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Qualities parents value in
choosing a school: the research

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Parents looking to choose the right school to give their child the best preparation for life must take a variety of school features into account. This paper reviews research findings to explore whether the features of a school that parents value most actually lead to better outcomes for their children.

Parents surveyed about the qualities they value most in choosing an Independent school consistently nominate several outstanding elements. These include:

- good teachers
- a supportive and caring environment
- good facilities
- educational excellence
- orderly and safe environment
- class size
- reinforcement of moral values.

Evidence from educational research shows that parents are right in seeing these as critical features of a good school. All are associated, to varying degrees, with better outcomes for students in the short and long term.

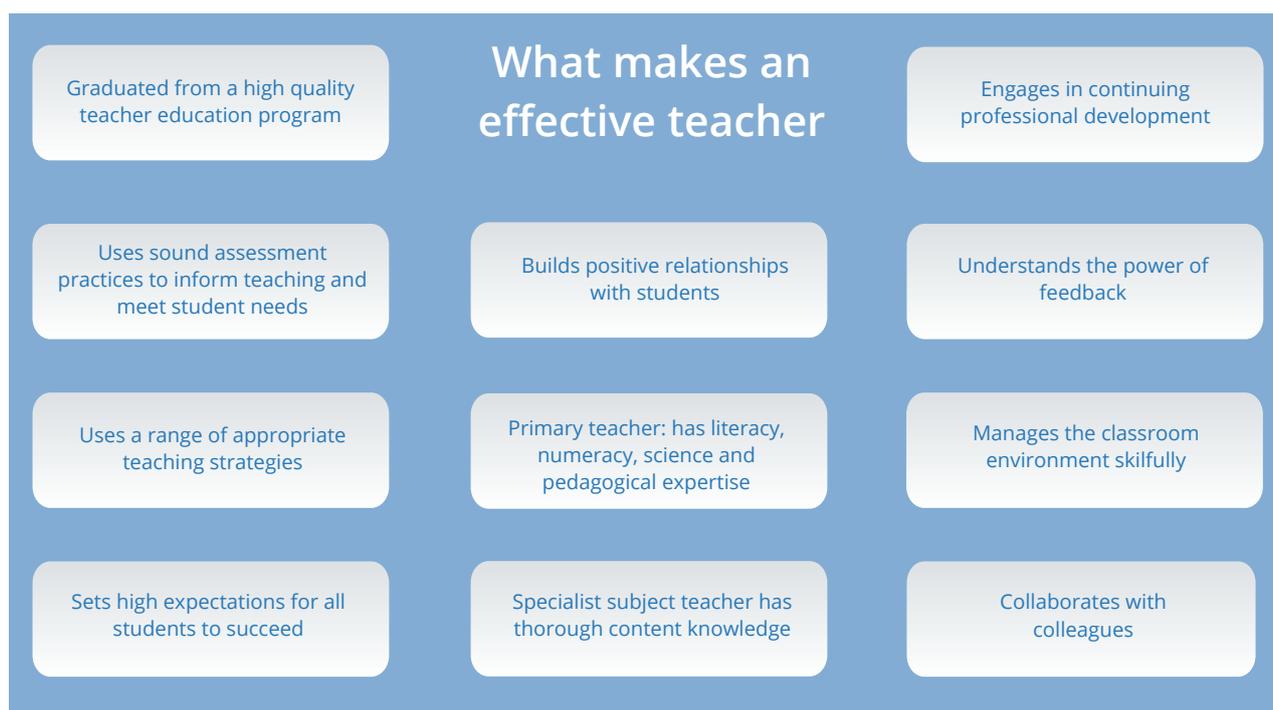
Good teachers

Parents seeking a quality schooling experience for their children are right to be heavily influenced in the first place by the quality of teaching they observe or know by reputation.

There is a large volume of research attesting to the paramount importance of good teachers and exploring what makes an effective teacher, as shown in the table below.

A good school will place high value on its teachers. It will be committed to recruiting high quality staff, developing teacher expertise, and to giving teachers professional autonomy to generate their own solutions to meet individual student needs within the framework of the curriculum and the school rules and ethos.

Teacher quality and professionalism are linked to higher academic achievement, but the influence of good teachers goes further than good academic results. The best teachers enhance children's experience of school as well as increase their learning. The evidence shows that when students have good relations with their teachers their performance and sense of belonging at school benefit. Part of the responsibility schools have to parents is to make a child's time at school a positive experience, regardless of their achievement level. Longitudinal studies confirm the significant difference a positive school experience can make — young people who enjoy being



at school, enjoy learning and feel safe and secure are more likely to do well in all dimensions of their post-school life.

A supportive and caring environment

Every parent, principal and teacher knows that schools are about more than academic outcomes — they are about personal growth, psychological and social development, the development of dispositions towards learning, and general wellbeing.

