

How to Know a Good Christian School

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Frequently I receive calls from parents wondering how to choose a Christian school for their child. While visiting schools, I've been asked by board members what they should be looking for as they visit classrooms or stroll through the halls of their school to know if quality education is occurring. Here are some questions I tell these parents and board members to ask.

What's on the walls? When I visit a school, the walls are the first words I hear. Walls speak, even when the students and teachers have gone home for the day. I look for walls that tell me that kids are viewed as creative image bearers of a creative Creator. Do the walls and bulletin boards of the classrooms and halls drip with student work? Or are only dry, lifeless, two-dimensional cardboard cutouts and teacher-produced materials covering the walls? I want to know that the school's teachers recognize who the child is before God, and I believe the walls tell me that.

The walls also tell me if this is a school that is permeating the children's lives and studies with God's Word. When I look around the classrooms, do I see evidence that this is a Christian school? Or could it be any classroom in any school across the continent? I judge schools by the student work on the walls, and the Bible verses, and the evidence that kids are being called to joyful obedience to Jesus Christ.

What are the big kids like? If you're a parent who is checking out a Christian school and you have a first grader, you'll likely be shown the grade one rooms, maybe the grade two rooms. That's important, but I want to see the end product of the school. I want to know what the big kids are like. Are they respectful to their teachers? Are they studious, animated, and fun? Are they respectful of the little kids? Are they the kind of kids I want my children to have as role models? Are they challenged to be Christian leaders? Do they dress like Christians? What kind of work are they doing? Are they actively involved in their education? What kinds of meaningful extra-curricular activities are they involved in? Are the big kids what I want my kids to be like in a few short years?

Are the restrooms clean? This sounds strange, but I believe the restrooms of a school are beacons of how the school is managed and what people—kids and adults—value about their school. Dirty restrooms cause me to wonder about how well the curriculum is developed and how well the finances are managed. Restrooms devoid of graffiti and heel marks on the walls tell me that the kids at the school are being taught self-discipline, self-respect, manners, and Christian integrity. Clean restrooms tell me that the school is well run and takes pride in what it is accomplishing.

Can the teachers tell you why they're there? Ask teachers as you meet them what made them choose to teach in a Christian school. They should have a ready answer. When I ask this question, I want to hear that they believe God commands Christians to permeate their children's lives with his Word, and they're helping parents do that. Or I want to hear from teachers that these children whom they are teaching are the future of the kingdom of God, and they are preparing these kids to be God's hands, feet, and mouthpieces in this world. Or I want to hear that they are fulfilling the mandates of Psalm 78, "telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done" so these children will "put their trust in God and ... keep his commands." I want to hear that the teachers have a strong sense that they are fulfilling a calling.

A number of schools ask teachers to write a one-page personal philosophy of Christian education and how that is implemented in their classrooms. Such an exercise makes teachers wrestle with their own calling and their perspective on what they are doing.

I have an administrator friend who puts it succinctly. "Everything my teachers do with their kids, I ask them, 'Why?'"

What's happening in the classroom? What do you look for in a classroom on a ten-minute visit?

Respect: Does the teacher show respect for the students? Are they treated like image bearers of their heavenly Father? Are the students corrected with loving discipline? Do the students show respect for each other?

Active involvement: Are the kids actively involved in their education? Most of us need stimulation, hands-on activities, lots of stories, a sense of security, change of pace, and multiple senses involved. Kids learn the same way, even more so. But sometimes I observe classrooms in which the teacher is up front talking, kids are in rows, and little or no interaction occurs for a half-hour or more. In classrooms like this I can see that the kids are planning recess, thinking about the fight they had with one of their parents that morning, or wondering when lunchtime is coming. Simply, the lesson is boring because the teacher has not bothered to wonder what will engage the kids in learning. I don't think that shows respect for how God created these students.

Teacher preparation: Any casual observer can determine if a teacher is prepared or not. Prepared teachers do a better job of teaching, but also telegraph to kids the importance of taking our work seriously before the face of God. I don't want my kids learning from lazy people because they're going to be learning things I don't want them to.

What do the textbooks look like? This tells me about the value kids place on education. Those who value books highly value what they learn from those books. I wonder how a kid feels when a teacher hands him or her a messed up, written-on, dog-eared textbook at the beginning of the year?

What do the test scores tell? Christian education should be high-quality education. If I were investigating a school, I'd ask to see the standardized test scores. Are the students of the school performing significantly above the national, provincial, or state norms? Better yet, I'd ask how the school is testing for it's own mission and vision. The best Christian schools have tests or projects that enable the staff to know if the students are learning the Christian values, life skills, and behaviors the school professes to be teaching.

Is the administrator on the move? I like to say that good principals are hard to find. Good principals are not easily found in their offices. They're roaming the school, visiting classrooms, talking to kids, leading curriculum meetings, discussing professional development with a teacher, showing parents the school, meeting with a donor, speaking to groups in the community, discussing issues with pastors, and much more.

Does the school have a sense of where God is calling it to go? The best schools are future-focused. Staff members, administrators, board members, students, and parents all know what the school is about. If you ask an older student why he or she is at this Christian school you should hear a good answer. Administrators should articulate a sense of mission and vision for the school; they should know what the goals of the school are and how they are leading toward that vision.

Who accredits the school? Increasingly I'm hearing from schools that this is one of the first questions new parents ask. Why? One reason is that it's a buzzword. But parents moving into a new community have little information to determine the quality of a school unless they know someone in town. Accreditation tells parents that the school takes seriously the quality of education they are providing for God's children.

Those are just a few of the things I look for that tell me a great deal in a very short amount of time.

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