What Makes a Good School? Identifying Excellent Middle Schools

Most of us have been in schools that we know are good. But what is it about such schools that makes them the successful places that they are? And how can other schools learn from their successes? The authors share the experience of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform in rolling out a vision for excellent schools across the country.

BY JOAN LIPSITZ AND TERI WEST

Excellent schools have a sense of purpose that drives every facet of practice and decision making. But what are the critical priorities that fuel that sense of purpose? The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform is a group of educators who believe that young adolescents are capable of learning and achieving at high levels and who are dedicated to improving schools for middle-grades students across the country. Believing that there is nothing as practical as a vision, the first step taken by the members of the forum was to develop a vision statement that would both answer the question posed above and express our shared convictions about school excellence. Through this process, we identified three interlocking priorities that are critical to the sense of purpose that permeates all aspects of successful schools. Briefly, high-performing schools with middle grades are:

• academically excellent — they challenge all of

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their students to use their minds well;

- developmentally responsive — they are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence and respectful of students' needs and interests; and

- socially equitable, democratic, and fair — they provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports and make positive options available to all students.

The forum also concluded that in order to pursue these priorities, high-performing schools must be learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements that will support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

There isn't anything in the forum's work that is exclusive to the middle grades; we believe our vision applies to all schools teaching all grade levels. However, the forum was created to advocate for dramatically improved schools for young adolescents, and, therefore, our emphasis is on the middle grades.

After developing and adopting our vision statement by unanimous consent, we all celebrated — but only briefly. We recognized that for our work to be practical, the forum would need to turn the vision statement into specific criteria for evaluating schools. We needed to develop an instrument that identified the qualities to examine and the questions to ask when assessing a middle-grades school. Could we come up with a set of criteria that would be as useful to a team of classroom teachers as it would be to a group of community members on a school governance committee, or to citizens advocating for school improvement, or to individual parents seeking a good school for their children? And would this set of criteria help the forum identify high-performing schools that others could visit and learn from?

The forum identified a set of criteria on which to evaluate each of the three priorities for high-performing middle-grades schools. The priorities and their criteria are complementary and interdependent. So, for example, an academically excellent school is one in which all students are learning to use their minds well in challenging classrooms where the curriculum, instruction, and assessments are responsive to children's developmental needs. The truly high-performing school sits at the intersection of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity.

It is extremely difficult to find schools that excel in all three areas, as the forum discovered in 1999 when it launched its Schools to Watch (STW) program to identify, recognize, and learn from exemplary schools. Since the vision was developed, STW has become a national movement in middle-level education. Fourteen states have recognized 87 STWs, and new states and schools are being added each year. Far more important, the forum's Schools to Watch have become models from which many other schools can learn to "get it right."

In the pages that follow, we describe a selection of the criteria for each of our three priorities for excellent schools. We offer this selection to give readers examples of our approach to assessing schools and to share specific bits and pieces from our observations of four schools. We also describe a sampling of criteria for evaluating a school's organizational structures and processes.1 Our purpose in presenting the forum's construct of high performance is both to shape the way that readers think about school excellence and to give them explicit guidelines for action when they answer the question "Is this a good school?"

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Criteria: At high-performing schools, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned with high standards, and all students are expected to meet or exceed those standards. These schools provide a coherent vision of what students should know and be able to do. They use instructional strategies that include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.

When talking to teachers in an academically excellent school, it quickly becomes clear that they hold high expectations for all of their students and insist that all of their students can master the curriculum. Teachers at such schools say things like, "We don't let up on the students," "We want everyone to achieve," and "We are a no-excuses school." Likewise, the principal expects a great deal from all the teachers at the school, holding them responsible for improving the quality of student work over time.

