

THE GOOD

What Makes a Good School? We posed the question central to this issue of *Education Canada* to two observers and analysts of education. Their responses reveal distinctly different approaches to the question, but a shared commitment to educational experiences that meet the different needs of individual children.

A Quality Check-list PETER COWLEY

Parents want their children to attend really good schools. Since I began work on school performance measurement some ten years ago, thousands of parents have asked me, “Which school is the best for my child?” In such instances, I have replied with regret that I do not know the answer because I do not know the child.

The reality, quite clearly, is that one size does not fit all. No one schooling model will be suited to the needs of every child. Nor do all families want the same learning experiences for their children. There is, however, some advice that I do offer parents that seems appropriate. First, I remind them that a poor decision can be undone quite easily. If the child does not prosper at the chosen school, parents are, in most cases, at liberty to enroll her at a different school the following year. Especially in Canada’s more urban areas, parents may choose from an increasing variety of schools and programs. Second, I offer parents a four-point checklist of the key characteristics that any good school – whether an inner city school serving disadvantaged children or a well-endowed university-prep school – will possess. These characteristics are, or should be, independently verifiable by the parent with modest effort.

To illustrate each of these characteristics of a good school, I offer the example of Frederick Douglass Academy,¹ a public middle school/high school in New York’s Harlem neighborhood. The school serves a largely black community whose children face a considerable variety of eco-

nomie and social challenges. Its much acclaimed principal, Dr. Gregory Hodge, was the guest speaker at the 2003 Garfield Weston Outstanding Principals Awards ceremonies held last fall in Calgary and Vancouver.²

A good school has a very public mission.

A good school has an actionable and easily understandable mission and the entire school community is committed to its fulfillment. Indeed, it cannot be otherwise because without a common purpose, student success is left to chance. When the school’s students, teachers, parents, administrators, and support staff can all define their responsibilities in terms of the school’s mission, success is the likely result.

Further, a good school will make its mission known at the outset so that families can gauge the alignment between the school’s purpose and their child’s needs. If a family is looking for a rigorous academic program taught within a Christian context, it won’t likely be satisfied with a secular school that focuses on the artistic development of the child.

There can be little confusion about the mission of Frederick Douglass Academy.

- The Frederick Douglass Academy intends to prepare all students for the academic and social challenges that lie ahead in college. Our students will be provided with an academically rigorous and comprehensive college preparatory curriculum that will enable them to successfully attend colleges and universities of their choice.



SCHOOL



A good school will also display its mission statement in understandable and explicit terms everywhere – on its web site, in informational materials provided to those involved with the school, in student manuals, on the notice board in the staff room, and on the walls of the school's hallways. The mission will inform everyday life at the school.

A good school knows how to succeed and tells everyone what it knows.

Of course, it is one thing to have an attractive mission; it is quite another to support it with the curriculum and methods that make its achievement possible. A good school has designed and implemented a learning program that makes success the norm. Again, in order to ensure alignment between school and family, a good school will make it easy for families to determine in advance how the school will fulfill its mission.

Here, in part, is a description of Frederick Douglass Academy's recipe for success.

- College preparation begins in the 6th grade. Students in the middle school study Japanese or Latin, music, art and dance in addition to academic classes. Students take New York State Regents classes starting in 8th grade.
- Each student and family must make a commitment to becoming part of the dream of attending college.
- Students are expected to strive for excellence in every part of their lives.
- Students are required to wear a plain white shirt/blouse, blue navy pants/skirts and black shoes. Emphasis is placed on one's intellect and not on one's appearance.
- Every student is expected to learn The Frederick Douglass Student Creed, (based on the Morehouse Student Creed) and the 12 Non-Negotiables, (Academy Rules).
- Four hours of homework is expected from our students.
- Entering students are required to

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attend our summer enrichment program, (three weeks for grades 6 and 7 and six weeks for grade 9).⁴

This program statement leaves little doubt that the school is intent upon fulfilling its mission and has a detailed plan to do so.

A good school maintains a rich communication with its families.

A good school will have a relationship with its families that is characterized by content rich, two-way communication.

It will begin by requiring that parents actively signal their understanding of the family's responsibilities. At FDA, parents must sign on to the Non-Negotiables from the very start.

