

# Stepping into the Shoes of Parents: A Professional Educator “Laces Up” to Choose a School

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“Put yourself in the parents’ shoes,” Larry Cremin, the President of Columbia Teachers College, Columbia University, told us. Larry also taught an educational policy course I attended. Twenty-five years later I decided to use my imagination and to follow Professor Cremin’s injunction. I day dreamed that I had a 14-year old daughter named Kate (the name of my Godchild). I am looking for a boarding school for her. I found that parents’- even wannabe parents- desires for their children’s education has a sound basis in the latest educational behavior and brain research.

**I want my daughter safe. I want her to feel secure, happy and stress free.**

The first thought that came to my mind was: I want my daughter to be safe. I don’t want to have to worry. Above all I don’t want Kate to have stress. I went to a school where there was tension and fear almost every day. No wonder I did not learn during that period of my life. Eric Jensen states, “Threat impairs brain cells. Threat also changes the body’s chemistry and impacts learning.” What is happening is that stress chemicals act on the hippocampus. That part of the brain aids in long term factual memories. Jensen also pointed out: “The brain stem is the

automatic functions that may help you survive.” In *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman talks about how we are affected by stress over time. We can’t remember well. As Goleman says, “stress makes us stupid.”

I will make sure there is a good screening system for people coming in and out of the campus and that teachers, house parents and anyone else working at the school have the concern of the children’s safety and well-being as their paramount goals. I would expect a 24-hour nursing service and would want to be assured that, if an emergency did occur, proper protocols were in place at the school, including medical evacuation. I also want an effective counseling service to help Kate though any emotional problems that may arise.

Since Kate will be a boarder, I want to make sure there is a boarding curriculum, that is, activities that stimulate and engage students until it is time to go to sleep. I am concerned that study periods not only have teachers present but teachers who actively help students on request. I want to see that Kate has a broad range of physical activities to choose from as well: a wide range of sports activities and sports teams. The research about the advantages of physical exercise

hippocampus. Exercise is also known to help diminish Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

But it is the atmosphere I observe at the boarding facilities and the school that will ultimately persuade me. Are the children happy, engaged, and active? Are the children being encouraged to be active learners both at school and at the boarding apartments? Did the children get along well with each other, help each other? I would not be shy about asking boarding students questions like: if you have a problem who would you go to for help? Are you excited about learning while you are here at this school? Do you feel it is easy to make friends, to be accepted by your peers, your teachers?

The latest research bears out my insistence on a nurturing, supportive learning environment for Kate. Ronald Kotulak showed that a positive learning environment can help elevate IQ scores, perhaps as much as 20 points.

**I want my daughter to be a good person.**

Last year I went to visit H.E. Prem Tinsulanonda to wish him a happy birthday. David Baird, the head of school, and Mom Tri Devakul, Chairman, from the Prem Center’s

leaving H.E. General Prem said, "Think about what a curriculum that produces good women and men would be like."

I thought many days about this challenge. The answer has many parts, and all of them can be found in the International Baccalaureate Organization's (IBO) approach to education. There is the teacher training that emphasizes inquiry based learning or, simply put, getting students to think for themselves and solve complex problems. But it is the values of integrity and respect for the individual inherent in the IB program that make it most attractive. I want to choose a school where teachers model the behavior I want my daughter to follow. I will

least one test.

([www.josephsoninstitute.org/reportcard](http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/reportcard)). In 2006 the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University found that 56 percent of graduate business students admitted cheating on exams.

I don't want my daughter to feel she has to cheat to get ahead.

How my daughter is taught both in the formal and informal setting of school is critical.

**I want teachers who are nurturing and use effective and varied teaching tools intent on developing life-long learners.**

From a didactic point of view, I am drawn to the IB programs because

Are the teachers leading students to think on their own, to solve problems? Is the learning relevant to the students' lives? Are they learning skills that are relevant to their future? Are the students learning to work collaboratively?

Modern brain research bears out my paternal instincts. Robert Marzano indicates that for our brain to "turn on" to learning mode the learning must be perceived as important to the individual; the learning must satisfy a personal need or goal. Steven Covey limns an effective learning environment that is win/win as "a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions." David Sousa underlines the need for teachers to appreciate that students with different sensory preferences will behave differently during learning, and that teachers tend to teach the way they learn. Sousa also points out that when "original learning was well-learned and accurate, new learning will be more powerful." As Jensen put it, "The brain thrives on meaning, not random information."

In sum, I am looking for a school that has teachers who make learning fun, dynamic and meaningful and can understand and utilize brain research and learning theory when scripting their lesson plans and teaching.

**I want a small school with small class sizes.**



ask: how do you choose your teachers? How do you screen your teachers? How will you evaluate your teachers? What is the mission statement of your school?

the IB trained teachers instruct often for long term memory. These teachers use visual, tactile and auditory tools in order to accommodate the different types

Anyone that doubts that the U.S.A., a center of democracy and justice, is facing an ethical crisis needs only study recent survey results. This past year the Josephson Institute surveyed 36,122 students from U.S. public and private schools. Shockingly, 33 per cent said they used the internet to plagiarize for a school assignment. 60 percent of the students admitted cheating on at

best schools have a family atmosphere in the sense that teachers care for the students as if they were their own children. If the child is a boarder it is all the more important that teachers and house parents are always on hand to lend support and guidance.

Small classes with ten to twenty students obviously permit a teacher to give more individual attention to students — to really know their students.

**I want my daughter to be in a learning environment that will prepare her for the challenges facing her generation.**

My imaginary daughter, Kate, is an average student who has the wonderful capacity to study hard. She is ambitious and she also wants to make a difference in the world.

Why would I be so eager as an American parent to seek an IB

of learners. Teachers make the learning relevant. Teachers also create a climate of collaboration and sharing — a win-win atmosphere. And finally, IB teachers teach for deep mastery of subject matter.

When Kate and I visit the classrooms of a perspective school I will be asking these questions: Are the teachers using good inquiry-based teaching methods?

World School? After all, only 1% of schools in the USA have an IB program. While that may be true, according to a recent Newsweek poll, 6 of the 10 best schools in the U.S. were IB schools.

So, what is it that makes an IB curriculum and learning approach so good, so different? Actually, good teaching is good teaching. The IB program is a system and curriculum, and good teachers everywhere can employ the core teaching values inherent in it. Here are some of the reasons I am looking for an IB School for Kate:

1. teachers use tools to facilitate long term memory: emotion, relevance, and concrete models
2. the lessons are dynamic and high interest and employ emotion when appropriate
3. there is an emphasis on inquiry based learning which develops critical thinking
4. the atmosphere of the

Before arriving in Chiang Mai two years ago, I was a professor at the University of South Florida and the regional head of the Small Schools Workshop. I know from our research that the safest and most secure schools should number optimally at no more that 500 to 600 pupils and that small class sizes are also important in promoting the commonweal of the children. Small schools permit a community atmosphere, and the

- classrooms is one of active engagement and support
5. support includes a sense of belonging, high level of support for achievement and a sense of empowerment.

For parents who want their children to be life-long learners it is important to understand what the school and the teachers are trying to achieve. Ted Sizer, a current, noted educational reformer, insists that educators know their students, believe in them, respect them and help them to grow into honest, compassionate, responsible citizens who are sensitive to others and are seekers of wisdom. As a parent I would be looking for a school that embraces these values. What kind of school are you looking for? ■

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