

Public School vs. Classical Christian School

The Importance of Teachers and Friends

The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance. -Benjamin Franklin¹

We need to have accurate expectations of how classical Christian school is working in our kids' lives—and what is unique to it and what is not. In my case, we live in a good public school district. Kids here get into good colleges. The classrooms are engaging and well equipped, with teachers that have on average more professional teaching credentials than the classical Christian classrooms where my kids attend.

However, the classrooms in my local public school are also populated by teachers and students who, on average, are not striving to follow Christ. This produces real problems.

1. Public Schools Employ Teachers who Cannot Model or Cultivate Christian Virtue

“We now reach a topic more important and vital than any yet treated—that of the right teachers for our children. The kind to be sought for are those whose lives are irreproachable, whose characters are unimpugned, and whose skill and experience are of the best. The root or fountain-head of character as a man and a gentleman lies in receiving the proper education. As farmers put stakes beside their plants, so the right kind of teacher provides firm support for the young in the shape of lessons and admonitions, carefully chosen so as to produce an upright growth of character.”

- Plutarch, from “On Bringing up a *Boy*”²

Undoubtedly there are wonderful Christians serving today in public schools. But there are just as many who are antagonistic to the gospel of Christ, and in a public school system, a parent has no voice in picking their child's teacher. This is problematic because teachers are a powerful authority figure and role model in children's lives.

Most teachers—Christian or non-Christian--strive to cultivate virtue in their students. The problem is that what a non-Christian teacher is trying to cultivate in your child is the world's “virtue.” And here's the problem with the world's virtue: it can leave a Christian worse off. Anthony Esolen explains: “We are not talking about sinners here, since everyone is one of those. We are talking about people whom C.S. Lewis called the “bent,” those whose souls are warped, so that the more “honest” and consistent and idealistic they are, the worse they will be; just as a faithful adherent of Stalin is far worse than an inconsistent adherent of

¹ Quoted in Water, Mark, Ed. *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. Pg. 297.

²Quoted in Gamble, Richard, Ed. *The Great Tradition; Classic Readings on What It Means to be an Educated Human Being*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. Pg 134.

Churchill, and more dangerous than someone who is too selfish or too stupid to be an adherent of anyone at all.”³

Anthony Esolon provides a thought experiment to illustrate the situation:

Now the question for us is not whether perversion ought to be taught in school. ... Let us change the terms of the situation so that we can see what the problem really is. Suppose it is not sex we are talking about, but violence. Imagine a world in which teachers introduce children to the thrill-seeking of stabbing and slashing—with precautions, of course, so that the person who is stabbed will probably not bleed to death. Suppose the teachers bring to the school speakers who delight in cruelty, whose eyes shine when they recount the first time they gouged out the eye of an enemy. Imagine that parents are not even informed when a machete-wielding gang man demonstrates on stage the proper angle at which to slice off someone’s arm in mid-fight. Imagine safe switchblades.

The problem is that you would be dealing with people whose imaginations and moral sensibilities are so diseased as to make such things even conceivable. It will not do merely to restrain them in this or that regard. They are not fit to teach your children the multiplication table. They are not fit to be near them at all. Every moment that your children are in their presence, they will be breathing the putrescent air from the diseased heart and spirit of the instructors, in an institution whose walls stink of it, it has lingered there so long.⁴

2. Public School Exposes Christian Children to an Unfit Social Norm

Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals. (1 Corinthians 15:33)

One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. (Proverbs 12:26)

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. (Proverbs 13:20)

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

³ Esolon, Anthony. *Out of the Ashes; Rebuilding American Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2017. Pp 52-53.

⁴ Esolon, Anthony. *Out of the Ashes; Rebuilding American Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2017. Pp 52-53.

Friends have a large influence on our children, especially as they enter adolescence. The Bible knows this—as does secular society. According to a review of research led by Mary Gifford Smith of Duke University, “Gangs, cliques, and peer groups vary in their overall rates of deviance, but if one member of a group engages in problem behavior, a high probability exists that other members will do the same.”⁵

Just because a child goes to public school does not mean they will develop bad friends. Conversely, just because a child goes to classical Christian school does not mean they will develop good friends. But, a child who goes to public school will be exposed to an unprotected social situation in a way that a child at a classical Christian school generally is not. They will also observe very different standards of modesty than befit a Christian.

St. Jerome (347-430 AD), one of the most influential early theologians, writes, “Thus must a soul be educated which is to be a temple of God. It must learn to hear nothing and to say nothing but what belongs to the fear of God. It must have no understanding of unclean words, and no knowledge of the world’s songs. Its tongue must be steeped while still tender in the sweetness of the psalms.”⁶

A child at public school will have a greater exposure to the world’s songs, a greater exposure to unclean words, a greater exposure to bare midriffs and underwear hanging out, and to things that don’t belong to the fear of God. Children at classical Christian school are sinners finding their path like every other person. But their tongues will be steeped in the sweetness of the psalms, their families will (on average) be supporting them on the narrow way, and the effect is a social norm that is far different than the public school playground.

The Cost of Public Education

I live in an affluent and high-performing public school district. Thus, I am not sending my children to classical Christian school so that they can get into better colleges than at my local public school. I am not sending my kids to classical Christian school because the teachers have more education. I am not sending my kids to classical Christian school so that they will have more educational opportunities - my public school district has far fancier technology and programming.

The object of classical Christian education is much bigger than all of this. It’s so big that it’s easy to lose sight of sometimes when the tuition bill comes due. But as you can see, the free education a public school offers, in fact, comes with great costs as well.

⁵ Gifford-Smith, Mary et al. Peer Influence in Children and Adolescents: Crossing the Bridge from Developmental to Intervention Science. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. 2005 Jun; 33(3): 255-265.

⁶ Quoted in Gamble, Richard, Ed. *The Great Tradition; Classic Readings on What It Means to be an Educated Human Being*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. Pg. 211.