- I have received a copy of the 12 Non-Negotiables and understand that I am responsible for these rules and regulations and must abide by all school and New York City Board of Education policies...I also realize that I must attend parent meetings and take an active part in my child's education, which includes: providing a quiet study place, reducing the number of hours my child watches television, create and follow a study schedule, check my child's homework, and provide my child with the necessary educational supplies

- I have chosen to send my child to The Frederick Douglass Academy because it is a college preparatory school. I will support this effort by permitting my child to attend the school year and summer enrichment programs. I will file the necessary forms in a timely fashion, paying application fees or applying for waivers, and check over my child's applications.⁵

A good school will continue the dialogue by keeping parents current on their children's progress and by regularly pointing out areas of concern to which parents must attend. It will make it easy and inviting for parents to maintain close contact with the school through whatever means – interactive

web sites, voice-mail, formal and informal meetings – are effective.

A good school will also actively engage its families as members of the school community. It is likely that the extent to which students see value in their schooling is, in part, determined by the value placed on schooling by the parents. A school like FDA enables parents to demonstrate visibly their commitment to education.

This is how Frederick Douglass Academy describes its parents' participation:

- We have a very active parent association. Our parents participate in PTA, Executive Board, School Leadership and grade meetings, staff and student selection, college and career fairs, academic and sports awards, fund-raising, cultural celebrations, chaperone trips, staff recognition, etc. We have a Parent Center and a Parent Coordinator.⁶

Finally, the school will be willing to communicate bad news as well as good. If a problem arises at the school, involving parents can not only bind them more closely to the school, but can also generate a wider variety of possible solutions.

A good school measures its performance and succeeds in its mission.

Even with a clear mission, an established plan for its attainment and a rich, effective, two-way flow of communication between school and family, a good school must prove that it has fulfilled its mission annually. It will do this with measurements of student outcomes that are consistent with the school's mission. Parents will be aware from the outset of the measurements that the school will use to define success. The school will use these measurements to generate improvement plans that will enable it to continue meeting its mission.

In many cases, third parties – departments of education and inde-

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pendent organizations like The Fraser Institute – produce relevant external measurements of school performance. Given its mission, Frederick Douglass Academy welcomes the annual assessments of its performance published by New York City Schools in conjunction with the New York State Education Department.⁷

So, after all, what is a good school? It is a school that has a clear mission, the methods and resources to fulfill the mission, and a defined performance measurement regime by which it agrees to be judged. It is a school that brings parents into the school community by opening and maintaining broad two-way channels of communication. It is a school that fulfills its mission year after year.

But, identifying good schools as I've characterized them is only the first step for the parent in search of the best school for his child. From among the good schools he finds, he must still select the one that appears to meet his child's needs most closely. I wish him the power of insight and a good bit of luck. ★

EN BREF Le choix de l'école est une décision personnelle et il est rare que la même solution convienne à tous. Les bonnes écoles – qu'il s'agisse d'une école de quartier défavorisé ou d'un établissement privé bien financé – partagent certaines caractéristiques. Elles ont une mission claire et un seuil de performance bien défini sur la base duquel elles acceptent d'être jugées. Elles font participer les parents à la communauté scolaire et maintiennent avec eux des communications étendues et bidirectionnelles. Enfin, elles atteignent leurs objectifs année après année.

PETER COWLEY is the Director of School Performance Studies at The Fraser Institute. He was involved in developing The Fraser Institute's Report Cards on secondary schools in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec as well as Report Cards on elementary schools in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario.

Notes

- 1 A considerable amount of information on Frederick Douglass Academy I can be found on its web site at: www.fda1.org.
- 2 Press releases announcing the proceedings of the awards ceremonies can be found at: <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/shared/readmore.asp?sNav=nr&id=553> and <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/shared/readmore.asp?sNav=nr&id=554>.
- 3 *2002-2003 Annual School Report, Frederick Douglass Academy, I.S. 10, District 5.* (New York City Public Schools, 2003). Digital document: <http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/SchoolReports/03asr/105010.pdf> (as of April 13, 2004).
- 4 *About Our School.* (Frederick Douglass Academy). Digital document <http://www.fda1.org> (as of April 13, 2004).
- 5 *Non-Negotiable Rules and Regulations Preface.* (Frederick Douglass Academy). Digital document <http://www.fda1.org> (as of April 13, 2004).
- 6 *2002-2003 Annual School Report, Frederick Douglass Academy, I.S. 10, District 5.* (New York City Public Schools, 2003). Digital document: <http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/SchoolReports/03asr/105010.pdf> (as of April 13, 2004).
- 7 *2002-2003 Annual School Report, Frederick Douglass Academy, I.S. 10, District 5.* (New York City Public Schools, 2003). Digital document: <http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/SchoolReports/03asr/105010.pdf> (as of April 13, 2004) and, *2002-2003 Annual School Report, Frederick Douglass Academy, H.S. 499, Manhattan Superintendency.* (New York City Public Schools, 2003). Digital document: <http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/SchoolReports/03asr/171499.pdf> (as of April 13, 2004)

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