

Quality Checklist for Education Consumers (IP-2-1990)

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Issue Paper

By [John Andrews](#)

Introduction: Certitudes for Colorado

Public education in Colorado is ripe for change. The legislature has enacted a new funding formula and a grassroots accountability process. The Governor has made school creativity a priority issue.

The final months of 1989 brought to the state three major conferences on improving the schools: a business-education summit in August, a Gates Foundation national symposium of reform experts in September, and a regional strategy meeting on parental choice hosted by U. S. Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos in November.

All this against the backdrop of sagging test scores, rising dropout rates, and growing concern that even the students who graduate are inadequately prepared as workers and citizens.

Seldom discussed, however, is the potential for school improvement to start from the bottom rather than the top. While there is no lack of a reform agenda confronting educators and policymakers, neither is there any lack of proven tools which individuals in the community can use to measure local school effectiveness and begin upgrading it.

New laws and new money may or may not have a part to play in revitalizing Colorado education; the point of this paper is that we already know enough about what works, regardless, for concerned citizens to begin playing their own part much more aggressively.

Specifically, many of these educational certitudes are contained in a small book by that very title, *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, published by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986 at the direction of then Secretary William J. Bennett. (Order from U.S. Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81009.)

The Independence Institute presents here a digest of the book's findings, laid out in the form of a grading sheet which can be used by any education consumer (including parents, taxpayers, voters, employers) to ask hard questions of the education providers who are accountable to him.

Where There's a Will

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

"Education, despite efforts to make it so, is not essentially mysterious," Secretary Bennett argues in the foreword to *What Works*. "Armed with good information, the American people can be trusted to fix their own schools." This issue paper provides a tool kit for such a grassroots movement. You can use the tool kit to follow the issue debates more knowledgeably, read between the lines in education news stories, or guide your own child to better results. But most of all, you are encouraged to use it for a field investigation of your local school or district.

For none of these thirty levers-for-change are a monopoly of powerful people in remote offices. Each is at the voluntary disposal of parents, teachers, principals, and community members, right down where the chalk meets the blackboard. All thirty deal with what's happening to school kids in school buildings on (and between) school days. And not a single one of them has to wait for budget increases or board decisions.

Where there's a will to do them, there's a way to begin at once. Instilling the will is simply a matter of focusing enough attention and applying enough pressure on the uncomfortable question: Why isn't this school using the best methods known, since it costs no more and requires no permission?

Tough and blunt as always, Bennett writes: "We now know certain things about teaching and learning as a result of the labors of the scholarly community. This book makes [them] available to the American people. Most of the evidence [here] confirms common sense. So be it. Given the abuse common sense has taken in recent decades, particularly in the theory and practice of education, it is no small contribution if research can play a role in bringing more of it to American education. Indeed, the reinforcement these findings give to common sense should bolster our confidence that we, as a people, can act together to improve our schools."

For Coloradoans, it should also bolster our impatience with school practices that don't measure up. Here is the tool kit. There are the classrooms. What are we waiting for?

How to Use the Tool Kit and Grade Sheet

Each "tool," or statement, is based on conclusive education research, fully documented in the *What Works* report. The declarative statements are quoted verbatim from that report. The flag phrases and accompanying investigative questions, on which grades can be based, were framed by the Independence Institute.

Users may wish to complete the whole questionnaire, or those portions with greatest interest to themselves, in any of several ways. It can be done by personal visits to the schools, by telephone interviews, or by giving it to a

teacher, principal, or school board member for self-grading and return.

Who can make use of the questionnaire? Parents, concerned voters, business people, reporters, legislators and their staffs, PTA leaders, advocates for minorities and the poor-- as well as the many educators who are already justifiably sure they're doing a pretty good job but want to do even better.

Whom should you approach for answers to the questionnaire? The principal and teachers at your local school. Members of the school board. The superintendent and other administrators in your school district. Students in the public schools, including your own child, his friends, possibly members of the student government at your child's school.

For an even broader overview, you can question your legislator, members of the state board of education, a university department of education, or official in one of the statewide school lobbies. Those lobbies include the CEA teachers union, the association of school executives, the association of school boards, and the Colorado PTA.

