

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

The Rise and the Demise of Church Academies Part 2 of Education Series

By Darla Isackson

[Read Part 1 Here](#)

Author's Note: Each child, school, and situation is different. It is not the author's place, nor intention to suggest a mass exodus from public schools. Because these schools are full of precious children, we need to be as supportive of good teachers and worthy school programs as possible. Thomas S. Monson, said "The Church has always had a vital interest in public education and encourages its members to participate in parent-teacher activities and other events designed to improve the education of our youth." ("Precious Children, a Gift from God," Ensign, June 2000, 2,)

The responsibility for decisions concerning the education of children has been placed squarely on the shoulders of parents. It is wise for parents to become as well informed as possible and to make prayerful decisions in regard to the education of each of their children. And it is wise for the rest of us to be supportive of individual parents' decisions. The Lord does not give one parent revelation in regard to what other parents should do with their own children. Consequently, it is not our place to judge each other, but only to seek to know the Lord's will concerning our own stewardships.

The purpose of this series on education is to increase awareness of:

1. the history of LDS education
2. the evolution of public education to the present day
3. Educational options available for parents to consider

(This article, Part 2, continues the history of LDS education up to 1920)

In Part One, "Education As the Early Prophets Saw It," I recounted the history of education after the Saints entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. A brief summary:

- Education started in single teacher schools held in ward meeting houses for as little as two months out of the year. They taught religion and the 3 R's, and utilized the scriptures and religious writings as textbooks.

- As people not of our faith began to flood the territory, schools were started by other denominations, and were funded by congregations in the East. They became known as "mission" schools. They set out to provide such high quality schooling for their own children that the Saints would send their children too; their stated objective was to curb the "threat of Mormonism" by baptizing Mormon children. Many LDS children were sent to these schools.

- The schools started by the Saints became "district" schools when the Saints ignored counsel to separate and shoulder the cost of education by tuition payments, and instead accepted funding from federal and local taxes. By so doing they relinquished curriculum control.

For clarification:

- Schools started by other denominations were called "mission schools."

- Government and tax-funded public schools were called "district schools."

- Private LDS schools funded by the Church and tuition payments were called "academies."

Most of the information in this article will again be drawn from the book: Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools by Jack Monnett (Archive Publishers, Heber City, Utah 1998). (To avoid confusion: In the first article I was quoting from the original printing of this book. On the cover of the most current printing, the subtitle "A look at principle-centered education through the prophets and LDS educational history" is no longer used, and Brother Monnett's given name "John D. has been changed to the name he always uses, "Jack")

In this article I have also drawn from a talk called, "Curriculum in Early Utah Schools," Dr. John D. Monnett, LDS Education Forum, August 1998.) Monnett holds degrees in education from Brigham Young University and a PhD in the Historical Foundations of Education from the University of Utah. He has taught in the LDS Church Education System as well as in public

schools.

Putting the Church Schools in Context of the Times

I want to backtrack a bit from where my first article left off to explain more about the conditions that contributed to the original Mormon-founded “private” schools becoming government and tax-funded public schools (known as district schools.) We need to understand why President John Taylor gave the directive in 1886 to pull away from the district schools (most of which had been originally started by Church leaders) and create separate tuition-funded church schools called “academies.”

It is helpful to realize that during the time John Taylor was president of the Church the Saints had been going through another time of great persecution. Numerous settlers not of our faith flooded Utah, especially after the railroad connection was completed in 1869. Understandably, the newcomers resisted LDS doctrine being taught in the classroom, and wanted non-LDS teachers for their children. The Edmunds act in 1882 and the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887 wrested political control from the Mormon citizens, made polygamy illegal, and disenfranchised most Latter-day Saint men--they could no longer vote. Many living plural marriage went into hiding. Conditions were chaotic. A tremendous transformation took place in Utah in the schools in response to these conditions--particularly in Salt Lake City.

Even by the school year 1891-92, while only 37% of the students attending district schools in Salt Lake City were not members of the Church, 92% of the teachers were not members. Why? The school boards were elected by the voters; when the LDS men could not vote, nonmembers voted for nonmember school board members, who, in turn, hired nonmember teachers. Jack Monnett suggest we consider the difference it would make to LDS children whether their school teacher was a faithful member who had survived the Haun’s Mill massacre versus or a nonmember teacher who had recently moved to Utah from Missouri. It is easy to understand why such a large percentage of nonmember teachers would be alarming to the Brethren.

