

# What's Going on in My Child's School?

A Parent's Guide to Good Schools



**H**ave you ever walked into your child's classroom or looked at a homework assignment and thought: "My days in school were very different from my child's experience. Is this good?" Fewer teachers stand in the front of the class lecturing as they may have when you attended school. Teachers still cover basic concepts in math, reading, science and other subjects, but now they help students learn more on their own. Increasingly, students are working together on projects rather than individually. More and more, ditto sheets with fill-in-the-blank problems are being supplemented—or replaced all together—with more challenging hands-on lessons that require students to think harder and use different skills.



Parents who attended schools with more traditional classrooms may raise their eyebrows at the new look of today's schools. What's behind these developments? Are they good for your child? What impact are these efforts having on your child's education? Is your child learning more?

This booklet is for parents who want to understand how and why schools are changing their approach. We will take you inside classrooms that are using innovative



approaches to learning—with impressive results. We will find out why schools are encouraging children to work and learn from each other. We will take a look at what teachers are doing to improve their skills so they are more effective in the classroom.

# How Children Learn

When we were in school, teachers drilled us on multiplication tables. They asked us to spell words over and over again, usually out loud and in front of the class. They quizzed us on historical facts. We filled in the names of state capitals on blank maps in geography class. Along the way, we memorized a lot of facts and figures.

Pop quiz: is what was good for us in school more than 20 years ago just as good now for our children?

- a.) Absolutely. What was good for me is good for my child.
- b.) Maybe. It's important to know the basics, but times are changing.
- c.) Not necessarily. I want my children to think more critically about the world around them and develop a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.
- d.) Don't know. Try again later.

Which answer did you choose?

Learning new words and memorizing multiplication tables and historical facts is important, but it's not enough. We want our students not only to be good spellers, we also want them to understand what they read. We want students not only to know how to add, subtract and multiply numbers, we want them to understand more complex math

concepts that will help them later in life. We want students to not only know critical historical dates, we also want them to know why these dates and events are significant and how they shaped our country and who we are today.

Research tells us that one of the best ways for children to learn is by relating what is taught in the classroom to what is happening in the real world. What children learn in the classroom must have real meaning in their everyday lives. They must understand why studying history or conducting a science experiment or reading a book is important to their lives outside the classroom. If not, the subject seems unimportant to them and not worth the effort.

Using what students already know or what they have experienced in their own lives is also a good way to help them make connections to new material. Learning only improves as students share new ideas with friends and classmates. These conversations require children to clarify their thinking. They also learn more from the person they are talking



with because that person shares what she knows and thinks about the topic. Relating new classroom material to the real world, a child's own experiences and sharing this learning with other people helps the student understand new ideas, concepts or subjects.

Parent Maria Robles has two children who attend Canutillo Elementary School in El Paso, Texas. She supports this approach to learning. "It tells me that kids are thinking, working and discussing ideas. The students are working together and not just sitting at a desk with a textbook by themselves. My son has come home and said: 'Mom, I want to check this out on the computer. I want to know more.' "

At Helen Ball Elementary School in El Paso, Texas, teachers balance a back-to-basics approach with hands-on learning and an emphasis on more challenging projects. This approach has earned high marks from parents.

"We hear parents say, "I wish it was like this when I went to school."  
— *Principal Joyce Sarowski*



## Teachers Take on a New Role in the Classroom

The days of teachers who lecture for the entire period and expect students to recite facts and figures are numbered, according to experts. Studies show that children learn more when they actively participate in learning than when they are taught by the more passive "sit and get" approach.

"I think now I provide more freedom for the students to discover. That's important. That's what they love. They have fantastic ideas. They like to learn things."  
— *Teacher Terry Ortiz*

Good teachers ask questions that help kids think independently and build their own understanding. Their students can explain what they learned and, more important, how they learned it and why the lesson was important. This contrasts sharply with reciting memorized answers that require little thinking or comprehension.

## ONE SCHOOL'S EXPERIENCE

Carencro Middle School, located in a semi-rural, working class area near Lafayette, Louisiana, is changing the way teachers teach and students learn. While teachers still cover the basics concepts in math, reading, science and writing, they are placing more emphasis on projects that require students to work in teams.

Carencro staff say students are more enthusiastic about classes and their work, and teachers collaborate more. Students use the computers to run spreadsheets, write presentations and research projects on the internet – among other activities.

Teachers say students retain more knowledge by working together. “The activities help them understand the background material. They aren’t just reading something, they have to work their way around a concept,” says science teacher Janet Castille.

Castille and other teachers stress that such activities require teaching the basics before students begin more complicated projects that require critical thinking rather than only memorization.