Don't assume that the data-gathering and grading process ("compared to what?") will be easy. The evaluation criteria suggested in What Works are so obvious that they tend to "hide in plain sight" under the eyes of today's educationist priesthood. Collecting your information may require a persistence bordering on rudeness. But persist! If you get conflicting answers from different sources, that tells you something. If some you approach cannot provide the answers, that is a significant answer in itself. Here are the thirty tools:

1. Work and Discipline: "Many highly successful individuals have above-average but not extraordinary intelligence. Accomplishment in a particular activity is often more dependent upon hard work and self-discipline than on innate ability." Do the activities and atmosphere of this school send each student a strong message that his or her achievement depends mainly on hard work and self-discipline?
2. Responsibility: "Belief in the value of hard work, the importance of personal responsibility, and the importance of education itself contributes to greater success at school." Does this school hold each student sharply responsible for treating education as precious, for deriving its full value to his own benefit, and for contributing to an atmosphere where others can derive its value?
3. Mom and Dad: "Parental involvement helps children learn more effectively." Are there concrete evidences that this school is doing its utmost to maximize involvement of mothers and fathers with their own children's education and with the running of the school itself?
4. Storytelling: "Telling young children stories can motivate them to read. Storytelling also introduces them to cultural values and literary traditions before they can read, write, and talk about stories by themselves." Does this school effectively use storytelling, especially for the youngest children, and does it do so in a way that dramatizes cultural values and literary traditions?
5. Phonics for Reading: "Children get a better start in reading if they are taught phonics. Learning phonics helps them to understand the relationship between

phonics: Learning phonics helps them to understand the relationship between letters and sounds and to 'break the code' that links the word they hear with the words they see in print." Does this school make full use of phonics with all beginning readers, lagging readers, and remedial reading pupils?

6. Context for Reading: "Children get more out of a reading assignment when the teacher precedes the lesson with background information and follows it with discussion" Do the teachers at this school bring each reading assignment to life by setting it in context as recommended by the research?
7. Writing Must be Taught: "The most effective way to teach writing is to teach it as a process of brainstorming, composing, revising, and editing." Does this school emphasize the teaching of writing throughout all the grades, utilizing the four steps recommended?
8. Math the Right Way: "Children in early grades learn mathematics more effectively when they use physical objects in their lessons. Although students need to learn how to find exact answers to arithmetic problems, good math students also learn the helpful skill of estimating the answers. This skill can be taught" Do math teachers at this school aid beginners with physical objects? Do they teach the skill of estimating?
9. Science in Action: "Children learn science best when they are able to do experiments, so they can witness 'science in action.'" Do the science teachers at this school engage the children with active learning through experiments?
10. Expectations Drive Results: "Teachers who set and communicate high expectations to all their students obtain greater academic performance from those students than teachers who set low expectations." How high are the expectations at this school? Are they made applicable to all the students? Are they clearly communicated and consistently enforced?
11. Time on Task: "How much time students are actively engaged in learning contributes strongly to their achievement. The amount of time available for learning is determined by the instructional and management skills of the teacher and the priorities set by the school administration." What percentage of the day at this school (without regard to the overall length of the day or the year) represents the students' actual time on task in academic subjects?
12. Direct Instruction, No Guesswork: "When teachers explain exactly what students are expected to learn, and demonstrate the steps needed to accomplish the particular academic task, students learn more." Do teachers at this school clearly explain the desired learning outcomes and patiently demonstrate the steps required?
13. Tutoring by Students: "Students tutoring other students can lead to improved academic achievement for both student and tutor and to positive attitudes toward course work." Does this school take advantage of these benefits in having students tutor each other?
14. Learn It by Heart: "Memorizing can help students absorb and retain the factual information on which understanding and critical thought are based." Do teachers at this school place appropriate emphasis on memory work?
15. Thinking Skills: "Student achievement rises when teachers ask questions that require students to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information in addition to simply recalling facts." Are students at this school required to learn the specific skills of effective thinking?
16. Study Skills: "The ways in which children study influence strongly how much they learn. Teachers can often help children develop better study skills." Are children at this school required to learn the specific skills of how to study?
17. Homework Load: "Student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework and students conscientiously do it. Well-designed homework assignments relate directly to classwork and extend students' learning beyond the classroom. Homework is most useful when teachers

learning beyond the classroom. Homework is most useful when teachers carefully prepare the assignment, thoroughly explain it, and give prompt comments and criticism when the work is completed." Does this school require regular homework assignments? Are they well designed and consistently supported by teachers?

