curriculum materials furnish a balance of perspectives without revealing bias or judgment?			
7.	Are students required to learn the history of their state in middle school?			
8.	Are students required to learn the history of their nation in high school?			
9.	Are students required to take 4 years of social studies in high school (including separate courses in U.S. Government and Economics)?			
10.	Are students taught to value the governance, economic and cultural foundations of America (including constitutional democracy, free enterprise, representative government, free markets, Judeo-Christian principals, heritage of western civilization, and individual, as well as states' rights)?			
Elements of Good Foreign Language Instruction		**Present in My School**		
		Yes	Partially	No
1.	Are students provided instruction in a foreign language in early elementary grades?			
2.	Does instruction primarily focus on comprehension and composition, including vocabulary (focusing secondarily on language appreciation and cultural awareness)?			
3.	Is the primary goal of instruction to produce fluency in reading, speaking, and writing?			

Elements of Good Foreign Language Instruction (Cont.)		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
4.	Is more than one course of language study offered to students?			
5.	Are all students offered at least three years of foreign language instruction in high school?			
Elements of Good Technology Instruction		**Present in My School**		
		Yes	**Partially**	**No**
1.	Are students taught to use computers beginning in elementary school?			
2.	Is the use of computer programs or the Internet effectively integrated into (directly related to) academic learning?			
3.	Does instruction progress beyond keyboarding skills?			
4.	Are students required to use word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, and databases?			
5.	Are students required to store, retrieve, and transmit electronic information?			
6.	Are parents given prior notification of the use of the Internet by students and provided an opportunity to consent or refuse access for their minor-age students?			
7.	Are software programs and classroom policies established to restrict inappropriate electronic transmissions?			
Elements of Good Textbooks and Effective Textbook Use		**Present in My School**		
		Yes	**Partially**	**No**
1.	Are textbooks furnished to each student?			
2.	Are students encouraged to take textbooks home?			

Elements of Good Textbooks and Effective Textbook Use (Cont.)		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
3.	Do teachers use textbooks (and/or independent materials) to organize and sequence what students are expected to learn?			
4.	Are textbooks factual and objective (offering a balanced perspective)?			
5.	Is the content of the textbook directly related to the subject of the course (i.e., career awareness is not included in a science book and environmental problems are not included in a math book)?			
6.	Do textbooks include original materials where appropriate (such as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address instead of an account of the speech)?			
7.	Are review questions provided at the end of the chapter or section?			
8.	Are textbook assignments and chapter tests designed to promote individual accountability (rather than the efforts of a group)?			
9.	Do textbook assignments and tests require students to demonstrate theoretical knowledge and skills learning as well as applied learning (e.g., projects or exhibitions)?			
Elements of Good Testing and Grading		**Present in My School**		
		Yes	**Partially**	**No**
1.	Are most grades based upon an individual student's (not his group's) performance?			
2.	Are grades furnished at regularly scheduled points in the school term and given as a letter or number?			
3.	Are tests corrected by teachers and returned to the students?			

Elements of Good Testing and Grading (Cont.)		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
4.	Do grades reflect that students have fully met all of the requirements for the course or grade?			
5.	Do grades reflect actual level of student achievement without grade inflation?			
6.	Are students allowed to fail courses? Are teachers encouraged to fail students who have not met course or grade level standards?			
7.	Is learning tested by both standardized exams and "authentic assessment" (projects, demonstrations or exhibitions of learning)?			
8.	Do tests require students to demonstrate their knowledge rather than just the ability to produce projects and exhibitions?			
9.	Do tests require students to demonstrate their knowledge without aids such as open books, formula charts, and programmed calculators?			
10.	Are grades based upon objectively scored, standardized tests, as well as written essays?			
11.	Do tests assess academic knowledge and skills identified by curriculum standards (rather than personal, social or psychological traits)?			
12.	Are tests designed to measure the extent of learning above grade level achievement (not just minimum competency)?			
13.	Are students promoted because they have achieved passing grades?			
14.	Are nationally-normed standardized tests (which will provide comparison of achievement between schools, counties, and states) administered annually?			
15.	Does the high school exit test assess 12th grade material (rather than 10th or 8th grade level)?			

Elements of Good Testing and Grading (Cont.)		Present in My School		
		Yes	Partially	No
16.	Do some students score at a level of 4 or 5 on Advanced Placement tests which are offered in high school?			
17.	Do SAT and ACT scores mirror (or align with) high school grade point averages? Do "A" students do well on pre-college tests?			
18.	Do students with A's and B's in high school do well on college proficiency or entrance exams (achieving scores that exempt them from having to take remedial courses)?			

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MATHEMATICS

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ASSISTANCE

TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION
General Education Information and Referrals
8122 Datapoint Dr., Ste. 816
San Antonio, TX 78229-3271
(210) 614-0080/(800) 694-TPPF

TEXAS JUSTICE FOUNDATION
Information about Parental and Student Rights and Legal Assistance
8122 Datapoint Dr., Ste. 812
San Antonio, TX 78229
(210) 614-7157

TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY
Information and Assistance Concerning State Policies for Schools and Students
1701 Congress Ave.
Austin, TX 78701
(800) 832-1221

TEXAS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
Information and Assistance Concerning State Policies for Schools and Students
1701 Congress Ave.
Austin, TX 78701
(512) 463-9007

TEXAS READING INSTITUTE
Information, Testing, Parent Training and Reading Intervention
11271 Richmond Ave.
Building H, Suite 101
Houston, TX 77082
(281) 293-7904

NATIONAL RIGHT TO READ FOUNDATION
Information about Reading and Referrals for Assistance
P. O. Box 490
The Plains, VA 20198-0490
(800) 468-8911

ENDNOTES

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About the Author

Chris Patterson joined the Texas Public Policy Foundation in August, 1996 and serves as Director of Education Policy. Chris' expertise is in the area of curriculum reform, instructional practices and "school-to-work". Chris is the founder, writer and editor of an educational newsletter (CUE) distributed to over 3,000 parents throughout the state of Texas and has written numerous policy briefs in the areas of curriculum reform, school-to-work, and most recently educational reform in Texas public schools. Chris' analyses, provided to Governor Bush and the State Board of Education, had a profound impact on the state's recently adopted curriculum standards (TEKS). In addition to her research, Chris represents TPPF at speaking engagements for local and statewide organizations, has been featured on radio talk shows and frequently provides policy briefs to elected officials in the area of education. Her most recent publication is a policy brief for the Heritage Foundation Symposium on School-to-Work, entitled "School-to-Work: The Coming Collision".

Chris holds a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the State University College of New York at Oneonta and a two year certificate in Labor Relations and Management Studies from Cornell University. Formerly, she was the Director of the Regional Action Phone of Western New York, serving the community by providing information referrals and suicide intervention to callers. Prior to her work with the hotline, Chris was employed by St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, N.Y. in Human Relations. She held a variety of positions during her ten year career, including personnel consultant, management development and Compensation and Benefits Administrator.

Chris and her husband, Bob, reside in San Antonio, TX. The Pattersons have two children, Rob, 15, and Matt, 13, both of whom attend public school.

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