The curriculum at high-performing schools follows a coherent plan that builds systematically on instruction from earlier grades — what students learn is neither haphazard nor random. When we ask teachers at such schools how they decide what to teach, they report spending a great deal of their planning time working individually or with their colleagues to incorporate the best of professional and state standards in their content-area lessons. Vibrant displays of student work in the halls reflect students' care in meeting those standards. In one school held accountable by high-stakes testing, teachers insist that, because the state test is based on state and national standards,
preparing students for the state test is not “teaching to the test” but rather “teaching to the standards.” When we ask these teachers what accounts for the rising test scores in such unusual schools, they talk about highly focused and energetic teaching.

When we ask students what they are learning, they not only express their enthusiasm but also can describe the content and purpose of the lesson. For instance, students in a language arts class said they were learning how to analyze a short story and predict its outcome. They were able to recognize that the lesson called for inference and “higher-order thinking skills.” In other words, the students were aware of how they were thinking, and, though they did not know it, they were learning about metacognition.

We ask students how they know if they are doing a good job. In some cases, the students are aware of and understand the performance standards because their teachers have told them what they are expected to master before starting a major activity. In some classes, students help develop the rubrics for judging the quality of their work. In one interdisciplinary classroom that integrates art, math, and science, we observed students preparing a group presentation on empathy. When asked how they would be assessed, the students reported that they and their teacher had designed a grading rubric. These rubrics are often posted on the classroom walls, or the students are given a copy to keep in their notebooks. In all cases, the rubrics are explicit and make sense to become proficient. The students were given a choice of topics drawn from the state’s learning goals for seventh-graders, including bar graphs, fractions, perimeter, the Pythagorean theorem, and volume. The students’ task was to study their chosen topic and then teach it to their classmates using a PowerPoint presentation of their own design. The goal was for all students to master a set of mathematical concepts while, at the same time, learning a useful application of technology. The students in this class were deeply engaged in becoming proficient in their chosen areas.

When evaluating schools on these criteria, ask yourself:

- Do I see zest for learning among both the teachers and the students?
- Are students expected to meet high academic standards? How are these standards communicated?
- Can students explain what they are doing in their classes and why it is important?
- How is the school’s curriculum selected? Who is involved in the process, and what guidelines do they use? Do teachers know why they are teaching what they are teaching?
- Does the school’s assessment program support its vision for curriculum and instruction?

Criteria: The school provides opportunities for teachers and other instructional staff to plan for, select, and engage in professional development that is aligned with nationally recognized standards. They have regular opportunities to work with their colleagues to deepen their knowledge and improve their practice. They collaborate in mak-
In one school, one of the teams constructed the year’s curriculum around interdisciplinary units. The team members decided what topics they would explore and then designed and developed the unit together using district standards. While we were visiting this school, the team was in the process of developing a unit on inventions. One of the teachers shared materials and resources from an inventions convention she had just attended. The teachers on the team were excited about planning this unit, and they shared ideas freely and gave one another feedback without fear of judgment. They were honest with one another when an idea didn’t seem right or if they felt it might create a problem.

In the social studies and language arts segments of the unit, the students were asked to explore the legal issues around inventions, to learn the difference between a copyright and a patent, and to investigate the history of inventions in the United States. In the math and science segments, students were challenged to design and build their own inventions in small groups of two or three. The teachers had brainstormed about the kinds of reading and writing students would do in this unit. They wanted their students to design inventions for real-world problems or needs. The unit was to culminate with the students presenting their work to the school and community at their own invention convention.

When the forum visits schools, we ask teachers what help they have received in aligning their curriculum with state and national standards. In one school, the mathematics curriculum is driven by the state’s learning goals, which, according to one of the mathematics teachers, encourage a balance of skill building and application. All the mathematics teachers at this school worked together closely to align the curriculum with the state standards. After aligning the curriculum, the teachers then piloted three textbooks but were not satisfied with any. After discussing what worked well and what didn’t, they finally decided to use a combination of teacher-developed curriculum units, a pre-algebra textbook, and Connected Math, which offers a range of hands-on activities.