Parents want their children to have a well-rounded education with a strong emphasis on learning life skills. A substantial body of research literature attests to the importance of schools having a focus on these broad non-cognitive goals, which are at least as important in determining success and satisfaction in adult life as academic results. Confident, resilient young people with a capacity for emotional intelligence and hard work perform better academically and are well positioned to lead responsible and satisfying lives.

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Research shows that these character traits can be learned and fostered, and that schools as well as families play a powerful role in building them. Schools that put an emphasis on non-cognitive behaviours are providing a critical foundation for their students in later life.

Non-cognitive qualities critical for success in later life

- effort
- organisation
- discipline
- participation
- enthusiasm
- teamwork
- leadership

Schools have a variety of ways to foster these non-cognitive qualities, in the classroom and through the range of extra-curricular activities offered to students. In the classroom, the relationship between teachers

and students is particularly important. Teaching practices and the conversations and discussions teachers have with their students can nurture and promote students' drive, motivation and effort. Students learn more and have fewer disciplinary problems when they feel their teachers take them seriously and when they have positive and constructive relations with their teacher. Classrooms characterised by mutual respect, empathy, warmth and encouragement have better outcomes.

Numerous studies show that participation in extra-curricular activities also enhances the non-academic outcomes of schooling and that the positive effects endure well beyond school. Some studies conclude that it is the identification with school and commitment to school-related values — a sense of belonging to the school — that brings the most benefit. Others suggest it is the improvement in non-cognitive skills that produces gains in learning.

These skills include:

- task persistence
- independence
- following instructions
- working within groups
- dealing well with authority figures and fitting in with peers.

Some research points to the important ways in which participation in extra-curricular activities reinforces classroom values, including achievement, independence and peer relationships, thus reinforcing the focus of schools on student wellbeing.

Benefits of music and the arts

The type of extra-curricular activity does not seem to make much difference to these findings, although special claims have been made in research for more direct benefits arising from involvement in extra-curricular music. There is a belief, borne out by research, that participation in the arts and music programs contributes to student social and emotional wellbeing. It is associated with greater resilience, self-regulation, self-esteem, identity and motivation as well as improvements in behavioural indicators such as empathy, tolerance, cooperation, collaboration and communication. These outcomes are seen as additional to the impact on creativity and the intrinsic benefits of arts and music education.

Good facilities

Parents may be attracted to schools that are well funded and well equipped with good facilities. However, research on the quality of school facilities generally finds that the physical environment has only a small influence on performance, less than most other features of a school.

What is important is not so much the adequacy or design of buildings but the sense they convey of the school culture and morale, and the extended opportunities they provide for academic, physical and social development and growth. A high quality physical environment can foster a strong sense of belonging that in turn is associated with an enthusiasm for learning.

It tends to be the case that poor quality facilities affect learning rather than high quality facilities promoting it. Research has found that when facilities are inadequate the focus on academic achievement is lessened, the school environment appears less orderly and serious and teachers are less likely to show enthusiasm for their work. These factors contribute to a poor school climate which affects performance.

Educational excellence

Academic press — a school climate where academic activities and student performance are valued by both students and teachers — is a recognised hallmark of a good school and is associated with higher than expected performance. In schools with a high level of academic press, students who do well academically are respected by their peers and honoured by the school community. Teachers and principals set appropriate and challenging goals and students respond positively, working hard to achieve them.

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Parents certainly expect their children to learn the essential skills of literacy and numeracy but they also seek broader education outcomes such as curiosity,

a love of learning, confidence, and the ability to think for themselves and be challenged. They also value evidence of high education performance in a school as a sign that students will be motivated and encouraged to aim for academic excellence.

Research has suggested a variety of reasons for the strong link between academic press and high performance:

- the curriculum and teaching are delivered at a higher level
- school and teacher expectations are higher
- students' norms regarding the usefulness of academic work are more conducive to learning
- possibly less disruption to teaching and learning.

One aspect of academic press is the effect of a student's academic peer group and the incentive and support high achieving fellow students provide for high academic achievement. Studies have found that individual student achievement is higher than expected in a higher achieving peer group, and that students benefit from having higher achieving schoolmates over their school career.

The explanation given for this positive and cumulative influence of peer group is that peers, like family, are a source of motivation and aspiration, as well as providing direct interactions in learning. Peer group norms, values and attitudes can either undermine or facilitate academic achievement and affect classroom processes in the pace of teaching, the behaviour of students, and interactions with the teacher.

Orderly and safe environment

An orderly atmosphere is recognised as an important characteristic of an effective school, just as an orderly well-managed class is associated with better outcomes for students. Research validates the intuitive understanding of parents that learning requires an orderly and cooperative environment inside and outside the classroom. Classroom discipline is a core element of effective teaching, directly impacting on achievement. The presence of disruptive students often has negative effects on every student's achievement, disturbing the teaching of other students and holding back the learning of the whole class. This underlines the importance of teachers' skills in behaviour management. Data show that the better

the classroom disciplinary climate, the more time is spent on teaching and learning and the stronger the student performance. Conversely, at the school level, disruptive behaviour is associated with lower performance.