The Stress of the Times, and President Taylor’s Views

Joyce Kinmont, president of LDS Home Education Association, said, “President John Taylor led the church through the difficult persecutions over polygamy. He saw his own government become hostile and take

control of public education; he saw teachers in the classroom whose intention it was to change the value system and world view of the LDS students . . . He said so much about the importance of an LDS education for LDS youth that Brother Monnett has put together a book about it. [She is referring to Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools].” (from a newsletter of the LDS Home Education Association)

Chapter Two of Monnett’s book tells the affect of the persecutions, the decline of church influence in district schools, and the political events that saw the minority take control over the majority. It tells how strongly President Taylor felt that these district schools were no longer acceptable, that LDS children should not be sent there, and that parents would be held accountable if they were .

In Chapter Three of Monnett’s book President Taylor taught that only by separating from common systems of schooling and by incorporating revealed principles into education, could the Saints achieve their desired goal. He said that God "expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth," including her " schools and education."

In October of 1886 John Taylor, from “the underground” in Kaysville, Utah, sent a message to be read in general conference, which was being held in Coalville, because of persecution. This was the message I quoted in the last article that began, “it is pleasing to notice the increased feeling of anxiety on the part of the Saints to have their children educated in schools where the doctrines of the Gospel and the precious records which God has given us can be taught and read.”

Setting Up Church Schools

Monnett explained, “In 1888, government pressure was so intense that the Church Education System was initiated; even though [many] Church members had neither shown interest nor intent to fund it. Church leaders hoped that government threats and outside pressure would help them realize the importance of conducting their own schools.” (Ibid, pp. 89) President Wilford Woodruff, who became the prophet after John Taylor’s death in 1887, was read to implement President Taylor’s suggestions. He said, “We feel that the time has arrived when the proper education of our children should be taken in hand by us as a people.” (Circular Letter to Stake Presidents, June 8, 1888)

Several prophets had said that the scriptures were the most important

textbooks for school, and now they were willing to set up Church schools to make that happen again. This was a tremendous undertaking. The Stake Presidents were instructed to set up at least one Academy in each stake and called by the stake name. They were to call to their school boards “men of character and integrity among the people, who will be able to use an influence in the collection of funds, so that academies may be established, good faculties employed, and education be made so cheap that it will be within the reach of the humblest in the land.” Tax money would not be used; parents were expected to pay a small tuition. How small? In a forum talk Monnett said, “Do you know how much the Mormon schools cost? Usually \$2, maybe \$3 a semester. Now of course that was more back then, but it was still considered very reasonable. So what happened?” (“Curriculum in Early Utah Schools,” Dr. Monnett, LDS Education Forum, August 1998)

Karl G. Maeser was the first superintendent of the new church schools. He told the academy teachers: “Judging the educational system in vogue in the United States by its fruits we need only refer to the statements made by many thinking men of this nation to the effect that evil results accrue from the practice of excluding Deity from textbooks and school rooms, and thus tacitly encouraging a feeling of infidelity, which is rapidly growing among the youth of this land. That system of Godless education has proved unsatisfactory, and we will have none of it.” (General Board of Education Minutes. April 9, 1989. LDS Archives.)

Minimal Support of Church Schools by the Saints

Unfortunately, a large percentage of the people . . . did not support the church schools, but sent their children to the District schools. George Q. Cannon wrote in the *Juvenile Instructor* (Volume 25, p. 243) that Church schools (academies) “should receive the fostering care and help of every Latter-day Saint who is able to give any assistance to them.” The beginning of the new school year brought little response to President Cannon’s plea. In his article he had told Church members that “It will be a great temptation to many people to send their children to the free schools that will now be supported by our taxes, but of what value is learning if it is acquired at the expense of faith?”

The “temptation” was evidently too great for Church members and the year showed a substantial decline in Church school enrollment. (Ibid, p. 154) The principal of the Box Elder Academy wrote to brother Maeser, “We believe the Saints should say today as Israel of old, ‘God hath spoken, let

Israel obey and patronize these schools and fill them to overflowing.” Yet in the 1890-91 academic term, [the year the Free School Act was passed] Box Elder Academy began the semester with 139 students and ended with 25. The school was closed following the second term of the 1892-93 school year. (Ibid, p. 153)

Was the Issue Money?

