WHAT MAKES A GOOD SCHOOL?

A SPECIAL EVENT FOR ORIGIN PARENTS

By Chris Bonnor AM

Good schools engage students in learning for personal achievement, for a sustainable livelihood and an enduring contribution to society.

SOME USEFUL QUESTIONS TO ASK

The school:

- How do you try to ensure that all your students are engaged in learning?
- How do you know if they are really learning for the long term (beyond test scores, that is)?
- How often do teachers spend time in each other's classrooms and reflect on their teaching?
- Tell me your policy on (insert topic of interest to you). Does it work and how do you know?
- What are the biggest risks to student safety and wellbeing? How do you minimise these risks?

Be wary with questions about homework, bullying, discipline and drugs – they tend to attract the same answers, regardless of the school. It's worth remembering all of these things do happen in places with hundreds of adolescents.

The students (ask questions which require more than a yes/no answer):

- What do you like about your school?
- What parts are most worthwhile?
- What would you change if you could? Why?
- What do you want to be (not just do) when you leave school?

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Big Picture EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

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Positive signs to look for

- A good school will never think it is good enough. It will set improvement goals, monitor progress and let everyone know. If it falls short or stumbles it will say so – and improve.
- The people in a good school talk about learning, not just about results. They will know the interests of all students and help them develop aspirations. They will be proud of the triers, not just the trophies.
- Good schools have strong values but will teach kids how to think and not what to think.
- Good teachers are those who can explain what they do, why they do it and how they know it works. Just like the students, they will also be learners who will share their learning with their peers.
- A good school has a good principal, one who develops leadership in others, especially in students. They will foster the other 'Rs' – relevance and relationships.

Additional Dos and Don'ts

- Go to the open days and nights but use the opportunity to talk to students most of all.
- Try to visit the school, by arrangement, at other times. You need to see AND feel schools.
- Be cautious when talking to parents of a particular school, they are prone to talking up their choices and talking down the alternatives.
- Read about things which really matter, like student engagement and learning – and how these best happen.
- Seriously question what the media says.
- Look up the My School website for information, but be wary of using it to compare particular schools.

Some useful resources:

- Bonnor and Caro: *What makes a good school?* New South
- David Gillespie: *Free Schools* Macmillan
- www.myschool.edu.au
- www.viccso.org.au/userfiles/files/great-schools-checklist-2012.pdf

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