

THE CASE FOR HOMESCHOOLING

by Roy Lechtreck

If it is not broken, don't fix it.

If it is broken, fix it.

But if it cannot be fixed, replace it.

The public schools are beyond repair. If it is not practical to replace the current system, then at least let those alone who wish to homeschool. Hassle them not. Instead, encourage them and help them.

That may sound pretty revolutionary and, some will say, un-American. But more and more parents are homeschooling their children. The best-seller *Megatrends* states that a million children are being taught at home, but that is probably an exaggeration. Yet several authors estimate that 250,000 families engage in homeschooling.

Advocates of homeschooling argue that all past attempts at reforming the public school have failed. Decentralization, open classrooms, a return to the basics, values clarification, and an emphasis on counseling and programs directed toward the potential dropout, are but a few of the recent attempts to put Humpty-Dumpty together again. Schools were even turned over to private corporations without any appreciable changes.

Parents who homeschool their children have three basic complaints against public

schools: the lack of academic rigor, the number of maladjusted graduates, and the anti-religious atmosphere. Homeschool advocates claim that homeschooling overcomes these problems. They argue that no matter whether the educational philosophy one holds is that schooling prepares for life or schooling is life, the homeschooled do better. Proponents also claim that private schools are nearly always similar to public schools, so the fundamental criticisms of public schools apply to private schools also, although to a lesser degree.

There are two ways to look at the arguments for homeschooling: by personal case histories¹ and by scholarly analysis. Although the true merit of homeschooling probably is best told as a series of case histories, this paper will examine the many studies done on various aspects of homeschooling.

Before we do so, however, we ought to look at the legal situation. Almost every state permits some type of homeschooling. The stringent rules against it have usually fallen when challenged in court, unless the challenge was based on the claim that the state may impose no regulations whatsoever on any homeschool. Existing state laws generally demand that homeschool children have a certain number of hours of schooling per year, and require parents to keep records of what is being done. These records

Mr. Lechtreck is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Montevallo in Alabama.

are to be inspected by the public school authorities.

Academic Performance

Let us now see how homeschooling compares to the public schools in academic performance. According to a study in Alabama, elementary-age homeschooled children performed at comparable levels to public school children. Furthermore, the level of education of the teacher-parent was not related to the performance of the children, and children of parents without teacher certification did as well as those who had a certified teacher-parent.²

Borg Hendrickson, in *Home School: Taking the First Step* points out other studies which say basically the same thing:

- Home-tutored children scored higher on standardized achievement tests than did their peers in the Los Angeles public schools and also made significant gains in maturation and social growth.
- A survey showed that the majority of 2,000 homeschooled children from various backgrounds achieved notable academic, attitudinal, and motivational progress.
- Homeschooled children in Arizona scored at above-average levels on standardized achievement tests in the mid-1980s.
- During the first half of the 1980s homeschooled children in Alaska consistently outscored their public school peers on standardized achievement tests.
- 76.1 percent of Oregon's homeschooled students scored above average on achievement tests in 1986.
- A 1987 comparison of Western Washington homeschooled students' achievement test scores with national norms showed that, with the exception of grade 1 math scores at the 49th percentile, the homeschooled students at each grade level scored above the 50th percentile in all subjects.
- In 1986, homeschooled students in grades 2, 3, 6, and 8 in Tennessee outscored public school students consistently. In national comparisons, the homeschooled students scored in the top 3% in math, top 4%

in spelling, top 1% in listening skills, and top 6% in environmental knowledge.

- Documentation by the Washington Public Instruction Department showed across the board higher performance by homeschooled students over public school students.³

These successes usually occur with only three hours of instruction each day. The teacher-parent, of course, has numerous texts, workbooks, videos, and materials to choose from, and when several families form a support group, an inexperienced parent can usually find answers to problems from other members of the group. The children have the almost undivided attention of the teacher without the distractions of a classroom. Homeschooled children also are much more likely to go to libraries, art, history, and science museums, and attend lectures and special events. (Several families which homeschool will often engage in these activities together.)

The suggestions of educational reformers that teachers be better prepared, that classes be smaller, and that more money be spent will not bring about any substantial improvement in academic achievement, according to George Leonard. He says that the cause of poor education is the nature of the public school today, and only drastic restructuring will work.

One argument of Leonard's that can be used to promote homeschooling is that human beings learn at different rates. Individualized education then can be much more effective than group education.