Australian schools on average have been found to have a weaker classroom disciplinary climate, with more time spent maintaining order than the international average. The data show, however, that this is not generally an issue for Independent schools, which tend to have positive results for disciplinary climate and classroom management.

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Research points to the pivotal role of a principal in setting the tone of a school, including creating an orderly and supportive school environment and a climate that encompasses challenging goals and professional collaboration. School climate is generally understood to encompass the social dynamics of a school including:

- the relations between principal, teachers and students
- the sense of community
- teacher and student morale
- norms among peers
- sense of safety.

School climate has an effect on student outcomes through its influence on motivational factors such as student commitment to school, incentive to learn and student satisfaction.

Class size

System-wide, the research evidence on class size is unequivocal — in no country or large school system is smaller average class size associated with improved performance.

However at the level of individual schools, research on the impact of class size on academic achievement

is not quite so conclusive. An influential long-term experimental study in Tennessee, USA, is widely cited as support for policies to reduce primary school class size. The study found that smaller classes produced substantial improvements in achievement, with students from minority groups benefiting more than others and the gains persisting over time. Other studies have found that the effect of class size is not substantial and varies with student characteristics such as prior achievement and family background.

While the research results are mixed, the weight of evidence suggests that smaller classes, especially in the early years of schooling, can have a small but important and lasting effect on achievement. This is mainly to the extent that they reduce discipline problems, raise teacher morale and provide for more student-teacher interaction. This is consistent with the commonly held view of parents and teachers that children are better off in smaller classes. Teachers believe that smaller classes are more manageable, providing more time for individualised learning and better relations with parents. Parents believe their children learn more, are more engaged and are less distracted in smaller classes.

The key to reaping academic benefits from smaller classes however is teacher expertise. The impact on student learning is dependent on teachers' skills, their ability to capitalise on the opportunities presented for more individualised learning, greater engagement and greater scope for innovation. The evidence shows that teachers do not always adapt their teaching to take advantage of smaller classes and, in these instances, there are no apparent gains.

Confirmation of these findings comes from international studies which show that smaller classes have an observable beneficial effect on student achievement only in countries with a relatively low-quality teaching force, whereas high-quality teachers are able to teach high-quality lessons independent of the size of the class.

Small schools hold the same kind of intuitive appeal to parents as small classes, creating an impression of more personal attention, more opportunities for students to be involved, greater cohesion, better discipline and a more caring environment. However these potential advantages need to be balanced against the broader curricular and extra-curricular offerings and more specialised teaching possible in larger schools.

The research does not find any positive link between school size and student outcomes — the character, location and structure of the school are more important than size.

Reinforcement of moral values

For many parents, it is the ethos of a school — a subjective sense of the culture and values and the way students and staff interact — that is the basis for judging school quality. Research shows that this is indeed a valid measure of a good school. A school's culture and values, and the extent to which these are shared by the student body, have a substantial influence on student achievement, largely through motivation and support.

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Research studies have found that schools with a high level of parental engagement have better outcomes. When parents are involved, students report more effort, concentration, attention and motivation. They are more inherently interested in learning, and experience higher perceived competence. Students whose parents are involved are more likely to take personal responsibility for their learning, seek challenging tasks, persist through academic challenges, and experience satisfaction in their schoolwork. The research evidence suggests that it is the demonstration of the importance parents attach to schooling and academic achievement that has a particularly strong influence on student achievement. Messages children receive about the importance of schooling increase their competence, motivation to learn, and engagement in school.

Although the nature of parental engagement changes from the early years of schooling through to high school, parental involvement still remains an important predictor of school outcomes for older students. One explanation given in the research for a continuing close association between parental involvement and achievement is labelled 'social control' — when families and schools work together to build a consensus about appropriate behaviour that can be effectively communicated to children at home and school. Agreement between schools and the parent community on both behavioural and academic goals serves to reinforce desired behaviour and reduce problems.

Research on parental links with schools finds that when children and their peers receive similar messages about appropriate behaviour across settings and from different sources, the messages become clear and salient, reducing confusion about expectations. On the other hand, if families do not agree with each other or with their school about appropriate behaviour, the authority and effectiveness of teachers, parents and other adults may be undermined.

Faith-based student success in schools

Faith-based schools are often singled out in the research for this dimension of their education. The academic and employment success of students from faith-based schools is in some studies attributed to the value systems of the schools, described in terms of paying greater attention to teacher-student relationships, fostering stronger parent-school interactions based on shared values, an underlying philosophy of caring and commitment, and a strong work ethic. Other research has shown that achievement gains are often higher in faith-based schools because of the expectations on teachers, that they will take a broad interest in their students, their character and their future.

This paper reviews research findings to explore whether the features of a school that parents value most in choosing an Independent school actually lead to better outcomes for their children.

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