Math teacher Tori Guzzetta believes that children actually work harder to learn material when they have to explain it to classmates and their teacher.

“Learning is a team sport. It gives more kids an opportunity to shine. Some kids are good with paper and pencil tests, but this way of teaching gives everyone a chance to do a variety of things to show what they have learned,” says Guzzetta.



“It’s a little like learning how to change a flat tire,” says Vicki Dimock, a program manager at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas. “If you just tell me how to do it, I may not learn on my own. A better way of teaching me is to be there with me while I try on my own and coach me through it.”

This doesn’t mean that the teacher is out of the picture completely—far from it. The teacher determines what each student knows at the beginning of the school year and then builds on that knowledge by encouraging the student to use logic, problem solving and reasoning. All the while, the teacher is assessing whether the student is making progress. If not, the teacher must try another way of reaching the student.

For all students—regardless of the level at which they are achieving—using materials, studying subjects and creating projects that are relevant is key to learning. Elementary school teacher Joyce Tate makes science apply to her students’ everyday lives by asking them about their parents’ jobs. If a student’s father works in a restaurant, the class learns about boiling points, heat intensity and accurate measurement. Tate introduces new subjects to students first by building on what students are familiar and comfortable with.

“The children get really excited,” Tate says. “A lot of students feel as if they aren’t prepared to do the kind of math and science we do. But when they find out we’re using materials that are easily available to them—right out of their kitchens—they don’t seem to be intimidated.”

“When that one child says: ‘Hey, I have got something that I didn’t have,’ and the light bulb goes off and it all clicks and it’s like, ‘this is easy,’ after we have been struggling. That’s what you’re here for—to see children finally realize: ‘I can do this. I worked hard. I had someone who believed in me and I was able to learn.’ — *Teacher Vicki Brown*

# Students Learn From Each Other

In the past, asking the student sitting next to you for help usually earned you a detention slip or a trip to the principal's office. Now, teachers encourage students to learn from one another.

Richard Bonnem has taught at Cochiti Elementary and Middle School in New Mexico for the last 10 years. Bonnem encourages his students to work together, and the results have been good.

“One of my top students helps my special needs student with her assignments,” says Bonnem. “I just talked to the student and told her how much I appreciated it. This is a fifth grader. It's almost like a family. It's not just the teacher giving the information. You can learn from a lot of different people.”

To encourage teamwork, Bonnem has changed the way his classroom is set up. Desks are grouped together, making it easier for students to work side by side. His class and others like it are noisier than more “traditional” learning environments, but there are good noises and bad noises. “I want the good noises,” says Bonnem. “I want my students focused on their projects and working as a group. I want them to be on task and problem solving. What you don't want to hear are kids talking about their boyfriends and girlfriends—those are the bad noises. I don't want silence either. I don't want them sitting there just by themselves.”



“I have learned to have fun with the kids. My big thing is to gain their trust so they are able to take risks and not be afraid of making a mistake. Now more than ever hands shoot up to answer a question ... it's like having 24 teachers in the room.” — *Teacher Richard Bonnem*

There's another reason that schools like Cochiti Elementary and Middle School are placing heavy emphasis on student collaboration and projects that focus on more than one subject at a time.

“If we can teach kids how to work together, brainstorm problems together—we are preparing them for life,” says Cochiti Principal June Reed. “This is what the workplace needs. People don't work in isolation anymore. Successful companies have teams now. Everybody has to work together. If we can start teaching children those skills now, we have done our job.”

Cochiti Elementary and Middle School is making progress. In 1998, the school received a distinguished school award from the U.S. Department of Education. Reed acknowledges that the school still has a ways to go to improve math and reading scores. Under her leadership, the school will continue to revise and update its school improvement plan to ensure that everything teachers do in the classroom relates to increasing student achievement.

This new approach to learning requires more of teachers, and that means teachers need to brush up on their skills.

## Teaching Teachers New Skills

Teachers—just like doctors or lawyers—must keep up with new developments in their field. What a veteran teacher taught 20 years ago may be lost in today’s classroom. Chances are good you would not schedule an appointment with a doctor who ignored the latest advancements in medicine or hire an attorney who failed to keep up with changes in the law. Why should we expect any lesser standard from the teacher we entrust our children to during the school year?



“Parents may think: ‘They have a degree in education so they know everything there is to know to teach my child.’ But just like any other profession, you have to stay current. New research comes out regularly informing us about what kids have to learn.” — *SEDL Programming Manager Vicki Dimock*

Teaching has been slow to catch up with other professions that build on-the-job training into the workday. For too long, teachers have focused largely on what goes on in their classrooms, without any time left over to compare notes and learn from each other. That’s changing. The time teachers spend meeting regularly with their colleagues during the school year to critique what worked and what didn’t in the classroom is paying off for children. Teachers—just like students—learn better when they collaborate.

