First steps to learning are taken in the home

Show me a home where education and learning are central values, and where the parents are reasonably competent at the business of child-rearing, and I’ll show you the home of a good student.

The correlation between parental competence and academic success isn’t perfect, of course. There are homes where parents are indifferent (or absent) but where children are eager learners.

And there are homes where parents seem to be doing everything right but where the children turn out to be awful.

But the correlation between good homes and good students stands. Further, the clearest identifying characteristic of what we call a good school is a critical mass of children from good homes.

If this is so, why do our public policies pay so little attention?

Listen to our school leaders and you’ll find the difference between school success and school failure lies in the quality of the superintendent, the size of the school budgets or the academic backgrounds and skill levels of the teachers.

But watch the parents.

Give them the choice that money and mobility can afford, and they quickly arrange to put their children in schools with a critical mass of students from “good” homes.

Indeed, the reasons behind the strong appeal that vouchers, charter schools and other alternatives have to low-income parents is that they believe their children will benefit from being in learning-centered environments.

I don’t mean to suggest that what schools and school districts do doesn’t matter. Of course it matters to have qualified teachers, principals who can provide safe-

Reach the writer at willrasp@washpost.com.