The teachers at this school had administrative support during this intensive planning period from the school’s learning coordinator, who facilitated their conversations. They now meet each grading quarter with the coordinator and the principal to review where they are and to make further decisions. In addition, the teachers meet regularly to refine their curriculum. When evaluating a school on these criteria, ask yourself:

- Does the principal support professional development opportunities for teachers and staff members?
- How does the school’s professional development plan help increase teachers’ knowledge and skills?
- Does the professional development challenge teachers’ current beliefs and assumptions?
- Does it provide classroom support and coaching?
- How is professional development related to the school’s improvement plan?

DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS

Criterion: The school provides access to comprehensive services that foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

In high-performing schools, the adults work together to provide a web of emotional and social support for the students, not just in the services the school provides but in the attitudes and relationships the adults establish with students. When visiting schools, we ask students where they go if they are having a problem. In almost all of the schools, students mention the names of one or two teachers with whom they have a good relationship. We can see signs of these relationships when we walk through the halls and sit in classrooms. Students have smiles on their faces and laugh with their teachers and their friends. During the change of classes at one school, a teacher who is clearly one of the favorites is surrounded by a half-dozen students, all wanting to share something about themselves or their families.

The affection and genuine caring between the students and faculty at this school is expressed in the way one principal puts her arm around a student to reprimand him about shouting a profanity in the hall. It is also expressed in the way students affectionately refer to members of the staff as “Mom” and to the school as a “second home.” In one School to Watch, the principal collected money from teachers and parents in order to buy presents for the students who were living in the local youth home during the winter holidays. She spent one night and more than $1,000 on gifts for these children. The teachers and administrators in these schools care about the details of their students’ lives.

Understanding that the faculty and staff do not have the capacity to attend to all of their students’ needs, one school seeks out partnerships with a local agency that can provide social services and programs to students with demonstrated need. The agency provides guidance; a creative arts program; individual, family, group, and crisis counseling; support for the school’s parent involvement program;
and classroom and faculty support services. The agency works only with schools that are committed to the partnership and able to make a financial contribution, albeit a small one. At this particular school, the partnership with the agency is written into the School Improvement Plan, and faculty members are identified to work with agency staff. Together, the teachers and agency staff members review the criteria for the partnership and then develop the kinds of programs and services that are most needed in the school.

Another school responded to its teen pregnancy rate by investing in a program designed to give young adolescents a sense of what being the primary caretaker for an infant is like. While the program is designed to help students make intelligent physical and emotional choices, the ultimate goal is to prevent teen pregnancy.

The school invested in 23 baby simulators, and every student is required take a simulator home for at least one weekend during his or her two years at the school. These life-like dolls are computer programmed to look, weigh, and behave like three-month-old infants. They need to be fed, picked up, held, and cuddled. They cry when they are hungry or need affection, when their diapers need changing, or when their head is not supported correctly. Sometimes they cry insconsolably for no apparent reason. The only way to stop the baby from crying is to turn a key a certain way to respond to the baby’s particular need. The keys are locked onto students’ wrists so they cannot give their 24-hour-a-day responsibility to anyone else. Sometimes, particularly during the night, parents want to help, but that would break the rules. The parents report how the weight of parenthood starts descending upon their children as the weekend progresses. The youth service agency worker says that most students are eager to take the baby home.

At each of the schools we visited, there was some form of peer mediation in which students learn to address and solve problems before they escalate.

Another issue that the forum looks at when evaluating schools on this criterion is how they address conflicts between students. In most schools, when a conflict between two students escalates, a fight breaks out, and students are suspended. And time out of the classroom is not time well spent. At each of the schools we visited, there was some form of peer mediation in which students learn to address and solve problems before they escalate. In this way, the schools help foster students’ social and emotional development. At one school, 20 students are selected by their peers and trained to be peer mediators. They are required to take a six-hour training program that focuses on rules and standards for mediation, leadership, and being accountable for what occurs in sessions. This school, which averages one peer mediation session per day, has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of discipline referrals to the principal’s office. At another school, the eighth-grade student conflict managers developed a presentation about the school’s peer mediation program for the seventh-graders in order to identify and begin to train the peer mediators for the following year.