A second argument is that "a certain amount of self-confidence and self-respect is an essential precondition to learning. Yet by and large, school is set up to humiliate publicly those who, for whatever reason, are unable to come up with the right answer when called upon."⁴

A third premise of his is that "the effectiveness of any learning experience depends on the frequency, variety, quality, and intensity of that interaction."⁵ Homeschooling would obviously be the best form of interaction.

The child, Leonard continues, is a "learn-

ing animal, sure and simple. . . . By the time our children start to school, almost all of them have completed one of the most spectacular learning tasks on this planet: The mastery of spoken language with no formal instruction whatever. . . . They have enjoyed a feast of high-intensity interaction with their teaching environment, which in this case comprises all the adults and other children around them.”⁶

Social Adjustment

None of the above comes at the expense of good social adjustment. Negative, not positive, socialization is the end product of most regular schooling, according to homeschool advocates. The drastic increase in crimes perpetrated by pupils against teachers, pupils against pupils, and teachers against pupils is an indication of a system that has lost sight of its goals or cannot achieve them. How can children be properly socialized in an atmosphere of fear and chaos? Peer dependency is also an example of negative socialization. It often prevents students from maturing, developing their own individual personalities, developing a moral code separate from that of the group, becoming self-reliant, and developing an acceptable work ethic. One wonders about the viability of a system wherein most admit to cheating regularly and trying to get by with as little effort as possible.

Another aspect of negative socialization, according to many scholars and homeschool advocates, is the school’s emphasis on competition. A student is not regularly encouraged to do his best, but just to be better than someone else. Nor is he encouraged to cooperate with others. It is impressed upon him daily that progress has come about by competition. Cooperation is considered utopian, cultish, or trivial. This, however, is a serious misinterpretation of history, free enterprise, and human nature, as very ably pointed out by Alfie Kohn in *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*.⁷

The glorification of sports in high school is another type of negative socialization. Sportsmanship is fine, but when students

are given passing grades to stay on the football team and taught that winning is the only reason for playing, our priorities are misplaced. Also, the emphasis on attracting the opposite sex and having the latest in videos and cassettes places a premium on pleasure—a selfishness destructive of friendships and sound judgment. Many argue that the negative socialization in public schools produces a population lacking in those civic virtues necessary for the survival of a democracy.

After reviewing the literature on homeschooling and socialization, Brian Roy writes that “the available empirical data suggest that homeschooled youth are doing at least as well as those in conventional schools in terms of affective outcomes. . . . [In] values, attitudes, and socialization of home-schooled youth, no tangible evidence was identified that they are inferior to conventional school youth in these areas.”⁸

Religious Beliefs

Regarding the third complaint against public schools, that they are anti-religion, homeschool advocates take the position that they cannot bring up their children in their own faith and send them to public schools where that faith is challenged or mocked. If adults have a hard time keeping a faith in the face of ridicule, how much more difficult will it be for a child?

Schools can be said to be anti-religion in at least two ways: by attacking religion directly, in history, literature, psychology, and biology textbooks and library books, or by ignoring religion and thereby letting children think it is unimportant. It is interesting that schools are more willing to allow a student to pass a biology course without dissecting a frog than they are willing to allow a student to substitute some other assignment for a chapter of a textbook promoting the idea that man is different from an ape only in the number of nerve endings in the brain and its chemistry. Sex education is also a big problem, for many such courses say or imply that being sexually active is nothing to be ashamed of and everything is

okay as long as one practices "safe sex." As for history, there is little about the positive role religion has played at times in world affairs. In psychology books, sin is often presented simply as sickness. (Hitler was not evil, just insane!) The anti-religion of some literature is more subtle. Many fundamentalists object to certain four-letter words, but that is minor compared to the glorification or acceptance of evil portrayed in some novels, essays, or poems.

Courses in values clarification implicitly deny that there are moral guideposts which we ought to follow. Instead of pointing out what moral codes are necessary for society to function, and the demands placed on us by the requirements that we observe others' rights (as, for instance, spelled out in the Declaration of Independence), the values-clarification approach looks at everything from the viewpoint of a child's supposed need for self-satisfaction. The question "What must you do to be a good citizen?" has been replaced by "What personal desires do you need to fulfill to be happy?"

Parents vs. Bureaucracy

Homeschool advocates are *not* conducting an assault against the public schools. All they ask is that the public school system recognize that they are sincere in their beliefs and to leave them alone as much as possible. Their number will never be large enough to pose a threat to any regular school teacher's job or education budgets. Homeschoolers say, "Our students are as well educated and as well adjusted as yours, if not more so. So just let us be."

