

Qualities parents value in choosing a school: the research

Parents surveyed about the qualities they value most in choosing an Independent school nominate several outstanding elements. These include:

- good teachers
- a supportive and caring environment
- good facilities
- educational excellence
- orderly and safe environment
- class size
- reinforcement of moral values.

This paper reviews a range of research findings to explore whether these features of a school actually lead to better outcomes for students.

Good teachers

Parents seeking a quality schooling experience for their children are right to have the highest regard for good teachers. The mainstay of an excellent school is teacher quality, which includes:

- how well teachers are trained
- subject and pedagogical knowledge and skills
- commitment to continuing professional development
- capacity for classroom management
- professionalism.

Good teaching is not only the major in-school influence on student performance, it is also linked to students' wellbeing and social and emotional development. The evidence shows that when students have good relationships with their teachers, both their performance and their sense of belonging at school benefit. Longitudinal studies confirm the significant difference a positive school experience can make

— young people who enjoy being at school, enjoy learning and feel safe and secure are more likely to do well in all dimensions of their post-school life.

A supportive and caring environment

Parents generally want their children to have a well-rounded education with a strong emphasis on learning life skills. Research studies have shown the non-academic outcomes of schooling such as personal growth, psychological and social development, the development of dispositions towards learning, and general wellbeing are at least as important in determining success and satisfaction in adult life as academic results.

Schools that put an emphasis on non-cognitive behaviours such as those in the table below, provide a critical foundation for their students in later life.

Non-cognitive qualities critical for success in later life

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------|
| • effort | • enthusiasm |
| • organisation | • teamwork |
| • discipline | • leadership |
| • participation | |

Schools foster these non-cognitive qualities in the classroom and through the range of extra-curricular activities offered to students. Research shows that in the classroom, a good relationship between teachers and students can nurture and promote students' drive, motivation and effort, while participation in extra-curricular activities reinforces classroom values and helps build these important non-cognitive qualities and behaviours.

Good facilities

While parents may be attracted to schools with good facilities, research on the quality and impact of school facilities generally finds that the physical environment has only a small influence on performance. What is important is the sense conveyed of the school culture and morale, and the extended opportunities they provide for academic, physical and social development and growth. A high quality physical environment can foster a strong sense of belonging that in turn is associated with an enthusiasm for learning.

Conversely, research has found that poor quality facilities can contribute to a poor school climate which in turn has an effect on performance.

Educational excellence

A school climate where academic activities and student performance are valued by both students and teachers is associated with higher than expected performance.

Research suggests that in schools with a strong focus on educational excellence — known as academic press — the curriculum and teaching are delivered at a higher level, the school's and teachers' expectations are higher, students' norms regarding the usefulness of academic work are more conducive to learning, and there is likely to be less disruption to teaching and learning.

Students also benefit from having a high achieving peer group as an incentive and support for higher academic achievement. Peers, like family, act as a source of motivation and aspiration, as well as providing direct interactions in learning.

An orderly and safe environment

Research validates parents' intuitive understanding that learning requires an orderly and cooperative environment inside and outside the classroom. Data show the better the classroom disciplinary climate, the more time is spent on teaching and learning and the stronger the student performance. Conversely, at the school level, disruptive behaviour is associated with lower performance.

The school climate — generally understood to encompass relations between principal, teachers and students, the sense of community, teacher and student morale, norms among peers, and a sense of

safety — has an effect on student outcomes through its influence on motivational factors such as student commitment to school, incentive to learn and student satisfaction.

When students have good relationships with teachers, their performance and their sense of belonging at school benefit.

Class size

The weight of evidence suggests that smaller classes, especially in the early years of schooling, can have a small but important and lasting effect on achievement, mainly to the extent that they reduce discipline problems, raise teacher morale and provide for more student-teacher interaction.

The key to reaping academic benefits from smaller classes is teacher expertise. The impact of a smaller class on student outcomes is dependent on teachers' skills, the ability of teachers to capitalise on the opportunities presented for more individualised learning, greater engagement and greater scope for innovation. If these skills are lacking, smaller classes make little difference.

Reinforcement of moral values

For many parents, it is the ethos of a school that is the basis for choosing a school. Research shows this is indeed a valid measure of a good school. A school's culture and values, and the extent to which these are shared by the parent and student body, have a substantial influence on student achievement, largely through motivation and support.

Research finds that schools with a high level of parental engagement have better outcomes. When parents are involved, students report more effort, concentration, attention and motivation. They are more inherently interested in learning and experience higher perceived competence. An explanation for the close association between parental involvement and student achievement lies in the school's reinforcement of values and goals. When schools and the parent community agree on behavioural and academic goals the desired behaviours are reinforced and students are able to thrive.