Rules and Tools for Choosing Schools

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Once the envy of the world, schools in the United States are now, all too often, second-rate. About one-third of public school students do not become proficient readers. Forty-five percent of eighth graders cannot solve problems that require them to divide fractions. Thirty percent of the first-year students at four year colleges and universities need remedial classes to get them up to speed.

There is, of course, considerable variation in quality among our nation's schools. And so, in *The Good School*, Peg Tyre, a journalist specializing in education, recommends that parents who want no child (of theirs) left behind get a lot smarter -- and more proactive -- about where and how their kids learn.

Drawing on the latest research, Tyre's book is a readable and reliable survey of the state-of-play (and work) in pre-schools, elementary schools, and middle schools. She is less successful, alas, in her principal aim: providing a practical guide to help parents choose or change their child's school.

Mean scores on standardized tests, Tyre demonstrates, reveal next to nothing about the effectiveness of schools. Teachers teach to the test, administrators have found ways to get rid of students who get low scores, and many states have dumbed down their exams. Although the ideal class size for elementary schools is thirteen to seventeen students, Tyre adds, this factor is not all that important in improving academic outcomes. Whether a classroom has twenty or twenty-five students does not seem to matter at all.

The battle over how to teach reading, Tyre insists, should be over. But it isn't. If teachers are not hooked on phonics, first graders are not blending sounds into words and then using them in sentences, and vocabulary acquisition, comprehension and fluency are not increasing markedly, Tyre advises parents to act, quickly.

According to Tyre there as a consensus as well among educational experts that recess is essential to success in school. By allowing brain proteins to flourish, exercise, for at least twenty minutes a day, enhances concentration, memory creation and retrieval as well as physical fitness.

Unfortunately, Tyre does not specify how, precisely, parents can use the information she presents in *The Good School*. How, for example, can they find out what is causing upward trends in test scores or get the data "broken out by subgroups"? How might they identify a "scaled down" curriculum in elementary school mathematics that "moves forward in an orderly and coherent way"? And distinguish it from one that isn't? How relevant to assessing the curriculum is evidence that classroom exposure to dance, music, and the visual arts has no significant impact on academic achievement -- when Tyre indicates that, "speaking personally, I want them for my child"?

Most importantly, if "good teachers matter more than just about anything else in education," how can parents know whether their kid's school has an abundant supply of them? After all, as Tyre acknowledges, "a teacher sometimes looks great but turns out to be a dud."

According to a report of the Economic Policy Institute, moreover, two thirds of teachers who rank in the top twenty percent one year disappear from the category the next year - and one third of those hailed as "highly effective" plummet to the bottom forty percent twelve months later.

Experience matters, Tyre tells us, as do advanced degrees in the subject matter the teacher is teaching. But how much? What is a reasonable percentage of newly-minted teachers? How helpful are mentoring programs for teachers? What questions should a parent ask -- in a meeting with a teacher -- that can shed light on his or her competence?

Tyre admits that she does not have a sure-fire method for identifying educational institutions that work for all kids. We appreciate her candor. And we applaud her for distilling and disseminating a substantial amount of useful information. Nonetheless, we suspect that many readers will be disappointed in Tyre's takeaways -- and what is left out of *The Good School*. Tyre does not spell out the options available to affluent parents or distinguish them from the choices economically-disadvantaged families can afford. She does not lay out the pros and cons of charter schools, religious schools, magnet schools, and home school. Apart from a brief shout out to the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), a nation-wide network of free, open enrollment schools, she does delineate the distinctive features of a school she considers exemplary. Nor does she explain, step-by-step, the logistics of switching a student to a public school outside of the home district.

We realize that we are asking a whole lot from one author and one book. But, then again, it seems clear to us that the time is now, right now, to find -- or found -- good schools that will serve the next generation of Americans as engines of opportunity in an intensely competitive information age.

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