

# IS YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL STUDENT-CENTERED?

The **Smart Parents** project contains stories, insights and tips from dozens of parents, along with expert commentary, all about creating powerful learning experiences for and with children. This checklist is for parents who want to ensure their school is student-centered. Student-centered learning is personalized and competency-based. It acknowledges that learning happens anytime, anywhere and encourages students to take ownership over their own learning. A student-centered classroom and school helps create deeper levels of engagement through a more personalized learning environment and allows for learners to thrive.



- ✔ Students are working at their own pace- for example, one student may be way further ahead than another student in math. The teacher has classroom management strategies for handling the differentiation.
- ✔ A mission or vision statement for the school is visible. This should be present and visible somewhere at the school.
- ✔ There is a high degree of student engagement which looks like enthusiasm, excitement, and passion. (If you see a lot of bored students, it's probably a good idea to ask why).
- ✔ Students are doing the bulk of the work and the talking. (In other words, don't be afraid of a loud classroom).
- ✔ Kids are smiling and having fun! If there's no joy, there's no learning.
- ✔ Student work is visible in the classroom and the hallways- and all students are represented.
- ✔ There is a strong sense of school community. The students are helping one another, and respectful and caring towards one another.
- ✔ Students are working on various projects- they are doing hands-on, real work.
- ✔ Objectives or lesson plans are visible. Many students are visual learners so the classrooms is organized. It is clear what students are doing and working on.
- ✔ Students are working at their own stations- choosing where to learn based on what works best for them.
- ✔ Adults are talking to each other respectfully and learning from one another. Adults are modeling the ways students behave. If the adults are having fun, connecting, and learning from one another, the students will too.
- ✔ Students are using technology to learn more about their own interests or to move at their own pace.

## HOW CAN YOU TELL IF THE SCHOOL YOU ARE VISITING OR THE SCHOOL YOUR CHILD CURRENTLY ATTENDS IS A STUDENT-CENTERED SCHOOL? LOOK FOR:



AFTER DOING YOUR OBSERVATION, YOU WILL HOPEFULLY HAVE A CHANCE TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS. HERE'S A HANDY LIST OF QUESTIONS THAT CAN GUIDE YOU TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SCHOOL AND THEIR STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES:



### PACE.

Do students move through content at their own pace and according to their own needs?



### PASSION.

Do students have opportunities to choose work that speaks to their own passions and interests and opportunities to learn outside of the traditional school day?



### PATH.

Is each child on a unique learning path or is s/he marching through content with the rest of the pack? Do students have what iNACOL's Susan Patrick would call "voice and choice" when it comes to their learning?



### MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT.

Do teachers know where your student currently is academically, where they've been and where they are going? Ongoing, meaningful assessment of knowledge and skills is essential to obtain insights needed to personalize learning. This knowledge generated from these assessments should inform your child's learning experience.



### PARENT INVOLVEMENT.

Are you, as a parent involved and meeting with the teacher and your child regularly (at minimum, 3- 4 times a year) to discuss your child's academic and social-emotional growth?



### BEHAVIOR.

How does your school handle behavior? Is there a rush to suspend students or does the school actively teach conflict resolution and restorative justice, so students can learn how to resolve conflicts, own up for their mistakes, and ultimately stay in school.



### FEEDBACK AND GROWTH.

Does assessment and feedback go beyond test scores? How does the school ensure that all students are aware of their own strengths and struggles? How does the school talk to students about their strengths and growth areas? How does the school involve parents in those conversations? Is this done in a way that is non-threatening and builds on strengths instead of derailing confidence?



### NONCOGNITIVE SKILLS.

In what ways are students also gaining noncognitive skills at the school- skills, attributes, and habits of mind that go beyond reading, writing, and math? Is your child motivated, engaged and encouraged in a way that feels supportive of learning?



### PROGRESS.

Does your child's teacher have a system for tracking individual student progress toward overall academic goals across various content areas? What is your child's involvement in tracking their progress and setting their own goals? Does your child have a strong sense of their strengths, weaknesses and overall progress? Can parents easily access information about their student and get an accurate picture of how their student is progressing?



### REAL WORLD LEARNING.

How well does the school incorporate the real world and encourage meaningful real world experiences?



### MENTORSHIPS.

Are there opportunities for your child to both be mentored by older students and/or mentor younger students?



### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.

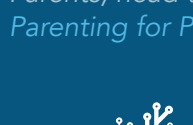
Are students involved in clubs and organizations after school that they are passionate about? How does the school help students build connections to one another?

Whether you are currently choosing a school for your child or whether you are just curious to know more about their current learning environment, this list can help generate powerful insights about their learning. Don't be surprised if you do not find evidence of all three of these components in your child's current school setting. For many schools that are in the earliest phases of shifting to more personalized and student-centered learning environments, this list is more aspirational than it is currently in practice. Parents can be powerful advocates for shifts like these as schools and districts increasingly acknowledge the importance of parent and community support. If your child's current school feels far off from the student-centered learning, determine what factors matter most to you and to your child and start there. Seek informal and formal learning opportunities for your child outside of the school day that are based on their interests and needs.

For more see the original sources of these ideas from the **Smart Parents** blog series: **3 Ways Parents Can Spot Student-Centered Learning** and **Is Your Child's School Student-Centered: A Checklist for School Visits**.

The **Smart Parents** book is a resource to guide parents in creating, choosing and advocating for powerful, student-centered learning experiences for their children. It is designed to facilitate conversation about important educational decisions parents face today. With advice on everything from picking preschools to accessing educational apps, this is the resource for parents so they can be informed, involved, inspirational and intentional.

For more information, to order the book or download your FREE digital copy of *Smart Parents*, head to: **Smart Parents: Parenting for Powerful Learning**.



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