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## Four Ways to Spot a Great Teacher

**Parents should seek out educators who have outside intellectual lives, follow the data and ask terrific questions.**

By  
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Real-life versions of the inspiring teacher played by the late Robin Williams in 'Dead Poets Society' often speak passionately about their favorite philosopher or poet. Touchstone Pictures/Everett Collection

I recently caught up with my downstairs neighbors, an attorney and a college professor, who have been consumed by the process of enrolling their adorable 5-year-old son in kindergarten.

Our apartment building in brownstone Brooklyn sits between two public schools—one known for resisting standardized-test prep, the other known for a more back-to-basics approach. On a tour of the first school, the principal boasted so effusively about its art program that my neighbors wondered whether their son would learn enough math and reading. At the second school, the central office was disorganized, and my neighbors left bewildered and without much information. In the end, they enrolled their son in a private school.

As students trundle back to the classroom, many parents will recognize my neighbors' frustration—and the anxiety that comes from trying to give your child the best possible education (especially if you can't afford to send them to private school). But in a landmark book this year, two sociologists, Angel L. Harris of Duke and Keith Robinson of the University of Texas at Austin, found that many things parents obsess over—checking homework nightly, volunteering at their kids' schools—have no measurable impact on student achievement.

Instead, what seems to matter most is getting one's child inside the classroom of an effective teacher. Parents who do so see their children's test scores rise by as much as 8% in reading and math, the study found.

Many schools ban parents from requesting specific teachers, which protects children whose parents are less involved. But most public schools, unhelpfully, also prevent parents of prospective students from spending unstructured time observing classrooms, where they could get a better feel for how teachers actually work with children. When parents like my neighbors visit schools, their impressions are often based more on gut instinct than on careful observation of what really makes a school great: how many skilled teachers it has.

So how can a parent identify superb teaching? Clearly, great teachers begin by loving children. But beyond that, a growing body of research points to some basic tenets of top-notch instruction—including these four actions and mind-sets parents can look and listen for when they visit a classroom, meet an educator or review their children's schoolwork.

### **Great teachers:**

- **Have active intellectual lives outside their classrooms.**

Economists have discovered that teachers with high SAT scores or perfect college GPAs are generally no better for their students than teachers with less impressive credentials. But teachers with large vocabularies *are* better at their jobs because this trait is associated with being intelligent, well-read and curious.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois, who once taught in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Tennessee, wrote that teachers must "be broad-minded, cultured men and women" able to "scatter civilization" among the

next generation. The best teachers often love to travel, have fascinating hobbies or speak passionately about their favorite philosopher or poet.

- **Believe intelligence is achievable, not inborn.**

Effective educators reject the idea that smarts are something that only some students have; they expect all children to perform at high levels, even those who are unruly, learning disabled or struggling with English.

How can you tell if a teacher has high expectations? Ask your child if he or she has learned anything new today. Research suggests that most students already know almost half of what is taught in most classes. Lame teachers—like one I watched spend a full 10 minutes explaining to a class in a Colorado Springs middle school that "denominator" refers to the bottom half of a fraction—spend too much time reviewing basic facts and too little time introducing deeper concepts.

- **Are data-driven.**

Effective teachers assess students at the beginning of new units to identify their strengths and weaknesses, then quiz students again when units end to determine whether concepts and skills have sunk in. Research from the cognitive psychologists Andrew Butler and Henry Roediger confirms that students score higher on end-of-year exams when they have been quizzed by their teacher along the way.

- **Ask great questions.**

According to the scholar John Hattie, when teachers focus lessons on concepts that are broader than those on multiple-choice tests, children's scores on higher-level assessments—like those that require writing—increase. How can you identify a high-quality question in your child's schoolwork? It tests for conceptual, not factual, understanding—not "When did the Great Depression occur?" but "What economic, social and political factors led to the Great Depression?"

Parents shouldn't be the only ones looking for these four traits. Principals and policy makers should focus less on standardized test scores than on these more sophisticated measures of excellence. Together, we can create a groundswell of demand for great teaching in every classroom.

—Ms. Goldstein is the author of "The Teacher Wars," recently published by Doubleday, and a staff writer at the Marshall Project.

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