

Public School vs. Classical Christian School

Content and Methods

For most Christian families, Christian education is a priority. But Christian families face a dilemma: does all of education have to be Christian? Can the Christian part of education happen at home and the math and reading part of education happen at school? How important is Christian schooling, given its high cost? After all, it is one thing to prefer Christian education. It is another thing to believe so strongly in it that you are willing to pay the cost of a private education (or homeschool).

Part one of this series discussed public education's goals and worldview. However, perhaps you're not convinced. Maybe you feel like your local school is insulated from some of the radical agendas present in modern day public education. You volunteer in your child's public school class, know and like their teacher, and see their curriculum. There are certainly some negatives about attending a non-Christian school, but maybe on a day-to-day basis it doesn't always necessarily seem so bad.

In reality, the problems with public education extend beyond the lofty policy level and penetrate into every classroom.

1. Public Schooling Skips Important Content.

Public education sets out to present politically correct material. What is especially bad about this is that it happens at the expense of content that children should be learning. Instead of a rigorous body of knowledge, the current state of public schooling is a disorganized, superficial scattershot of information.

In the interest of creative expression, grammar is no longer taught and students never build a foundation for understanding language. In the interest of promoting reading and egalitarianism, no books are declared "better" than others—and so students are encouraged to read crude graphic novels as readily as literature that is true, good or beautiful. In the interest of expediency, learning cursive is often skipped altogether -limiting students' access to reading writing from the past, and not exposing them to well-documented cognitive benefits. William Klem, senior professor of neuroscience at Texas A &M writes that "the benefits to brain development [of cursive] are similar to what you get with learning to play a musical instrument."¹

In the interest of fun, memorizing something like math facts is avoided. But math facts are a key building block for higher-level success. Stanford math education researcher Jo Boaler says that "Math facts are a very small part of mathematics, but unfortunately students who don't memorize math facts well often come to believe that they can never be successful with math and turn away from the subject,"² Antipathy to memorization also has another casualty; students lose the ability to locate themselves in the world - either geographically or

¹ Kelmm, William. Why Writing by Hand Could Make You Smarter. Psychology Today. Memory Medic Blog. March 14, 2013.

² Parker, Clifton. Learn math without fear, Stanford Expert Says. Stanford News. January 29, 2015.

throughout history. Anthony Esolon writes in *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture* that:

History for children is a grand story filled with stories, and the names and dates are important in the story for the same reason that you cannot make any sense out of a novel if you are always forgetting who is who and how old they are. For the last hundred years, educational innovators have been telling us that history is more than a matter of names and dates, as if anybody ever said it was. The result is that students don't know any of those names and dates, and because they have no cast of characters and no timeline, they can't tell any stories, either.³

In the interest of countering cultural imperialism, the study of Western Civilization has been severely shortchanged in recent years. Failing to understand our origins fundamentally undercuts our ability to avoid the mistakes and heresies of the ages—or to emulate history's triumphs.

Patrick Deneen, a professor at Notre Dame, writes about the effect this curriculum has on the students in his college classes:

"My students are know-nothings," he writes. "They are exceedingly nice, pleasant, trustworthy, mostly honest, well-intentioned, and utterly decent. But their brains are largely empty, devoid of any substantial knowledge that might be the fruits of an education in an inheritance and a gift of a previous generation. They are the culmination of western civilization, a civilization that has forgotten nearly everything about itself, and as a result, has achieved near-perfect indifference to its own culture."⁴

2. Public Schooling Teaches All Content Without Reference to Christ.

It makes sense at face value to think that children can learn their skills and facts at school, and their worldview and theology at home. But not speaking about God in the classroom is not neutrality -- it is actively working against a Christian worldview. As Christians our goal is to "take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). How are kids going to learn to train their thought life in constant obedience to Christ if God is not spoken about 8 hours a day, 5 days a week for 13 years?

How can literature be properly understood if the spiritual significance of a book can't be discussed? How can you understand *Moby Dick* without knowing about the Biblical Ahab and Ishmael? How can you discuss *The Scarlet Letter* adequately in a secular context? (A guide to teaching the book writes, "While *The Scarlet Letter* may seem dated to your students, you

³ Esolon, Anthony. *Out of the Ashes; Rebuilding American Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2017. Pp 64-65.