When evaluating a school on this criterion, ask yourself:
• Where can students go when they are having a problem?
• Does every student in the school feel there is an adult he or she trusts and can turn to?
• How do the adults in the building relate to the students? Is there evidence of strong and respectful relationships between adults and students? Is there a feeling of warmth and genuine caring between teachers and their students? Are students smiling and laughing?
• What does respecting students’ needs and interests mean to the faculty, staff, and administration? How does this fit into the school’s overall mission? Do the school’s programs and practices reflect this understanding?
• What programs, services, and support systems are in place to address students’ needs?
• Does the school have a network of health care providers, counselors, education and job training specialists, and other providers that is available to serve students and families? Does the school publicize this network well? Do students and families feel comfortable using these services?

**Criterion:** The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of students. It
regards families as partners in their children’s education, keeping them informed, involving them in their children’s learning, and including them in decision making.

When we visit schools, we hear over and over again that when children get to middle school, parents tend to “drop out” of school involvement. This happens just when young adolescents are beginning to seek greater autonomy from their parents and to crave acceptance from their peers. But parent involvement in the middle grades is crucial to student success. Therefore, schools must do more than invite parents into the school; they must reach out into their communities and make parents feel needed and welcomed. They also must help parents see the value to their children of being active in the middle school. High-performing schools create structures and systems to facilitate parent involvement. We ask principals what the school does to make parents feel that they are an integral part of the school.

In one school with a student population of around 570, about 70 parents are actively involved under the leadership of a volunteer coordinator. Parents at this school donated over 5,000 academic hours in one year as part of the parent volunteer program. This level of parental activity does not happen by chance. A parent volunteer coordinator is trained by the district’s central office for the position; in turn, the coordinator trains the school volunteers. Parents fill out applications to volunteer, indicating their available hours. The parent volunteer coordinator calls the parents, who must be fingerprinted, have criminal background checks, and get a TB skin test prior to volunteering. The parent volunteers take part in an orientation session, in which they receive training in areas as diverse as student confidentiality and running the copying machines. Most important, the parents become an integral part of the school’s aspirations for student development and achievement. A father at this school summed up parent involvement this way: “At this school the child is in the center of a circle, and everyone is around that child to reach out and help him or her mature and learn.”

We ask parents what they think is the key to increasing parent involvement, and they often mention the responsiveness of staff members and the welcoming environment of the school. Many parents we speak with say that it means a lot to them when the principal greets them by name when they walk in the school door. These details are important to parents and communicate to them that they are valued members of the school. One parent said, “Parents are accepted as full partners in the school. We are welcomed with open arms.”

Parents also appreciate that the school shares information with them. At one school, parents can call into an information-on-demand system. Using a PIN number, they have immediate access to their child’s academic, attendance, and discipline records. A homework hotline gives parents access to their child’s homework assignments on any given night. At another school, parents can access their child’s homework assignments through the school’s website. Some teachers communicate with parents via e-mail during the course of the day. If a problem comes up or if there is something positive the teachers want to share with parents, they can do so immediately and at their convenience. In these various ways, schools help parents gain access to information and be more involved in their children’s education.

When evaluating a school on this criterion, ask yourself:
- Are there many parents in the school? Do they have lunch with the students and talk to the teachers and counselors?
- Is there a family center in the school, and do parents run it?
- What communication systems does the school have to make sure that every family is contacted at least once a month?
- Does the principal know many family members by name?
- What does the school do to ensure that parents and family members play meaningful roles, for instance, on the school council and school committees?

SOCIAL EQUITY

Criteria: Faculty and administrators expect high-quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, offering special adaptations, and other supports. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all classes and school activities.

When the forum visits schools, we are especially interested in how accessible academic and extracurricular programs are to students with disabilities. Inclusion for students with special needs means more than simply including them in the same classes as regular students. It often means adapting curriculum, instruction, and assessment to their special needs. For a socially equitable school, ensuring that all students have access to academic and extracurricular programs, having high expectations for all students, and providing the support to help them meet those expectations are paramount.

