

Choosing Excellence

John Merrow

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There seems to be three kinds of schools in America today—bad, good enough, and excellent. Parents in search of the excellent school know to avoid the bad, but probably have their children enrolled in a good enough school. Merrow provides parents in search of excellent schools tips, strategies, and questions to ask while looking.

The idea of this book grew from a list Merrow created on the anniversary of his twenty-fifth year as an education reporter. The list of standards was highly personal and based on his biases about education. Parents today are demanding quality education for their children, and this book addresses issues such as testing, technology, safety, homework, and special education.

Focusing on excellent practice, Merrow resists offering readers a checklist by which to judge a school. He feels that by letting parents know what strategies are in place in the best schools, they will be able to make better decisions. He cautions against judging a school after only one visit or by a single score on a standardized test. Be prepared to ask hard questions, though, especially when teacher qualifications are concerned. Excellent schools have teachers who majored or minored in the subject areas in which they are teaching.

Charter schools have become alternatives to traditional public schools, but Merrow cautions, “buyer beware.” Examples of charter schools who fail to deliver a quality education are given, such as “Citizen 2000.” This was a K-12 “for profit” school, which opened in Arizona in 1995. Unfortunately, the school, under the leadership of Dr. Lawndia Venerable, closed by November, 1996, having turned into a personal “cash cow” for Dr. Venerable and her family, and it was funded by public education dollars.

Each chapter ends with a list of questions about “practices, behaviors, and strategies” that will help school visitors come to a judgement that is thoughtful. Merrow believes that all students deserve excellence, and that excellence is achievable in schools today. As a strong supporter of public education, while still being a critic who cares, Merrow believes that schools and parents are allies, working together in the best interest of children.

TRACY FITZWATER (May / June 2001)

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