⁴ Deneen, Patrick. "How a Generation Lost Its Common Culture," *Minding the Campus*, February 2, 2016. Available at: <http://www.mindingthecampus.org/2016/02/how-a-generation-lost-its-common-culture/>

can demonstrate how it deals with matters that are relevant by discussing how young women are still publicly shamed for their sexuality.”⁵)

Similarly, how can history be meaningful without reference to sin, virtue, and God’s work in this world? Is history a random sequence of one culture’s power over another with no ultimate purpose? Or is it about God’s plan and how he’s carrying it out? The answer to this question drastically affects the content and approach to the study of history. It also drastically affects the conclusions young people will reach. For example, how can children have an understanding of the original meaning of the separation of church and state if the Christianity of the founding fathers is systematically ignored?

How can science’s meaning and implications be truly understood and appreciated without connection to the world as God’s creation? How can students in a public school science class learn the limitations of science if taught by instructors who approach science as the only reliable source of knowledge?

The effect of learning without reference to Christ all day every day at school is teaching our kids to live a functional dualism. At home and at church they will operate with one set of thoughts, and at school they operate with another. Instead of helping them integrate their faith into life, this produces the opposite effect: a disintegration that they must fight the rest of their lives.

If our goal as Christians is to see Christ in everything, all learning should happen with reference to him. Whether we like it or not, formation happens during school hours so it does our children a great service to address it intentionally and rigorously in a way that honors God.

3. The Methods of Public Schooling Do Not Promote Virtue

The effect of school is both in the information it conveys and in the way it conveys it. Methods do more than serve as vehicles to pass on information. They also form our imaginations and our hearts. For example, in public school, education is typically striving to be fun, innovative, affirming, relevant, child-centered, collaborative, technologically current, therapeutic, and employing multiple learning styles.

This list sounds dynamic and interesting. But here’s the problem with these methods:

a) Creates a Desire to Be Entertained

Creating the expectation for fun in every activity reinforces the entertainment-seeking nature of our culture as well as the idea that happiness is the ultimate goal in life. This impairs our children’s ability to appreciate deeper things like learning for the sake of learning, and the difference between living for the sake of happiness and a life spent glorifying God.

⁵ Spencer, Derek. “How to Teach the Scarlet Letter.” Prestwick House Publishers. Teaching Guides. Available at: <https://www.prestwickhouse.com/blog/post/2017/07/how-to-teach-the-scarlet-letter>

b) Does Not Cultivate Self-Discipline

Instead of teaching self-mastery in learning to sit still, current teaching methods simply change the expectations so that students don't have to sit still, and thus children lose the opportunity to develop patience, perseverance, and self-control. (Incidentally, not knowing how to sit still makes Sunday sermons especially distasteful, and will impair our kids' abilities to participate in the life of the church.)

c) Focuses Unduly on Self-Esteem

Giving children as much freedom as possible to express their personalities and continually emphasizing self-esteem feeds a narcissistic focus on self, which impedes the development of character ("I'm perfect just the way I am!") and hinders an appropriate sense of self-esteem which is built on genuine accomplishment.

d) Erodes Respect for Authority

Child-centered learning has the potential to erode respect for authority by sending the child the message that their opinion is what is most important -even when they don't know what they're talking about.

e) Teaches an Unquestioned Relationship with Technology

Relying heavily on technology as a teaching tool (including giving kids their own laptops in middle school) sends the message that technology is an unfettered good, instead of starting from the premise that unless we learn to be wise masters of technology, it will master us.

f) Leads to Citizens who Can't Locate themselves in History or Geography

As mentioned above, avoiding rote memorization creates "know-nothings" with a fundamental brain fog about the world.

g) Impairs Resilience

Avoiding winners and losers for the sake of self-esteem creates children who are bad winners and bad losers, and impairs children's resilience for the inevitable bumps in the road of life.

h) Wastes Time

Emphasizing a therapeutic approach to education erodes consequences for bad behavior, puts kids in control of the classroom, and wastes everyone's time.

Conclusion

All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth. -Aristotle⁶

There are no sure things in this world, especially when it comes to the choices our children will make and who they will become. As a parent, I want to do all I can to encourage my children in the faith. And one of the best ways I can do that, after committing to my marriage and to my church, is to help my kids not form an identity counter to the cross of Christ. One of the best ways that I can do this is by putting them in a school where everything is taught in relation to ultimate truth.

⁶ Quoted in Water, Mark, Ed. The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotes. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. Pg. 296.