When evaluating a school, we ask the teachers and principal about the kinds of support they provide for
students with disabilities and special needs. At one school, students with diagnosed learning and behavioral disabilities are included in classes that are co-taught by regular teachers and special education teachers. In this school, students with learning disabilities and their teachers are not relegated to an out-of-the-way room; they are an integral part of the school community. The special education teachers are equal partners in the design and delivery of classroom instruction. They collaborate with subject-matter teachers in designing instructional units and share the responsibility of teaching classes. The special education teachers are consulted by many teachers in the school and are valued for their knowledge about teaching students with learning disabilities.

In another school, students with severe cognitive or behavioral disabilities cannot be included in regular academic classes. Nonetheless, these students participate in school life to the greatest extent possible and are held accountable for their work. Their teacher believes it is important for these students to be expected to accomplish a great deal in their self-contained class. So, for example, when this teacher reads his students a story, they know they are going to be assessed on it the next day.

Another thing that we look at when evaluating schools is how they support those students who are at risk academically. In an otherwise heterogeneously grouped school we visited, the principal had instituted a program called “Academic Connections” to help students achieve the required standards and beyond. In this program, students are divided into three groups according to their achievement test scores and are provided with instruction specifically geared to their skill levels. Another school offers two after-school programs that provide additional instructional time to students who are not meeting academic standards. The student/teacher ratio in the after-school classes is low — about 12 students per teacher — in order to allow for more individualized instruction. The participating teachers meet with one another to determine which students will receive additional tutorial time based on the students’ needs. At yet another school, the resource room is open to all students for additional tutorials in reading and math. While some students are assigned to the reading and math resource tutorials, all students have the option to drop in voluntarily.

Principals and teachers at socially equitable schools foster an atmosphere of inclusion by ensuring that all students have access to the richest and most challenging programs — programs that are usually available to only some students. Many schools across the country have mandated special programs for their highest-achieving students. One principal who believes that all her students should have access to the enriched learning opportunities offered in these programs is in the process of ensuring that all her teachers become certified in instruction for the gifted and talented. She is working to designate a school an STW — actually rising to the level of “deal breaker” in deciding whether to designate a school an STW. This is because we believe that when a school has a high suspension rate or suspends students from particular groups at a grossly higher rate than others and has no plan for addressing these problems, it is a sign that the school does not have the same expectations for all students.

Suspended students miss valuable classroom time, and the time they spend in in-school suspension is generally a waste. Therefore, a crucial factor in our evaluations of schools is what students are required to do during suspensions. Are they expect-
ed to complete the work they are missing in their classes? Do their teachers visit them to keep them up-to-date on assignments? If the students need counseling in order to get back on track, do they receive it from a school counselor or social worker? Is the school aware of the obstacles and barriers the students may be facing outside of school, and do school personnel intervene to help these students get assistance or counseling? While in order to ensure students’ safety all schools must have a discipline code that establishes clear consequences for students who break rules, the way a school understands and tries to change patterns of suspension ultimately reflects its beliefs about social equity.

One school we visited disaggregated its suspension data manually by race, socioeconomic status, and gender because its district did not have the technological capacity to provide this service. As a result of their data analysis, which identified unacceptably high suspension rates, the staff members of this school zeroed in on reducing the amount of instructional time missed. Staff members tracked the amount of time that passed from the moment a student was referred to the administration for disciplinary action until a decision about consequences was made. As a result of this exercise, students no longer waste instructional time sitting in the office waiting for administrative disposition. In one school, for instance, the principal believes her students are being shortchanged technologically. Her action plan includes:

- **Studying.** She and her teachers will look at outstanding programs across the state.
- **Training.** She will draw on the expertise of the district’s curriculum director, who is a proponent of instructional technology. The director has a train-the-trainers process that the principal would like to adopt in her school so that the teachers can teach one another.
- **Monitoring.** She will require her teachers to report how their specific plans to use technology will improve

There is just no getting around it, to become excellent a school must have a risk-taking, visionary, practical leader.