18. **Monitoring the Progress of Students:** "Frequent and systematic monitoring of students' progress helps students, parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers identify strengths and weaknesses in learning and instruction." Does this school conduct frequent and systematic monitoring of students' progress?
19. **Cultural Literacy Required:** "Students read more fluently and with greater understanding if they have background knowledge of the past and present. Such knowledge and understanding is called cultural literacy." Do the teachers at this school demonstrate an urgent commitment to equipping students with background knowledge of the past and present?
20. **Historical Vacuum Unacceptable:** "Skimpy requirements and declining enrollments in history classes are contributing to a decline in students' knowledge of the past." Does this school require meaty history courses and lots of them? (Mushy "social studies" curricula are no substitute; look carefully at what that generic wrapper really contains in your particular school.)
21. **Foreign Language for the Long Haul:** "The best way to learn a foreign language in school is to start early and to study it intensively over many years." Does this school act accordingly in its courses and requirements?
22. **High Schools Should Aim High:** "The stronger the emphasis on academic courses, the more advanced the subject matter, and the more rigorous the textbook, the more high school students learn. Subjects that are learned mainly at school rather than at home, such as science and math, are most influenced by the number and kinds of courses taken." Does this school (if a high school) really pour it on the students as recommended? If an elementary or middle school, is it pushing kids to ready them for a rigorous high school?
23. **Be Scholars, Ladies and Gentlemen:** "Schools that encourage academic achievement focus on the importance of scholastic success and on maintaining order and discipline." Is the total atmosphere of this school oriented to challenging all students to be scholars, ladies and gentlemen; or is there a pervasive rationalization for low standards?
24. **Rules that Liberate:** "Schools contribute to their students' academic achievement by establishing, communicating, and enforcing fair and consistent discipline policies." How good is the discipline at this school?
25. **Attendance Improves with Parents' Help:** "Unexcused absences decrease when parents are promptly informed that their children are not attending school." Does this school phone or write parents with a same-day notice of truant students?
26. **The Principal as Skipper:** "Successful principals establish policies that create an orderly environment and support effective instruction." Is this school captained like a ship with high morale and in fighting trim; or is the leadership loose and drifting?
27. **Teachers as a Winning Team:** "Students benefit academically when their teachers share ideas, cooperate in activities, and assist one another's intellectual growth." Is there concrete evidence that the teachers at this school work together as described?
28. **Knowing the Boss Cares:** "Teachers welcome professional suggestions about improving their work, but they rarely receive them." Do the teachers at this school receive attentive, constructive, supportive supervision from administrators?
29. **Job Readiness is More than Vocational:** "Business leaders report that students

29. Job Readiness is More than Vocational: "Business leaders report that students with solid basic skills and positive work attitudes are more likely to find and keep jobs than students with vocational skills alone." Do the curriculum and culture of this school contribute to all-around job readiness for all students, including the low achievers?
30. The Very Best Schools: "The most important characteristics of effective schools are strong instructional leadership, a safe and orderly climate, school-wide emphasis on basic skills, high teacher expectations for student achievement, and continuous assessment of pupil progress." Does this school act as though it places highest priority on the five attributes named, or is it bogged down with distractions and excuses?

Conclusion

This paper marks a departure from the customary procedure of the Independence Institute. Rather than a set of public policy recommendations such as we usually produce, this is a handbook for citizen activism. That focus is appropriate, we believe, since parents hold the primary educational responsibility for their own children, since public schools in America and particularly here in Colorado are basically a local function, and since educational change from above seems bureaucratically grid locked at best, perversely counter-productive at worst.

The grades marked by each user will necessarily be somewhat subjective; sound educational practice cannot be simplistic qualified like expenditures or staffing ratios. But your evaluation of your school or district is not less valid for that reason. You are quite capable of giving a classroom the sniff test, of recognizing quality or mediocrity when you see it. As Secretary Bennett wrote in *What Works*, "The American people can be trusted to fix their own schools."

The 30-point report card to be completed by users of this investigative checklist will accomplish little if treated as an exercise in "I told you so." The objective is not school bashing, but firm and patient efforts towards school improvement. We hope to foster a civil dialogue between education consumers and education providers leading to increments of progress on one or all of the boardroom education policy reforms.

We believe that such data from the field, placed before policymakers, will help show them that government's major task for education renewal now is not pouring in more resources --America already far outspends the world on schooling --but removing the barriers that block innovation and the coddling that dulls incentives.

Institutions exist for individuals, not vice versa. The proper role of any institution, including government and the school system it funds, is to facilitate rather than manipulate or dictate. A school should not be a learning factory but a freedom framework, an environment conducive to letting each person become and be his own best self.

The task of Colorado education policymakers is to set up that kind of

The task of Colorado education policymakers is to set up that kind of framework and environment, then get out of the way so teachers can teach, learners can learn, and families can cope --or live with the consequences.

* Editor Chester E. Finn, Jr., explains: "We included only those findings about which research evidence and expert opinion were consistent, persuasive, and fairly stable over time. Each finding in this volume has been checked and rechecked by professional staff members in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and by expert outside reviewers. During this process, we discarded more items than we kept, among them dozens of research findings that we judged to be less reliable, less helpful, or less consequential than those we retained."

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