A GUIDE TO TALKING ABOUT HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION:

What do all kids need for strong schools?
In the school

The academic, social-emotional, cultural and health needs of every student are all equally valuable in a school that provides a high-quality education. Students are exposed to a broad curriculum including a range of fine and performing arts, math, language arts, physical education, science, social studies, technology, world languages and subjects valued by the local community. Students learn best when they are engaged in interactive methods of instruction and can participate in the learning process through hands-on work. Curriculum is relevant to students’ past experiences and connected to real world applications. Teachers assess how well students are learning using a variety of both formal and informal methods. Formal assessments are primarily created by the teacher and closely tied to the curriculum. Class sizes are small, capped at levels that promote better learning environments. Special education and English-language learning supports are readily available.

The citywide parent group, Raise Your Hand, has worked for the past year on a research project studying what education experts say is important for schools and school systems to be successful.
Schools are clean, safe and comfortable with ample space for activities. Wrap-around services such as after-school programs, tutoring, and a variety of health services for children and families are available. Students have easy access to social workers, psychologists, counselors, and nurses. Teachers have ample time to collaborate, reflect, and plan as a team, with access to experienced teachers and principals. The principal and other administrators of the school are instructional leaders who are experienced educators with the autonomy to lead the school and unite the stakeholders around a common vision. The school has a welcoming culture and climate where parents/guardians are recognized as partners. Parents/Guardians have opportunities to engage with teachers and principals in supporting students’ learning. Discipline practices are fair and supportive and include restorative justice.

**In the district**

A high-quality system has stable district leadership that supports schools because it is organized by comprehensive, long-term goals and by policies that include adequate and equitable funding. There’s a strong focus on equity in student outcomes and equality in opportunity. This means programs and services meet the needs of students in each building and resources are provided based on need. The school district respects the professional expertise of teachers and administrators by granting them the autonomy to exercise that expertise. The district embraces students, families, and community as assets: valuable people who have talents, experiences, strengths, skills, perspectives and resources to contribute to the school community. Students’ educational experiences are greatly impacted by the circumstances of their lives outside of school; therefore, district leaders advocate for the additional resources necessary within schools to ameliorate the effects of poverty, segregation and other systemic societal problems.

**In the community**

Schools are critical to the well-being of a community, and the community is key to the success of a school. Open-enrollment, neighborhood schools provide access to all students and are supported with equitable resources and programs. Relationship building between schools and the community takes time and requires patience, hard work and investment in the long term to be truly transformative. Schools are valued as community institutions and collaboration within communities is encouraged. The district actively makes use of resources in the larger community to build partnerships with local universities, museums, and other cultural venues. The district draws upon local expertise and ensures that those connections with university, social service, business and other partners are available to the whole system.
In the School:

**Instruction and curriculum**

The purpose of education is not only to impart knowledge but also to foster students’ creativity and curiosity. Parents/Guardians want their children to become life-long learners, problem-solvers, self-confident individuals and active participants in our democracy. Students learn best when they are engaged and have a voice in what they are learning.

Teachers have the latitude and support to develop lessons to meet the needs and interests of their students. Students have a role in deciding what and how they learn. They have ample opportunity to apply what they learn to the world and the community in which they live. Schools make meaningful connections between the knowledge, culture, and talents of the students’ communities.

**Assessment is more than standardized testing**

Teachers continuously assess students in a variety of ways, gathering feedback on their students’ learning through direct observation and communication, and using this information as a diagnostic tool to inform instruction. Informal assessments closely guide a teacher’s instructional decisions.

“Learning is a matter of constructing ideas rather than passively absorbing information or practicing skills.”

—Alfie Kohn

**IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:**

Have you visited your child’s classroom? What have you observed? What does the school day look like for your child? Do students have art, music, physical education, technology, library, social studies, science? Is your child learning how to think and solve problems?
Class size policies: Did you know that 32 states have class size reduction policies in place?