**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES**

In order for schools to be academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable, there must be appropriate structures and processes in place. When evaluating schools, the forum looks at whether these structural factors are in place to allow the school to excel.

**Criterion: Someone in the school has the responsibility and authority to oversee the school improvement enterprise and move it forward. This person**
instruction and increase student performance.

We ask principals about their sources of inspiration. Excellent school leaders can answer this question articulately. For instance, one principal, who is an ardent proponent of school-based decision making, was influenced by John Goodlad’s school renewal plan. This principal organized her school staff into Goodlad’s five cadres: planning, curriculum and instruction, communication, school climate, and staff development. (She later added a technology cadre.) Each cadre chooses by consensus co-leaders who constitute the “campus advisory team,” which is the school’s shared-decision-making committee. This is not process for the sake of process; the purpose is to create a structure and climate for school improvement. All staff members must serve on the cadres so that, as the principal says, everyone is “part of the solution. No one can sit back and whine.”

When we ask principals what their goals were when they first came to their schools, they have no trouble rattling them off. One principal’s three major goals were to strengthen the school’s academics, improve the learning environment, and increase parent participation. Over the course of her first year at the school, this principal met with her staff to turn these goals into manageable objectives for their school improvement plan. She wanted staff members both to see the big picture and to be able to focus on what was doable. In her second year, she and the staff developed specific goals in all three areas, which have driven the school ever since.

We ask principals to tell us very specific anecdotes that illustrate their leadership styles. Here is one such story, in which the principal’s leadership combines strategic thinking, inclusiveness, and humor. At the outset of her administration, this principal took the building itself under her wing as part of an effort to get an unruly school back under control. While the building needed repairs — even the water fountains were broken — the custodial staff argued that the students would destroy anything they fixed. The principal disagreed and, in order to quickly accomplish a visual change — what she calls “the image of discipline” — she had the school facilities fixed and cleaned.

From the beginning of her principalship, she wove the contributions of community partners into the school’s goals. To encourage teachers to help keep the building clean by getting their hands dirty picking things up from the floors, the principal got Target, a new school partner, to contribute 100 bottles of hand cleaner, which she dispensed to a surprised staff during a faculty meeting.

We also ask principals to list the top three to five things they would do if moving to another school. This is one of the principals’ favorite questions, because it challenges them to evaluate their work to date and fantasize about starting over. One principal came up with the following:

1. Communicate a vision for student success very early on, continually articulate the vision throughout the year, and have a plan for realizing it. Staff members need to see very early on how high the bar is raised, what the expectations are, and what needs to be done to get there.

2. Look at how the school collects data, in which areas, and how the data are used for planning. What guides schoolwide initiatives? It is extremely important to collect data, formally and informally, to support the school’s goals. There is no other way to be able to assess accurately the school’s strengths and weaknesses.

3. Look at how each schoolwide initiative is tied into the school improvement plan. It is easy to get off track quickly. Before you know it, there is so much going on in the school that things can quickly become disconnected.

4. Continually encourage the staff in the great things they are already doing and give them the latitude and flexibility to try something new and different.

5. Open the school and its classrooms to external critical friends. We constantly talk about the need for accountability as well as the need for continuous school improvement. What a great way to achieve both by having professionals in the field with specific expertise come into the school to observe our teaching practices in the classroom and review our supports for students and provide feedback.

When evaluating a school on this criterion, ask yourself:

- Does the school look like what it wants to be?
- Does it have a single, thorough, credible plan for reaching its vision?
- Does everyone know what the plan is? Do they respect it? Do they endorse it enthusiastically? Can they articulate it?
• Is the plan a healthy stretch for faculty and students?

Criteria: The school holds itself accountable for its students’ success rather than blaming others for its shortcomings. The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions, including school-generated evaluation data that it uses to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement. The school delineates benchmarks and insists upon evidence and results. The school intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question.