Many factors entered into the Saints’ decisions. At the risk of oversimplification of a complicated issue, we will attempt to analyze the reasons. Brother Monnett said, “It was obvious that the free school mentality had swept the territory. Free schools reminded Saints of how little they had (or how little they thought they had in relation to others) and what a burdensome expense church education was, even though President Woodruff had instructed charges to be “cheap” enough for everyone to attend. Money had always been tight, but prior to free schools, tuition was not an issue. Free education made the extra expense an issue and allowed the Saints to prioritize education with their other expenses. . .

“Money is a great prioritizer; it is spent on things that are most important. Sometimes, there is literally none, but other times there is simply none that we want to spend on things that are not really important to us . . . To be sure, following the initial announcement these were hard times for the Saints and school tuition was a sacrifice; but the Lord did not feel that it was an unreasonable sacrifice to obtain schooling based on celestial principles. The Saints had to decide how their limited money, and later how their surplus money would be spent. “ (Ibid, pp. 158-159)

President Cannon editorialized in the *Juvenile Instructor* (Vol. 27, p. 546): “There are parents who are very favorable to their children receiving education, but appear to be indifferent as to the character of the teaching which they receive. They do not seem to place any value on their children being taught the principles of their religion. Apparently, therefore, they would as soon their children be taught in schools or colleges where religion is entirely ignored as in an academy taught by Latter-day Saints. . . The Latter-day Saints have forsaken everything for their religion. They have been willing to die for it . . How persons who have had these feelings concerning religion in their own case can be so careless as to expose their children to infidelity seems a great mystery.”

Monnett suggested that “rejecting the prophets and fostering dependency on taxes for their education, the Saints were more easily converted to

public schools rather than to the sacrifice attendant in church schools . . . Many Church members were placated by what they determined were higher educational standards established by the State.”

Was the Issue Quality of Teachers and Facilities?

In his forum talk, Monnett said, “Why did the members of the Church literally vacate their own schools? [Money] was some of it, but not all of it. Would you do that today? Can you imagine: if there were a directive today that said ‘Every Stake Center will now become a school,’ how would you feel about it? . . . Well, there were those who followed the prophets, but there were those who did not. Sometimes teachers were the issue. Some Saints said ‘We think we know more than the prophets because so-and-so has a degree from such-and-such university and he’s teaching in the public school and we know brother so-and-so over here and we know his family. We know their weaknesses. And so we’re going to go over to the public school instead.’

Many saw the public schools as better funded, better organized, and offering a “higher quality of education.” They justified this opinion as they saw the Church academies struggling with smaller and smaller enrollments--and consequently fewer teachers, etc.

The Temptation to Rejoin Babylon

When an overwhelming number of the Saints sent their children to the public schools, the church schools struggled financially. Still, the leaders reasoned that neither academic nor facility superiority could compensate for gospel-centered curriculum, and they struggled on. The Church provided ever-increasing financial support as they were able, but the support of the Saints did not increase.

Brother Monnett said, “The key was separation. It was and is so difficult to separate (or at least to stay apart) from the worldly things; we seem to gravitate back to them. The early Saints had left everything and traveled west in their covered wagons to a barren valley where incredible hardships awaited. A few years later Brigham Young asked them: ‘What are you here for? What did you come for? Virtually all of you say you left Babylon and came here to build up the kingdom of God; but our acts speak as loud, and a little louder than our words can.’ (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 15. p. 159) Even in the semi-isolated territory, Babylon (the world) was still evident.”(Ibid p. 207)

Was the Problem Lack of Communication? Is It Today?

My friend, who read an early draft of this article, could not believe that the Latter-day Saints would not send their children en masse to the Church academies if they knew all about them. Since communications were so much more difficult then, she concluded that many people were not informed. That was not the case. Virtually every Latter-day Saint was made aware through general conference addresses, Church magazines, and stake and ward leadership. (Remember, an academy was set up in every stake. It would be very hard not to know about that!)

To bring this situation into focus, perhaps all we have to do is consider current directives from the prophets which we are all aware of, and guess the percentage of member participation. After repeated counsel for decades, how many have a full year supply of food? How many are actively and consistently working on their family history? (Two years ago Brother Turley, director of family history for the whole Church said at our multi-stake family history staff meeting that the estimate was 5%) How many are holding regular family home evenings and daily family scripture study? (Hopefully that percentage is much higher) Is our lack of obedience because we haven't been told about these things?