In many cases, in fact, homeschooling may be the only sensible way of educating children. This is especially true of families who move around a lot and families with children with exceptional abilities or disabilities.

The defense of homeschooling is not necessarily an attack on public school teachers. Most homeschoolers would probably argue

that it is not the teachers but the system that is at fault.

In the recent book *Politics, Markets, and American Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe claim that public school bureaucracy is the major culprit. After making allowances for tax revenues, size of school, economic and social background of the pupils, and many other factors, Chubb and Moe argue that the most effective schools are the less constrained schools. Too many supervisors and too many rules spoil the process.⁹

In preparing this article, I was fortunate to meet a lower-middle income, homeschooling couple from central Alabama, who have been homeschooling their two children (now 14 and 11 years of age) for six years. Both children have traveled alone to visit relatives in Germany. The elder had a \$500 bank account at the age of 12. Both have won numerous prizes in local contests. In a letter to me, the mother mentioned what is probably her greatest satisfaction as a home-school parent: "I feel that if anything . . . were to happen to my husband and myself, John and Angela would be left with the basics of survival and enough sense to make it through life knowing what hard work is. . . . They are happy children and know how to make the best of just about every situation." □

1. David Williams, Larry Arnoldsen, and Peter Reynolds, *Understanding Home Education: Case Studies in Home Schools*—Conference Paper, April 1984 (New Orleans, La.: American Educational Research Association, 1984).

2. C. J. Daane and Jennie Rakestraw, "Home Schooling: A Profile and Study of Achievement Test Results in Alabama," *ERS Spectrum*, Spring 1989.

3. Borg Hendrickson, *Home School: Taking the First Step* (Koonskia, Idaho: Mountain Meadow Press, 1989), pp. 10–11.

4. George Leonard, "The End of School," *The Atlantic*, May 1992, p. 26.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

8. Brian D. Roy, *A Comparison of Home Schooling and Conventional Schooling with a Focus on Learner Outcomes* (Corvallis, Ore.: Oregon State University, 1986), doctoral dissertation.

9. John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and American Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990).

THE POLITICS OF POWER

by John Chamberlain

The Greeks had a word for it: "Nothing in excess." Centuries later, Edmund Burke used the word prudence. He believed in a conciliatory approach to Britain's relations with America on the one hand and Ireland on the other. Thus it could be seen that Russell Kirk has had good literary forebears for his book, *The Politics of Power* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Bryn Mawr, Pa., 304 pp., \$19.95 cloth; \$8.95 paperback).

Kirk has a genuine passion for order: He has orderly listings of ten conservative principles, ten conservative events, and ten conservative books. It would have offended his sense of order to have had to settle for nine or eleven books, or six or twelve events.

Kirk is against the Behemoth State in any form whatever. It forces centralization in decision-making. Variety disappears. As a disciple of the Swiss-German economist Wilhelm Roepke, Kirk is an enemy of the "cult of the colossal." Roepke says we must find our way back to the humane scale in both economics and politics.

A Michigander, Russell Kirk is well acquainted with the gigantism of the automobile industry. Henry Ford thought that his Model T would restore the humane scale. It would allow a worker to go to work in the morning and return home to raise soybeans or whatever in the afternoon.

But the Model T failed in its mission.

The great set piece of Kirk's book turns out to be what happened in Detroit, Kirk's hometown before he moved to Piety Hill in a rural area. He grew up near the railroad tracks leading out of Detroit. All his life he has had to go in and out of the automobile city. The decline of the automobile business had its reflex: the city, struggling with joblessness, became a mugging center with murders common every corner. Only the foolhardy dared to go out.

Kirk has a scunner on the word "ideology." To become an ideologue is to him, equivalent to making a pact with the devil. It may be admitted that ideology is not a pretty word. But most people use it loosely, as an object of search. To have settled with a philosophy, putting ideas together in a bundle does not mean that one can never change one's mind.

Luckily, Kirk is a prime storyteller. He recreates the atmosphere of Tennessee agrarianism with a beautiful character portrait of Donald Davidson, who refused to go through New York City on his way to his summer home in Vermont. His picture of Detroit in decay is hereby recommended to Jack Kemp, the man who wants to bring business to the inner city.

One can forget the semantics of Kirk's approach while delighting in his storytelling power. So read him for this and the searing section on Detroit's collapse. Don't worry about the book's title. □