We ask high-performing schools how they know if they are meeting their behavioral and academic goals. Their answers invariably have to do with “sleuthing their data.” The data the administration and staff collect and analyze serve as the basis for decisions about areas needing more focused attention and changes in practice. Data provide evidence of need, improvement, and success or failure.

One school collects student work, sometimes monthly and sometimes biweekly, as evidence of whether its school improvement plan is leading to higher student achievement. The school has developed what it calls a “crate system.” All teachers submit a crate of examples of high-, medium-, and low-level student work along with lesson plans that they propose to help improve their students’ knowledge and skills. A curriculum committee meets monthly to evaluate the content of the crates. The information from this evaluation is compiled into what the school calls a “Vital Signs Report.”

In addition, at least once every nine weeks, “content leaders” facilitate a content-area meeting—a time for all teachers of the same subject matter to evaluate student work and student progress. Information from this “impact check,” along with the “vital signs report,” is forwarded to the school’s decision-making council, where schoolwide decisions affecting continuous improvement are made. Teachers’ data collection improves their day-to-day instructional practice; it also ties the school’s governance structure to the school’s achievement goals.

We ask schools what they do when their data analysis tells them they are not meeting their goals. We have observed a school that uses staff development days to go over students’ state test data by subject area. Test data have become one of several lenses for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of every student and teacher and for setting improvement strategies. Together, the principal and the teachers study state data, objective by objective, and then take action. For instance, when only 53% of the school’s students were skilled in summarization, teachers focused on that objective. In this school, analysis of test data makes the test serve the school’s instructional goals.

Data analysis is not a dry affair in these schools. One principal has studied patterns of teacher absences to learn which times of the year absences are greatest and to devise morale-building strategies for those times. Running the numbers helps her meet the needs of the adults in her school so that her teachers are energized to work with their students.

When evaluating a school on these criteria, ask yourself:

• What tools and processes does the school use to set high standards for progress?
• Does the school continually collect and use data to seek evidence that it is meeting its goals?
• Does the school avoid blaming others for its shortfalls?
• Are there examples of ways that the school changed its approach in response to an examination of its data?

CONCLUSION

Using a construct for assessing schools concentrates the mind on their mission, accomplishments, and failures. But using evaluation criteria as part of a rigid checklist can lead to looking at the parts disconnected from the whole — or the soul — of the school. The ethos of the school — its personality, its environment, its spirit — is every bit as important as its particular practices and structures. High-performing schools are places where adults and children live, grow, and learn well. These schools are driven by a sense of purpose about children’s intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. These schools are also vibrant adult learning communities. The intellectual ante is high, and a can-do spirit pervades the school, from the janitors and cafeteria workers to the parents, students, teachers, and administrators. The work ethic is palpable. Relationships between adults and students are relaxed, demanding, and caring. The corridors and cafeteria are noisy but peaceable, the adults are energetic and enthusiastic, and the students are attentive and expressive. These schools are a part of, not apart from, their communities. One leaves these schools with a renewed sense of hopefulness about the power of the teaching/learning contract between adults and students.

It is a joy to visit these schools. You may not be able to quantify “joy,” but look for it within both the school and yourself. It is the most important criterion of all.

1. The full set of criteria for each priority and as part of a rigid checklist can lead to looking at the parts disconnected from the whole — or the soul — of the school. The ethos of the school — its personality, its environment, its spirit — is every bit as important as its particular practices and structures. High-performing schools are places where adults and children live, grow, and learn well. These schools are driven by a sense of purpose about children’s intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. These schools are also vibrant adult learning communities. The intellectual ante is high, and a can-do spirit pervades the school, from the janitors and cafeteria workers to the parents, students, teachers, and administrators. The work ethic is palpable. Relationships between adults and students are relaxed, demanding, and caring. The corridors and cafeteria are noisy but peaceable, the adults are energetic and enthusiastic, and the students are attentive and expressive. These schools are a part of, not apart from, their communities. One leaves these schools with a renewed sense of hopefulness about the power of the teaching/learning contract between adults and students.

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