

School Number 500 to School Number 50: What's the Difference?

By STEPHANIE MCCOY

OUR FAMILY RECENTLY ENCOUNTERED a life-changing event: a move. We spent 16 years in our previous home, and in the summer of 2022, we moved across town. In Portland, Oregon, where we live, elementary school assignment is mainly on the basis of a student's residence, so the new house also meant a new school for our two kids, who are in 2nd and 4th grade.

Although we've only been part of the new school community for seven months, I have already noticed huge differences between the two schools. Online rankings from various comparison websites labeled the new school as significantly better. Precisely what that looks like for students and parents became clear and concrete over time.

The first big difference I noticed was within the new neighborhood. Our previous school was located in a highly impoverished area. Sadly, that factor brought a lot of crime. Shoplifting, drug-use, and violence were regular occurrences near our old home. Sirens blaring were daily background noise. A walk to the store meant likely exposure to people using drugs or fighting. Unfortunately, many of the homeless people that we encountered were aggressive. This lack of safety was the number one reason for our move.

Our new neighborhood is incredibly safe and quiet. The only noises we hear are neighbors chatting and dogs barking. Our neighbors and nearby residents seem happy, healthy, and involved in their community. Our new neighborhood has many more resources and a higher average income than our previous neighborhood.

One difference I've noticed within the school is the level of involvement from the school community and Parent Teacher Association. I work as a "classroom lead" for my son's classroom, helping the teacher with family communication, school fundraising, and general coordination on classroom matters. So I'm constantly asking for donations, chaperones, and volunteers. I was shocked the first time I asked for chaperones for a field trip. I asked for five, and within minutes I had seven. It was the same when I asked for donations toward the teacher's Christmas gift. Within a few days, I had \$325! Every time I ask for anything for the school or classroom, the goal is met and exceeded immediately.

Our old school struggled with donations and fundraising. The volunteers and chaperones came in smaller numbers. This makes sense, because the neighborhood had a lower average income. Caregivers weren't as available for volunteer and chaperone opportunities, because many of them had to work.

Another difference I found was that our old school tended to offer free financial and language resources, while our new school offers classes, events, and materials at a cost. I remember many events at our old school that would involve handing out art sets, food, and other items to families, and the school would put together a family night and provide a dinner and entertainment for free. This school year, we were floored that at the Halloween carnival, our new school charged admission and sold concessions. I think this is a good difference. The impoverished school shouldn't charge admission to low-income families, and it seems fair to me that a school in a middle-class neighborhood would charge admission.

The biggest difference I have found between the two schools sits between the classroom walls: behavior. Our old school, where I worked as an instructional assistant, had some shocking statistics on behavior referrals last year. I remember sitting through a staff meeting looking over slides, and the number of incidents was just heartbreaking. A lot of kids would leave the classroom, destroy educational materials, and get into physical altercations. My son would get frustrated on a regular basis because these disruptions affected his learning. He would simply have to sit and wait while a student disrupted a lesson because there weren't behavior specialists to assist. I brought this concern to his new teacher at his new school and he simply said, "I think Atticus is in for a pleasant surprise, because those things very rarely happen here." Seven months later, my son hasn't reported an incident yet. If there are behavior problems, they are dealt with swiftly and out of the classroom.

Resources are one big difference between a low-ranking and high-ranking school. Is the school properly staffed? Is the staff being continually educated? Does the neighborhood have financial resources? Is the school community active? The per-pupil spending at the old school, at nearly \$22,000 a year, was actually considerably more than at the new school, which spends about \$16,000 a year, so "resources" can mean a lot more than just how much money the government spends on operating a school.

My family managed to afford the move to the more expensive neighborhood and the higher-ranked school only after a couple of small inheritances and years of savings. If more people could see firsthand the differences between the two schools, though, maybe there'd be increased political support for allowing students access to safer, better-resourced schools in ways that don't require a family to move across town.

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