



What is a Good School?

By Educator Barnes – June 18, 2019

At the end of 2018, Roland Martin kicked off his “Is School Choice the Black Choice?” town hall series in Indianapolis. The entire Indy K12 crew attended; it was the first event where our entire team was present. Afterward, I wrote about the event. A follower of my work who reads many of the pieces I write, left a lengthy comment.

As usual, I really enjoy reading your insights, observations and personal experience from being an educator in Indianapolis. I have a question I would like to ask your opinion on.

First some background...I took a graduate level class at Purdue a few semesters ago offered by the Curriculum and Instruction department in the school of education. It was on the TV series The Wire. It is a series I watched. The series is based in and on Baltimore, MD which is my hometown. The series had a season which focused on the Baltimore City Public schools. The goal of the class was to use this specific season of the series to interrogate citizenship and civic instruction; i.e. social studies. Since I have an undergrad degree in history, an MA in American Studies and am currently pursuing a PhD in American Studies also this interested me. Since my areas of concentration in my program are African American studies, & Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, I believe that civic education intersects with how we vote, live, impact and make policy in our communities especially policy which affects marginalized and underrepresented people. Many of the issues you engage within this piece came up in class. Yet, there is one thing that our professor said that continues to roll around in my head. In class discussion, the term good school came up. She responded by stating that that term does not have a hard definition, especially among educators. In other words, no one can decide what exactly a good school is. I am wondering what your thoughts are on this. Mine basically is that parents and guardians must determine what is good for their individual child. For example, my best friend has two kids she is still raising and 3 foster kids. All of the kids attend Christian school but one. The one thought he wanted to attend and they enrolled him. He did not like it. For him, it was important to be around more people who looked like him. He is biracial but identifies as Black whereas it was not as important to the other kids. As you perhaps surmised the school is overwhelmingly white.

It is almost six months later, and I'm still working out the main question she asked, "What is a good school?" Today, I will attempt to give a response. This response is a work in progress because my thoughts about this have continued to change as I progressed through K-12, earned my bachelor's degree, began teaching, returned to school to earn my master's degree, and then became a parent with children in school. Each of these experiences has shaped, changed, developed, and further defined my ideas of a good school. I believe as my children continue to progress through the education system, my thoughts will continue to evolve.

As was pointed out in the reader comment I shared, educators have difficulty agreeing upon what makes a good school. I believe there should be some non-negotiables for all educators and parents.

My non-negotiables for all schools:

Teachers must believe all students can learn.

If you are in my children's school and you don't believe they can learn, then goodbye. Don't let your classroom door hit you on the way out (well...maybe it should). You should not be an educator. Go find another profession, please!

Students from all backgrounds who are racially, ethnically, linguistically, or economically different are learning.

If a school is majority white but the black kids are failing, this is not a good school. Schools can earn an A or B rating if their population of students of color is small and failing. That's not okay.

Teachers must know their content well.

Some students are not learning because their teachers haven't learned. No, a first-year teacher will not be as good as a ten-year teacher, but we need more teachers knowledgeable in their content and not learning on the job.

The school communicates with parents clearly and frequently about important issues and asks for input before making decisions.

The school serves the community. If major changes are happening or my children are behaving poorly, I expect a phone call, email, or some form of communication. I shouldn't have to beg for information.

The principal must support teachers and build teacher leaders.

A principal cannot run a school alone, but many of them feel like they have to do so. They micromanage, lead with fear, and refuse to delegate to others. This creates toxic environments and leads to a rotating cast of teachers in the school.

Schools must be safe.

Teachers nor students should feel fear when they walk through the school doors. Too many schools are rampant with bullying from both teachers and students. Violent behavior is occurring, and there isn't a plan to curve the behavior.

Schools need appropriate up to date resources.

Teachers should not have to purchase their entire curriculum from Teachers Pay Teachers because they don't have textbooks or the resources are decades old.

Teachers should not be a racist, a bully, a pedophile, or present any danger.

There are too many stories about teachers harming children through the actions I listed above, and yet, many of these teachers get canned from one school and find employment at other places. I not only want these teachers away from children, but I want their teaching license revoked.

If a school doesn't meet these requirements, I have a hard time seeing it as a good school even if the school has an A rating.

The additional requirements I want for my children:

The school should have a diverse student and staff population.

This is not to say that my children can only learn in proximity to white children. I have no problem with all black schools, but my husband and I didn't want our children to attend a mostly white school as we did. We were part of desegregation busing and experienced mostly white classrooms in elementary school. In middle and high school, it got a little better because some diverse families started moving into to district where we were bused. But when you live in a mostly black neighborhood and are bused to a mostly white school, it is hard. Our sons' principal is black and Asian. There are teachers from different backgrounds; there are not as many diverse teachers as we would want but there are some. Their classes are diverse. They have had Asian, Latino, black and white classmates. Not only are they exposed to diverse children like themselves, but they are also exposed to children of color who are not black.

The school should be close to our home.

When my husband and I were bused from Indianapolis Public Schools to the MSD of Lawrence Township, we were on the bus for at least 30 minutes riding past cornfields. Our boundary school is about a seven-minute drive from our house. The closeness of the school makes it easier to attend school events or to get to school during inclement weather.

Children should have off-campus experiences.

Learning should happen outside of the school walls. Students need to get out in the community and learn about their community. They need to travel to different places within the state, in other states, and maybe even out of the country. They need hands-on experiences they could not have in the classroom.

At the end of the day, this is my list. This list is still a work in progress. Every parent and educator should have a good school list. We cannot accept schools as good schools based solely on test scores and school building ratings; there is so much more to a good school. The school must fit the child and the goals the family has.

What is on your good school list?