Researchers have found that reducing class size improves academic achievement, social-emotional learning, school culture, and student self-esteem, motivation, and persistence. These positive effects are especially strong for younger students (K-3), low-income students, and students of color, although students in upper grades will also benefit from smaller class size. The additional short-term cost of smaller class sizes is offset by the long-term benefit of improved social and educational outcomes.

Policy makers should carefully weigh the efficacy of class size reduction policy against other potential uses of funds.”

Class size matters

Classroom sizes are kept at or below levels (25 students) that allow teachers to individualize instruction when needed and maintain a productive classroom environment.

Standardized achievement tests, created by individuals or organizations with no direct contact with the students being assessed, are used sparingly. Scores from such tests on their own do not indicate educational quality and primarily reflect factors that schools have little control over. When standardized assessments are used as one component of assessing schools or districts, only a sample of students are tested and results are never used as the basis for punitive or high-stakes decisions.

“All else being equal, increasing class sizes will harm student outcomes. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will be offset by more substantial social and educational costs in the future. The payoff from class size reduction is larger for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.

Teachers design their own formal assessment tools along with curricula, so they are integrated into what is happening in the classroom. Formal assessment documents what and how a student has learned. The best assessments are authentic, that is they have inherent meaning as activities in students’ lives beyond just serving to measure or track students’ learning.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

How do teachers assess learning at your child’s school? What are the standardized tests given at the school? How often are these tests given? How does your child feel about the testing? Is there an opt-out policy at your school? Is test prep taking up instructional time? What other ways do teachers assess student learning?

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

What’s the class size at the school? Are there teachers’ aides in the classroom? If so, what impact do they have on instruction or classroom management? Does your child’s teacher have time to give your child individual attention?
In the District:

**Policies:** Decisions are made in a transparent and open manner. These policies are not only communicated but also explained to all stakeholders and developed with them. School boards do more than listen to parents/guardians; they include parents/guardians, school administrators, teachers, and students when creating, evaluating and implementing district-wide policies. Schools have enough autonomy to ensure that successful strategies are not replaced by “rubber-stamped” universal policies.

**Pre-K:** Universal preschool is available for 3 and 4 year olds. The preschool curriculum is play-based, which means preschool children spend most of their time engaged in play-based activities of their own choosing, both indoors and out. These activities provide them with a foundation for later learning experiences in reading, math, science, art, and music. Through play they develop social, emotional and cognitive skills essential for later school success.

**Special education** Schools are adequately funded with appropriate support embedded in the classroom, as well as specialized resource centers and professional services. Parents/Guardians are partners in developing a child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Individualized decision-making and instruction are at the center of a child’s IEP. Educators plan this instruction collaboratively, including families, professional colleagues, and personnel from other agencies as appropriate. IEPs have individualized transition plans to assist in a variety of transitions such as from preschool to elementary school to high school (Council for Exceptional Children 2004). Early screening and early intervention services are universally available and easy for parents/guardians to navigate.

**IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:**

Have you had experience with district policies and personnel?
Has district personnel been responsive to your questions and concerns?
Do you feel like district policies are adequately explained?

What special education support exists in your child’s school? Are children with special needs included in the classroom or do they have separate instruction? Are there sufficient resources for children with IEPs? How does the school support parents/guardians whose children have IEPs?
IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

How diverse is your child’s school? What support exists for second language learners? Does the school reach out to families of ELL students? Does the school and district communicate with families using materials translated in languages reflecting the school’s ELL community?

English Language Learners (ELL):
A fluent adult speaker of two or more languages is regarded as the most desirable outcome for a student who arrives at school with limited experience with English, and ideally even for those who arrive speaking only English. Teachers receive assistance and professional development needed to make use of the most effective instructional practices. Teachers incorporate strategies that promote both English language acquisition and the child’s home language(s). Teachers harness parent involvement and work with community-based organizations to improve the outcomes of English Language learners. ELLs have an advocate at the highest level of decision-making in the district so that their special needs and capabilities are taken into account.