Researchers say that good professional development:

- takes place during the regular school calendar;
- provides opportunities for hands-on practice and reflection; and
- fosters more collaboration and team work with other teachers and the principal.

Parent Maria Robles says she doesn't mind when a substitute occasionally fills in for her children's teachers who are receiving professional development. "Teachers get a lot of training. It strengthens my belief in the principal because he obviously cares about the kids enough to help the teachers get better educated."

Robles, who volunteers at Canutillo Elementary, says she sees the results of teacher professional development first hand. "I'm in school a lot. I hear teachers talk a lot about what they want to do in the classroom, what they have learned. They sound excited and it's wonderful to see."

Terry Ortiz knows collaborating with his colleagues has made him a better teacher. "This is really an opportunity to get some true feedback and to work with other people instead of just being isolated in your classroom," says Ortiz.

Principal Vicki Baldwin of Garza High School in Austin, Texas, says her teachers were uncomfortable with the idea of professional development at first. But Baldwin was determined to push her teachers to think differently, to think in ways that would benefit their students.

"I've always been a proponent of professional development," says Baldwin. "You always need new skills and you are much more effective if you collaborate with other teachers. I asked teachers to be more flexible, to work together. They needed new skills to do that."

## TEN TIPS FOR PARENTS: HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN

- Talk with your child's teacher about what he or she will learn and be expected to do during the school year.
- Find out how you can help your child with school-related projects at home.
- Make learning a priority in your home by providing a time and place for children to study.
- Visit your child's classroom to learn more about the instructor's teaching style.
- Ask your child's teacher for updates on how he/she is doing and where he or she might need help.
- Learn more about what your child's teacher is doing to keep his or her teaching skills up-to-date.
- Take advantage of community resources such as the library, after-school tutoring, field trips and summer camps that encourage learning.
- Get involved with your child in community, school and volunteer activities.
- Look into different colleges or read about interesting careers together. Visit a college campus or a job site with your child.
- Turn off the television and talk with your child about current events, books or movies during meals.

# What Parents Should Look For

So what do teachers learn in professional development? What does it mean to your child? How do you know whether your child's teacher is receiving good professional develop-



ment or simply wasting valuable classroom time that could be spent in the classroom with your child?

In the past, teachers often focused all their attention on the brightest students in the class and hoped that the slower students would catch up. Good professional development emphasizes giving teachers the tools and expertise they need to help all students achieve at high levels. It requires teachers to take a hard look at what they are doing in the classroom, to examine whether they are successfully challenging all children to their best ability and to adjust their teaching when instruction is not working for students.

For example, teachers are learning to focus more heavily on the learning needs of their students. That's because more and more research shows that learning needs vary from student to student. One student may need more one-on-one time with a teacher. Another may be a visual learner and still another may learn through hands-on activities. So, teachers have to understand what motivates their students and keep track of it. This requires talking with other teachers, reflecting on what works and what doesn't in the classroom, and identifying areas for improvement.

How can you tell whether your child's teacher is receiving good professional development? Here's a checklist of what to look for:

- Does the professional development focus on improving student achievement, and is it tied to the school's overall improvement plan?
- Does it require your child's teacher to meet regularly with other teachers and critique his or her work in the classroom?
- How often do teachers meet to polish their skills and learn more about the latest teaching techniques?



Parents don't need an expert to tell them that a good teacher brings out the best in their child. We all know this from personal experience. All of us can name at least one teacher who had a big impact on our lives and on the way we learned.

Some teachers were born with a natural gift to teach. They intuitively know how to help a child struggling in math. They move easily from one child's learning style to another's. Many teachers, however, are like the rest of us. Getting better at what we do requires extra effort and help. For teachers, this means participating in professional development that helps push them to a whole new level of teaching. Improving teacher quality through good professional development improves learning for all of our children.

## TEN TIPS FOR PARENTS: GET INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

- Attend school events and activities.
- Tutor students after school.
- Encourage at least one other parent to become a school volunteer.
- Volunteer at your child's school at least three times a year.
- Offer to work as a teacher's aide in your child's classroom.
- Ask the principal if your child's school has a school improvement plan.
- Ask questions. Ask more questions.
- Learn more about how the school is increasing student achievement.
- Get involved in school meetings for parents and community members that focus on how to strengthen student learning.
- Help school staff research new and proven learning methods.



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