

Book Proposal
by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Is Your Child Attending a Zoo?

Or, How to Evaluate Your Child's School

Introduction: One of the most important decisions parents must make is choosing a school for their child. For most parents, the choice is pretty limited to the public school a child is assigned to. In some communities, parents do have a choice among schools. But how are parents to know which school is the best one? What should they look for? What kind of questions should they ask? This book will help parents evaluate a school so that they can make a decision based on personal observation and objective information.

Chapter One: Where do we start? First you must find out if the school has a well-articulated philosophy of education that determines what is taught and how it is taught. You must find out if the school operates within the framework of a mandated reform program assisted by the federal government, requiring a specific form of curriculum. If this is the case, then the purpose of the school is to serve the needs of the government rather than the needs of your child. If the schools in your town are so conducted, then you may want to consider a private school or homeschooling. Government directed school reforms will be discussed in a later chapter.

Chapter Two: The physical environment. Whether parents know it or not, the physical environment of a building and classroom can have a positive or negative effect on the child. The parent must ask: Would I enjoy being in this building or classroom six hours a day, five days a week, for a whole school year? Is the atmosphere in this classroom conducive to learning or is there too much noise and distraction? Ask for permission to actually sit in a classroom for an hour or two to see what goes on among the students and how the teacher handles the kids.

The seating arrangement is also important. If the children are seated in rows and the teacher is the focus of attention in front of the class, then the class will probably be conducted in a traditional manner. If the children are seated behind little tables grouped together so that they can openly socialize and do group work then the class will be conducted along "progressive" lines.

Because there is significant difference between the traditional and the progressive models, a parent should know which model the school has adopted. Some schools try to combine both models. The school you're looking at may be one of those.

Chapter Three: The Traditional Model. What is its philosophical basis? The emphasis is usually on teaching academic skills, maintaining classroom discipline, sometimes having a dress code, using textbooks, teaching subject matter as separate disciplines. In the kindergarten and primary grades reading is usually taught with phonics, and arithmetic is learned primarily by rote memorization. Few public schools today adhere to the traditional model. To find that model, parents may have to consider private alternatives. The advantage of the traditional model is that children learn their basics pretty well and student behavior is well controlled.

Chapter Four: The Progressive Model. Most schools today have adopted the progressive model of education. You will know it the moment you enter a first-grade classroom. The children will be seated around tables, chatting or working in groups. The walls will be decorated with all sorts of posters, pictures of animals, etc. The teacher will not be the focus of attention. She is now a facilitator. Occasionally she will read to a group of kids seated on the floor

and will have a discussion with them. Her teaching program usually includes whole-language, invented spelling, the new math, etc. Subject matter will be interdisciplinary. The atmosphere may seem chaotic, but it is believed that each child is learning on his or her own. The advantage of this model is its informality and general permissiveness.

Chapter Five: Teachers. When you put a child in a school you are entrusting that child to a complete stranger. Most parents assume that their child's teacher is qualified and certified. But experience, sometimes painful, has taught us that some of today's teachers may not only be incompetent, but also immoral. How can parents know what kind of individual is their child's teacher? If possible, get background information on the faculty: colleges attended, degrees earned. If the school does not have such information, you might talk with the teacher and elicit the information you want in a chatty, friendly, non-threatening way.

Chapter Six: Teaching Reading. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That certainly applies to the field of reading instruction. Faulty teaching methods can cause reading problems, and it behooves parents to find out how reading is being taught in the school. This chapter will explain the various ways reading is being taught, how to evaluate different programs and what questions to ask. Although educators have declared that the reading war between phonics and whole language is over, it is doubtful that it really is. Thus, it is most important to know what to look for in a school's reading program.

Chapter Seven: Writing and Spelling. You would think that such subjects would be taught in a way that would virtually satisfy all parents. Unfortunately, that is not the case. One of the questions most often asked by parents is how to improve an older child's spelling. More often than not that child was taught writing by the invented spelling method, which, unfortunately, creates spelling problems. Again, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. If you teach spelling in a logical, rational way, you can avoid developing bad spelling habits. Also, find out how your child will be taught to write: cursive first or print first? The proper sequence makes all the difference.

Chapter Eight: Math. Millions of children emerge from our schools with poor mathematical skills. Usually the problem can be traced back to the first and second grades and how the child was taught arithmetic. Again, prevention can guard your child against mathematical dysfunction. There are good ways and bad ways to teach arithmetic. This chapter will help parents recognize the good and the bad ways.

Chapter Nine: The new federally mandated curriculum. Most parents are not aware of the sweeping reforms that are being implemented in schools across the nation. These radical changes may persuade you to seek alternatives for your children. The new curriculum is the result of three important pieces of legislation passed by Congress in 1994: Goals 2000; School-to-Work Opportunities Act; and the Improving America's Schools Act. It is important for parents to understand the ramifications of these acts. They are changing the goals of schooling and what children are to be taught. They also include gathering extensive personal data about your child which will become a permanent record in a federal computer in Washington.

Chapter Ten: Music, Art, and Foreign Language. Most parents want their children to be exposed to the arts and some study of music. Does the school teach art? Does the school teach children to play musical instruments? If not, does it at least teach music appreciation? Does the school have a band or a chorus? Foreign language is another way of expanding a child's cultural horizons. Find out what languages the school offers. For some parents, cultural education is an important way to instill love and appreciation of the arts and reading. It provides nourishment for the soul. If a school is deficient in this area, you may not want to put your child there.

Chapter Eleven: Computers in the classroom. Is the school technologically up to date?

About the Author

Samuel L. Blumenfeld has written ten books on education, including:

The New Illiterates

How to Tutor

Alpha-Phonics: A Primer for Beginning Readers

Homeschooling: A Parents Guide to Teaching Children

He is considered one of the world's top authorities on reading.
He has lectured in all fifty states as well as in Canada, Australia,
and New Zealand.

He is very well known among homeschoolers and has spoken at many
homeschool conventions over the last fifteen years.

Dr. Blumenfeld also edited *The Blumenfeld Education Letter* for ten
years, keeping a close watch on the growing illiteracy problem.
He presently is a columnist for World Net Daily and several other
internet websites and writes regularly for *Practical Homeschooling*.

Prior to becoming a full-time writer, Dr. Blumenfeld was an editor
in the book publishing industry in New York.
He worked at Rinehart & Company, The Viking Press, The World
Publishing Company, and Grosset & Dunlap.

He decided to write this book after reading an article about Tom
Cruise's struggle to learn to read. Tom says:

"When I was about 7 years old, I had been labeled dyslexic. I'd try to
concentrate on what I was reading, then I'd get to the end of the page
and have very little memory of anything I'd read. I would go blank,
feel anxious, nervous, bored, frustrated, dumb. I would get angry. My
legs would actually hurt when I was studying. My head ached. All
through school and well into my career, I felt like I had a secret."

Tom was a victim of the faulty teaching methods in his school. Had
his parents known how he was being taught at school, his years of
agony and failure could have been avoided.