

GOOD SCHOOL

How do you know if the school where you are teaching is the right one for you? How can you tell before you even take a job there? What are some of the key characteristics of effective schools? Here are 10 ways to know if your school is effective.

1. Attitude of the Office Staff

This might seem an odd first choice. However, the first thing that greets you when you enter a school is the office staff. Their actions set the tone for the rest of the school. If the front office is inviting for educators, parents, and learners, then the school leadership values customer service. However, if the office staff is unhappy and rude, you must question whether the school as a whole including its Principal has the correct attitude towards customer service and teamwork. Be wary of schools where the staff is just not approachable. You as an educator will probably find that if the staff has a pervasive unhelpful attitude they will not provide you with the support you need throughout the year.

2. Attitude of the Principal

Just as with the office staff, you will probably have the ability to meet with the Principal of your school before you actually begin working there. His or her attitude is extremely important for you and the school as a whole. An effective Principal should be open, encouraging, and innovative. They should be learner-centered in their decisions. They should also empower educators while providing with the necessary support and training to grow each year. Principals who are never present, who have horrible customer service, or who are not open to innovation will be difficult to work for, with and will probably result in many disgruntled employees and parents.

3. Mix of New and Veteran Educators

New educators come into a school fired up to teach and innovate. Many of them truly believe that they can make a difference. At the same time, they often have a lot to learn about classroom management and the inner workings of the school system. On the other hand, veteran educators provide years of experience and understanding of how to effectively manage their classrooms and get things done in the school. At the same time, they are also sometimes stuck in their way of teaching a subject and might be wary of innovation. Only through a mix of the new and old can both learn and grow. This brings me to my next item...

4. Learner-Centered Attitude With Core Values

To be truly effective, a Principal must create a system of core values which the entire staff shares. To do this, the Principal must involve the educators and staff each step of the way. A common theme to each of the core values must be a learner-centered view of education. When a decision is made in the school, the first thought should always be "**What's best for the learners?**" When everyone shares this belief infighting will lessen and the school can focus on the business of teaching. If a conflict occurs between staff members, then they should first meet and together decide what is best for the learners. With this focus there is no doubt that the final decision will be more effective and much easier to accept by all parties.

5. Mentoring Program

In public schools, districts provide new educators with a mentor during their first year. Some have very formal mentoring programs and others are more relaxed. However, each school should provide new educators with an internal mentor. This should happen whether the educator is fresh out of college or coming from another school district. Effective schools have strong core values that each educator knows. Only by pairing a new educator with a mentor who truly believes this core values will the school's mission be fulfilled. On a more practical side, a mentor can help a new educator learn the ropes. They will introduce them to key office staff and help them navigate the bureaucracy involved with items such as field trips and purchasing classroom items.

6. Departmental Politics Kept to a Minimum

Almost every department in a school will have its share of politics and drama. For example, a Mathematics Department might have educators who want more power or who try and get a larger share of the department's resources. There will probably be some sort of seniority system set up for picking courses for the following year or determining who gets to go to specific conferences. However, a quality school will not allow this type of behavior to undermine the quality of teaching learners. Again, this starts with quality leadership from the Principal on down. The school leadership should be clear on its goals for each department and work with the department heads to create a collaborative environment where politics are kept to a minimum.

7. Faculty is Empowered and Involved

When the faculty is empowered to make decisions backed up by the administration, a level of trust grows which allows for greater innovation and more effective teaching. An individual who feels empowered and involved in the decision-making process will not only have greater job satisfaction but will also be better able to accept decisions with which they might not agree. As before this starts with the Principal and the shared core values that all relate back to determining what is best for learners. A school where educator opinions are not valued and they feel powerless will result in disgruntled educators who do not have the desire to put as much into their teaching. You can tell this type of school if you hear phrases such as "Why bother?"

8. Teamwork amongst the Faculty (department)

Even in the best of schools there will be educators who do not want to share with others. They will be the ones who get to school in the morning, close themselves in their room, and don't come out except for mandatory meetings. If the majority of the educators at your school do this, then the school has a problem. Instead, a quality school will create an atmosphere where educators want to share with each other. This should be something which the school and department leadership should model. Schools which reward intra- and inter-departmental sharing will see a huge increase in the quality of classroom teaching. It is a proven fact that an integrated curriculum is more effective for the learner than learning each topic in isolation.

9. Communication Is Honest and Frequent

The school leadership in a quality school provides educators, staff, learners, and parents with frequent communication about what is happening. Rumors and gossip are rampant in many schools. Many of these rumors can lead to disgruntled employees. If the school is not communicating the reasons for decisions or upcoming changes as soon as they can, then rumor mills will take effect the results can be devastating. Therefore, it is important that the school leadership models frequent communication and has an open-door policy so that educators and staff can come forward with questions and concerns as they arise.

10. Parental Involvement

Many schools and especially high schools do not stress parental involvement in their child's education. It is the school's job to pull parents in and help them understand what they can do. Some educators do not want to bother. However, the more you as an educator involve the parents, the better the children will behave and perform in your class. Many parents want to know what's going on in class but have no way of figuring out how to do this. A school which stresses parental contact for both positive and negative reasons is one which will only grow more effective over time. Thankfully, this is something that each educator can institute even if the school as a whole does not stress this involvement.