



Draper Notes

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Ten Signs Your Child Is in a Failing School District

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In these days of Common Core State Standards and continuing attacks on public education by billionaires and their bought-and-paid-for legislators, parents need a few guidelines on how to tell if their child is in a failing school district.

It has nothing to do with low scores on state-mandated standardized tests and more to do with the culture in the school district.

Here are 10 signs that your child is in a failing school district:

1. **The large majority of your teachers have less than five years of experience-** The best schools have solid veteran teaching forces, mixing in talented newcomers each year as teachers retire or move into administration or other job opportunities. When you run off your veteran teachers, you not only do not have teachers who can mentor the younger staff members and help them reach their full potential, but you also are increasing the odds that you are going to hire some less gifted teachers just to fill the vacancies. That makes it that much harder to understand why so many state legislatures are appropriating millions for inexperienced Teach for America instructors instead of spending that money to keep their best teachers in the classroom.
2. **Teachers are overwhelmed with requests for data-** Any time teachers are spending more time providing data for the bean counters in administration, it is a good indication that your school has gone astray. Most of that data is supplied through the use of one practice standardized test after another. In recent years, the situation has grown worse with many

school districts adding costly practice tests given multiple times during the year. These not only take away from instructional time, but they also strip the children of any love of learning and they provide overly generous fees to the testing companies. What is worse, the expensive practice tests, whether students do well on them or not, provide no guarantee of success on the high stakes test at the end of the school year.

3. **Teachers receive no support from administrators on discipline issues-** In our ravenous quest for more and more data, one of the worst things that has occurred was the decision to measure a school's safety by its numbers of incidents, referrals, and suspensions. It was a natural progression for administrators, both at upper and lower levels, to find ways to game the system and avoid climbing statistics. In some schools, this has been done by encouraging teachers to handle every kind of situation in their classrooms and not involve the principal's office. Teachers receive the message that they are the ones who will suffer if students are given referrals. Because of that, behavior that would have been met with an instant office referral only a few years ago, is allowed to continue in the classroom and creates even more distractions for teachers and students.
4. **Professional development is limited to indoctrination and data-** An alarming trend the past few years has been the transition of professional development from learning techniques that will help the teacher to improve teaching and classroom management techniques to attempts to forcefully install a culture that would seem more desirable in a business than in an institution of learning. Much of this has come from the proliferation of consultants and motivational speakers who latched on to public schools after the implementation of No Child Left Alive and have yet to loosen their grip.
5. **The message is tightly controlled, eliminating constructive criticism-** At one time, the top administrators in public school districts were invariably educators who worked their way through the system, spending years in the classroom before going into administration. Nowadays, many top administrators have only spent three years or less in the classroom and are more like CEOs and executive vice presidents than educators. This had led to a culture shift with an overemphasis on public relations. Anyone in the school district or in the community who dares to question a decision is accused of trying to "hurt the children" or "attack teachers." When administrators surround themselves with yes-men and strictly control the message, it makes it much more likely that mistakes are going to be made, at a cost to the children and to the taxpayers.
6. **School Board members serve as rubber stamps-** Over the past few decades, the role of boards of education has changed dramatically. In many communities, the board of education acts more like the board of directors of a Fortune 500 company, rubber stamping whatever

the superintendent or top administrator does without question. That is not what voters expect when they elect school board members. Obviously, you do not want to have board members looking over administrators' shoulders every minute of every day, but when the board of education places blind trust in anyone it increases the odds that something disastrous will happen. One of the major criticisms lodged against board members is that they "have an agenda," as if that is something bad. If the agenda is to stop out-of-control spending, or place more emphasis on education, what is wrong with that? When boards serve as rubber stamps for any administrator, they are effectively taking away local control of our school districts.

7. **The community is not involved in its schools-** In many school districts, the community is kept at arm's length until it is time to pass another bond issue or tax levy increase. Or the community involvement is restricted to a carefully selected group of business and civic leaders or the spouses of those leaders. A successful school district is one in which the involvement is organic and comes from all segments of the community, not just the ones who are needed when it comes time to ask for money. In some school districts, the community is asked for its input and then guided to give the input the administrators are seeking so they can say whatever initiative they have has the support of the community. That is not community involvement; that is pure spin.
8. **The district is top heavy with administrators-** While there is certainly a need to have strong, capable administrators directing a school district, administration tends to grow far more than is necessary, using funds that could be spent much better in the classroom. Rule of thumb, the more executive directors of anything that you have, the more problems your school district is going to have.
9. **An overemphasis has been placed on technology-** While it would seem that the more emphasis placed on technology in this day and age the better, that is simply not the case. With many schools adding laptops, iPads, and other devices that students can take home with them, districts have begun a push to incorporate the technology into every lesson, complete overkill that works against the student in the long run. While it is vital that students are able to handle technology, it is just as important that they are able to participate in discussions, listen to lectures (schools are eliminating these and that creates a problem for students when they go on to higher education), and take notes. If your school district is pushing the idea that everything can be learned by consulting Google then your child is being shortchanged.
10. **Not enough emphasis is being placed on civics and citizenship-** In the push to make sure everyone is "college and career ready," many schools are depriving children of some of the most important knowledge they should receive- how to participate in their society as an informed voter, who has the understanding of what this country is all about. While it is important that students be ready to work, the idea that they should be doing so during their

high school years at the expense of learning about government, history, and the things they need to know to be a full participant in our society is ludicrous.

This list leaves off other important factors- poverty, crime, and how many billionaires you have who are trying to force privatization of education down your throat, but for those who want to make a difference at a local level, these are the danger signs that your district is failing.