



# How to Spot a School That Cheats and Find the Real Deal

*Reporters who dig below the surface can tell if schools merit praise or an investigation.*

By Karin Chenoweth

A teacher once told me that she had chosen what school to teach in based on her father's advice. He was a UPS delivery person who took the measure of a school based on what he could see between the front door and the office. There is a lot you can learn about a school's leadership and climate in those few steps, if you know what to look for. I call it the UPS test, and recommend it every time you enter a building, before setting foot in a classroom:

Is the school dirty or clean? Is the entrance forbidding or welcoming? Are the halls bare or adorned with recent student work? In the office, do the school's secretaries look up brightly or with hostility – or do they ignore you? Are children in the office looking miserable? Are parents in the office looking steamed? When children are in the hall, do teachers yell at them to be quiet or softly praise good behavior: “I like the way this class is walking quietly so we don't disturb other



classes”? If the principal is in the hall, do children occasionally break away for a hug? Is the hug greeted with a smile or a harsh word? Does the principal know the students well enough to say things like, “Hi, Shawn, does your knee feel better?” or “Cheyenne, your grandmother is going to be so proud of how you did on your spelling test!”?

A few minutes in a school hallway, especially if replicated many times over a few months, allows a fairly accurate judgment of whether the school is efficient, pleasant, and respectful to students, staff, and visitors.

Let's say that a school – I'll be talking primarily about elementary schools here – passes the UPS test and also has high test scores. Does that mean it is a

good school? Let's complicate the question. The school has high test scores and what is often called a “challenging” population – a high percentage of children of color, children in poverty, children learning English and children with disabilities.

Some educators and reporters automatically suspect such schools of cheating. Because I have been in many high-scoring, high-poverty, high-minority schools that don't cheat, I never assume this. But that raises the question – how do I know that such a school is not cheating? It may be hubris on my part, but I think I can tell. I hasten to add that I don't claim omniscience. If there's a little inappropriate coaching in a classroom, I might not be able to detect that. But widespread, organized-by-the-school cheating is as plain as plain can be.

Cheating is a betrayal of the trust between students and educators. When grownups in a school cheat, they paint a false picture of what their students know and can do and thus deny students the chance to get the help they need. A school that would betray students in that way is betraying them in lots of other ways as well, ways that can be seen throughout the school.

To succeed with challenging populations, schools can't be sloppy about anything. They must be thoughtful and efficient about curriculum, professional development, interventions for children who need help, discipline and school atmosphere. Further, all the grownups in the building need to be working from the same page, which requires collaboration and communication.

Reporters can sort the legitimate from the illegitimate by looking for the right things.

First is the principal's reaction when you call. If you say, “I'm interested in what you do to get your high scores” and the principal doesn't welcome you to the school to see for yourself, that's reason to wonder. Most principals of legitimately high-scoring schools are eager to share what they are doing. Two caveats: Some central offices discourage granting journalists such access, so a refusal for a visit may not signify anything about the school. Second, even good principals may be reluctant to spend time educating a novice or someone they don't trust will be fair to the school. That said, refusal or reluctance is more often than not a red flag.

Once in a school, these are some of the things I look for:

- Overall atmosphere – the UPS test.
- How the school uses time. The day should be scheduled both to ensure that teachers have time to collaborate and enough uninterrupted time in class to provide coherent instruction.
- How the school plans its instruction. Do teachers plan together or separately? If they say they plan together, do they meet daily, weekly, or monthly? Hint: If there is not a formal way for teachers to meet at least weekly, with opportunities to work together informally more frequently than that, there's not a lot of collaboration going on.
- How teachers interact. When they are together, do they talk about teaching? Do they offer to help one another? Is there a sense that all of the teachers are in it together? This is what's called a teacher network, and it is a crucial factor in good schools. Sit in on their meetings.
- The kind of "test prep" the school does. What I call "test sophistication" lets students practice a bit so they know how their state tests look and are constructed. Countless hours spent bubbling in practice tests and being taught "test-taking strategies" is something else and should be taken as a bad sign of how much learning is occurring.
- How the school tracks student achievement. Schools should measure each student's progress multiple times throughout the year. In addition, ask teachers about individual students. Teachers should be using a variety of assessments, informal and formal, throughout each day to identify those who need help.
- How the school delivers that help. Does it have after-school tutoring, before-school tutoring, one-on-one mentoring by volunteers? How does the school link classroom instruction to tutoring?
- How teachers keep up with what other teachers are doing. In a good school, teachers monitor student achievement data, determine which teachers do better with certain topics – for example, long division – and observe those teachers' lessons.
- The way the principal talks about teachers and students. Are her comments positive and respectful or negative and dismissive? Does he talk about the curriculum? About teaching?

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- How teachers talk about students. Do they say, "Our kids can achieve great things," or do they say "Our kids are never going to do as well as kids at [name of some other school]." Do they offer excuses, such as, "Well, we have a lot of children whose parents don't support them academically"? Or do they identify, for example, vocabulary acquisition as a school-wide weakness and talk about what they're doing about it.

- Professional development of teachers. Is it systematic and tied to data or is it just whatever workshop the superintendent or principal happened to see at a recent conference?

- The role teachers have in decisions such as hiring, use of federal Title I funds for disadvantaged students and other grant monies, and school policies and procedures. If the principal is the only one making those kinds of decisions, teachers are likely to feel disconnected.
- What students say about the school. Students who have attended other schools are some of the best sources of information, because they have a basis of comparison. Same thing for parents.
- What students say about what they're reading. Ask them to name their favorite books and note if a wide variety of books is available throughout the school. Can students explain what they are learning and talk about what they're reading?

Schools are complex organisms, and it is impossible to get a handle on everything that goes on inside. But reporters who look beyond the surface and gather information about the ways schools think about instruction and organize their curriculum, time and resources will make a real start on understanding the schools they cover – and sorting out whether high scorers deserve to be praised or investigated. ■



Karin Chenoweth is the author of "It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools," published by Harvard Education Press.