



CHRIS BONNOR ventures some key reflections about what true quality is in relation to schooling, leadership and connecting with parents ...

Both before and after writing *What makes a good school?* both Jane Caro and I had many opportunities to talk to parents. Most recently I delivered, in conjunction with the Origin Foundation, a series of seminars on the topic. It meant trying to blend my professional perspective with the priorities of parents. At the very least I learned that if we do this as teachers and principals we might better bridge this gap.

In talking to parents about good schools I am constantly haunted by the findings of much of the research about school choice. Research that considers what parents do rather than what they say identify two main drivers of school choice: the social composition of school enrolments (who will my kid sit next to?) and the level of student achievement (who will my kid aspire to be like?).

So instead I ask what exactly do good schools look like - and what do they do that makes them “good”. It is hardly an original activity but the diversity of views which arise on such occasions often surprises audiences of parents and can spark some nuanced conversations.

Then I suggest some of the questions which parents might ask of teachers at the schools they visit:

- What really sparks learning in kids? How do you ensure that all your students are engaged in what the school offers and does?
- How do you know if they are really learning for the long term?
- How often do teachers spend time in each other’s classrooms and reflect on their teaching? Are your teachers learners as well?
- Tell me your policy on (insert topic). Does it work and how do you know?
- What policies and practices do you feel are quite useless? How can you change these?

It would have done me good in my years as a principal to be invaded by parents asking these sorts of questions. If parents across Australia keep asking just the first three of these questions they would have a collective power to influence school change.

I advise parents not to ask superficial questions about homework (answer: we give them lots), bullying (answer: not in my school), misbehaviour (here?), drugs (what?). I urge them to ignore the school glossies, My School, the media, the local rumour machine – and visit the school to discover how and what they feel.

Jane Caro stresses that, as sources of information about schools, parents have a number of agendas, including the need to post-rationalise their own school choices. This means that common narratives about schools are rich with reasons to avoid some, while preferring others – the others especially including those which charge fees.

I suggest that it is possible to avoid these conversations by going straight to the real experts, the students. But parents have to think carefully and ask questions which require more than a yes/no answer. These might include:

- 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?



It is inevitable that parents cannot be experts on schools and education – and we need to work harder to familiarise them with some of the complexities of today’s schools. In the absence of that they rely on the media, their own dated experience and that of their own parents – who often pay the fees apparently necessary for their grandchildren to go to a “good school”.

In the process it is very useful to gently raise various issues and bust a few myths about schools. Here are a few suggestions:

1. There is a ‘shopping list’ of things that occasionally keep parents awake at night: student safety/wellbeing, bullying, homework, social media, substance abuse, discipline. Obviously schools need to address all these things but it helps to raise two issues: firstly schools cannot win these battles alone and secondly, what should be the priorities of schools and how should these be ranked?
2. Schools today can look quite different and this alone can challenge preconceptions. I like to ask parents to pass judgment on a range of school and classroom practices – and then showing them what the research suggests are most useful. Among the relatively useless practices are many prized by politicians, media and older generations. It is a fun thing to do.
3. Parents also want to know about the relative worth of public and private schools or schools with various labels. My preferred activity is to show them the levels of student achievement in public, Catholic and Independent schools which enrol similar students. As I unfold this on a PowerPoint slide there is always a collective intake of breath as the columns indicating student achievement rise to, wait for it, almost exactly the same level for each school sector.

As my colleagues at the Origin Foundation stressed the conversations at such seminars are useful it is always essential for participants to have something to take away with them. I was asked to come up with a paragraph of reflections about good schools, so it read something like this:

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. They will know and tell you how, and if, learning is really happening. They will 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. And if it doesn’t work they won’t keep doing it. Just like the students, they will also be learners who will share their learning with their peers. They will know what they and their school stand for - and will make sure other things rarely get in the way. A good school has a good principal, but one who develops leadership in others, especially in students. They will foster the other ‘Rs’ – relevance

and relationships. Finally, the people in a good school will like kids and believe that both they and the kids can really make a difference - for themselves and others.

Chris Bonnor is a former secondary principal and previous head of the NSW Secondary Principals’ Council. He is a Fellow of the Centre for Policy Development and co-author with Jane Caro of *The Stupid Country and What makes a good school?*