Professional Development:
The district establishes plans to support teachers in their professional growth by giving teachers the time and tools to share and improve classroom techniques, mentor and coach each other, and discuss curricular challenges and successes. Professional development focuses on implementing and improving teaching as well as learning new skills and techniques. Principals are experienced educators, who understand and respond to the needs of their faculty and staff. Professional development is driven by teacher needs and by local school priorities; it is not a one-size-fits-all program determined by the district.

“For the vast majority of learners, it helps when their learning...expands upon the learners’ known universe, rather than denying or trying to forget a part of it.”
—Meier, Deborah  In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an era of Testing and Standardization

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

Do teachers at your school have adequate time to work together to plan and prepare? Do teachers have a say in their own professional development? Is it tied to their classroom instruction? Do the school administrators have classroom experience?
In the Community:

**Collaborative Relationships:** Parents/Guardians, teachers, administrators, students and community members work together to set educational practices and policies. Trust among all parties is critical to building and maintaining strong schools and districts. Clear, honest communication about what works and what needs improvement in the school and district is an important aspect of this trust.

1. Teachers and administrators have time to collaborate, improve teaching practices, mentor new teachers, and discover new ways to help students learn. Professional development supports the particular needs of teachers in their respective schools.

2. Parents/guardians, teachers and students communicate about students’ strengths and needs. They cooperate to support learning.

3. Administrators, parents/guardians and students discuss school priorities or concerns and contribute new ideas. Administrators create a welcoming atmosphere, and parents feel welcome in the school.

4. Schools know about the organizations in their communities that help support and serve children and families. Schools and communities create partnerships to support the school’s mission and the community’s concerns. Schools and communities maintain a dialogue to create a thriving, mutually-beneficial relationship.

**IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:**

What relationship does your child’s school have with other community organizations? How accessible is your child’s teacher and the principal? Is there a clear pathway for parents/guardians to share a concern or idea with school staff? What are the roles parents/guardians play in the school? Is there an effective local school council or other parent group and are parents/guardians encouraged to be involved in making decisions?
A SCHOOL DISTRICT PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL KIDS

Montgomery County, Maryland
Largest school district in Maryland; 17th largest school district in the U.S.

SOME KEY FEATURES OF THIS DISTRICT:

• A school superintendent with a holistic view of education
• A 3 year-moratorium on standardized testing
• A non-ideological approach to school change: no school closings; only 1 charter in district
• Intensive outreach to parents and the community
• Teacher Evaluation/Professional Development and Peer Assisted Review (PAR):
  - PAR is a collaborative approach with the teachers union and the administrators association.
  - PAR is a process of teacher mentoring and individualized instructional support for new teachers and for underperforming experienced teachers.
  - Effective and experienced teachers’ expertise is at the center of the professional development and evaluation process.
  - The focus is on improvement of instructional practice.

DEMOGRAPHICS (151,289 STUDENTS)

- 32% White
- 21.5% African American
- 14% Asian
- 27.4% Hispanic

FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH

- 34%

ESL - 13.3%  SPED - 11.7

Graduation Rate: 87.4%
Raise Your Hand for high-quality education for all children in Chicago and beyond!

GENERAL TIPS FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS:

In Chicago, attend Local School Council meetings. These are open to the public and provide information about how a school operates. Outside of Chicago, attend PTA or other parent meetings at your school.

Attend school board meetings. These are open to the public and provide information about how a district operates.

Request monthly or quarterly forums, where administration and parents/guardians meet to go over current school practices and discuss concerns.

Volunteer in your child’s classroom. Get to know your child’s teacher, the principal, school staff, and other parents/guardians.

Collaborate with parents/guardians in other schools.

Compare notes and work with community organizations to bring more resources into your child’s school.

Call, write and meet with elected officials to advocate for policies that will support high-quality education, like increased and equitable school funding and limits on the use of standardized testing.

Get involved in community organizations like Raise Your Hand that are working to build a stable, equitable, high-quality school system.

For further information regarding references cited here, please visit www.ilraiseyourhand.org.

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