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To Home-school or Not to Home-school: How Both Sides Got It Wrong, Part 1

by Scott McPherson

It is highly encouraging that the topic of homeschooling is growing in popularity, a fact reflected by the increasing amounts of time being devoted to its discussion in the mainstream media. An example of this can be found in the September 3 issue of *USA Today*.

In the “Today’s debate” section of the paper, *USA Today*’s editorial position, which claimed to favor homeschooling, squared off against Dennis L. Evans, the director of doctoral programs in education leadership at the University of California, Irvine, in an attempt to provide equal space to two opposing sides on this issue. Both “sides” wrote an approximately equal number of words offering a defense of their respective positions.

The trouble is, philosophically the two positions were really closer in agreement than variance and, worse, it was to the detriment of home education.

For example, look at the way in which the “pro-homeschooling” view was presented. The *USA Today* position became immediately suspect upon reading the headline: “Support for home-schoolers can pay off for all students,” followed by the contention “Involved home-school students benefit public school community.”

This immediately raised the suspicion that the “pro-homeschooling” position would ultimately boil down to how it affects “public” (henceforth to be properly identified as “government”) education, rather than focus on the higher quality of child development that takes place when loving, caring, devoted parents take up the responsibility of teaching their own children — the essence of homeschooling.

This concern is vindicated soon enough. About halfway through the piece, after readers are told that “instead of accepting ... the valuable role home-school supporters can play ... too many traditional educators are setting up roadblocks” such as “excessive paperwork demands on home-schooling parents” and denying “home-schooled children the opportunity to participate in music and sports activities at local schools,” we’re told that “such moves can needlessly deprive public schools of valuable alliances with taxpayers and advocates of quality education.”

Say what?

Parents who choose to home-school their children are, by and large, not the least bit interested in forging “valuable alliances” with government educationists, and they have come to see the concept of government education as totally anathema to hopes of a “quality education.” Thus, for a variety of reasons, they have chosen to reject the government-run educational system in favor of one that, as *USA Today* accurately identified, “best serves their children’s needs.”

Some find the government education system too secular, too politically correct, too inefficient, too corrupt, too crime-ridden, too sexual, too faddish, too bureaucratic, too incompetent, too dangerous, or any combination thereof. Some, known as “un-schoolers,” find the entire concept of “teaching” and “schooling” to be impediments to real learning.

But whatever their motivation, it certainly has nothing to do with benefiting “all students,” let alone the “public school community.” Parents choose home education for their children because they have rejected a one-size-fits-all approach to learning in favor of an educational environment customized to their kids as *individuals* rather than as cogs in an educational assembly line. Whether *USA Today* offered these two alleged benefits as a sop to the pro-government education crowd or just poorly introduced its argument, it served only to cloud the issue of why homeschooling is a good thing.

Though *USA Today* certainly deserves credit for raising this issue and trying to identify the obstacles that many home-schooling families face (though the problem goes far beyond mere “excessive paperwork” to actual harassment and surreptitious legislative attempts to abolish the practice altogether), it fell far short of providing a clear moral and practical reason for why homeschooling is good for kids. (Writing, in the closing lines, “To date ... no evidence demonstrates a significant problem of homeschooled children receiving poor educations” and “research suggests home schooling can be very effective” is tepid, at best).

Instead, the writer offers three ways he feels will “help more states and school districts reach out to homeschooling parents.” The second two are moderately beneficial, if cosmetic, changes. These are “reducing burdensome paperwork” and “letting home-schoolers join school activities.”

Fair enough, but hardly destined to bring momentum to the homeschooling movement.

The real fly in the ointment, however, is their first proposal: “Funding online teaching.” This is defined by reference to the “Florida Virtual School [which] is a public school that conducts classes over the Internet. Students include not only home-schoolers but also students looking for courses their local schools don’t offer or more flexible class schedules.” In short, the way to help those who have run away from the system is to use *even more* public funds — taxes — to bring the system back to them. This ignores why the home-schooling parents kept their kids at home to begin with, and presumes that the flaws inherent in a government education system can be glossed over by expanding the government school curriculum to the Internet.

A more effective way of supporting homeschoolers would be to help facilitate the expansion of home-schooling networks and provide greater resources to home-schooling families. Though it may chafe the editorial style of *USA Today* — and will certainly rouse the condemnation of the government education establishment, which may help to explain the paper's failure to suggest it — these do not require any positive action on the part of government at all. They could be accomplished more easily, more effectively, and more competently by providing tax breaks, such as property-tax exemptions, to those who don't send children into the government system.

Left alone to find the best path for their children's development, and not having to pay for a system they have rejected, home-schooling parents will work with allies of their own choosing to bring a quality, genuine, loving, and personalized education to the growing minds and bodies they have created and decided to keep in their care.

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