Wandering Sheep Must Still Be Fed

Monnett said that roughly 90% of the members of the church opted for public schools and only 10% sent their children to the LDS schools. "Jesus' primary charge to his Church was to 'Feed my sheep.' Assuming that we are shepherds responsible for our sheep and only 10% follow us while 90% scamper into a different valley, what should we do? We know that our path is best, but should we ignore the 90% who did not follow us and concentrate on the 10% who did? We would be poor stewards if we did. Likewise, when 90% of the Lord's sheep rejected his counsel and attended public schools, they could not be left to flounder. The Lord's education system was built upon correct principles; however, the most correct principle was the Church's stewardship to feed the Lord's sheep. That has to be done [in] cooperation of district [public] schools, the arena selected by the Saints." (Ibid p. 188-189)

Monnett continued, "The Lord didn't say, 'I told you so! Look at all the problems because you didn't do it my way.'" Instead, he offered options within the parameters the Saints had set for themselves. . . Through his prophets he said that he would work on their turf. It was a limited turf that

had both curricular and personnel restraints that necessarily diluted celestial education. Working within their framework, other programs were developed; many of which are still found among the Saints today. The prophets hadn't abandoned correct principles. As much as they were able, they held to the educational criteria the Lord had established but redefined their application to accommodate the Saints. The Saints were not left without guidance; unfortunately, however, they lost some of their blessings. The Lord said, 'I command and men obey not; I revoke and they receive not the blessings.'" (D&C 58:32) (Ibid, pp. 212-213)

"Again, the Savior's analogy of the shepherd: The shepherd knows the way to the grassiest meadows and attempts to lead his sheep. [When they opt instead for more easily available food] as a wise shepherd, he stays with his flock and continues teaching them to listen and understand him. Meanwhile, the sheep have lost the benefit of the grassy meadows and must learn while eating on the stony hillsides." (Ibid, p. 213)

Church Academies Are Closed in 1920

Although the stalwart Saints who were fully supporting the Church schools protested and mourned, "The order to eliminate church academies was given on February 24, 1920. By that time, the released-time seminary program had been sufficiently field-tested and church educators recognized its potential. Academies [academy buildings that were separate and not held in regular church buildings] were sold to school districts [for very small amounts] and either used for schools or other public use." Several academies in Idaho, Utah, and Arizona were given to their respective states and became state colleges. (Ibid, p. 200)

What Happened Then?

"The concern for children's learning has been a ceaseless thrust within the Church. From the early seminary classes (which were ward-controlled elementary schools), academies and religion classes, to Elder Joseph F. Merrill's initial recommendation for a released-time seminary class in Salt Lake City in 1912, the Church has embarked on a continued educational course. " (Ibid, p. 228) The seminary program was soon in place to supplement the secular curriculum of students attending higher grades of district schools.

Interestingly, the religious education program for the early and middle grades was originally called the "seminary" program. But when the Church

academies were closed, the religious education of the young children was left to the parents and the wards, and the current seminary program was instituted only for grades 9-12. How well have we shouldered the load? The Primary program of the Church is doing an incredible job. But are the parents teaching the children on a daily basis in the home? Are our children being given the daily building blocks they need to build a strong enough foundation to counter the weight of the worldly influences all around them?

Monnett concluded. "The prophets (Brigham Young, John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff) all understood and taught that formal education should not be funded by public taxes, but should be shouldered independently by church members. They encouraged school autonomy and attempted to implement the principle as much as the Saints would allow. Church members, however, were content with the world's solution for educational financing. Had the Saints followed the prophets, the public school system would not have been the forum for Latter-day Saint education. As much as the prophets desired education in a private and controlled setting, it was unfeasible because of the Saints reluctance to sacrifice tuition payments--as well as most other church offerings." (Ibid, p. 89) [The Saints of those days weren't doing well at tithing either; not many years later, President Lorenzo Snow called them to repentance on that principle.]

"The living prophet is the mouthpiece of the Lord. Although the prophet and General Authorities warned Church members about supporting schools through public taxes, their words were ignored and taxation progressively became the chief source of school revenue. Of the role of prophets, President Ezra Taft Benson succinctly said, "follow them [the prophets] and be blessed; reject them and suffer." (Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p. 334) Following countless warnings about free schools and the inherent problems of general taxation, the Saints allowed themselves to follow the politically popular funding model and to literally place their trust in the 'arm of flesh.'" (Ibid p. 88)

Why Didn't I Hear About This When My Children Were Little?

I've asked that question, as have many others. Brother Monnett suggests it is because, "The Lord will not continually warn us about the same things for his 'Spirit shall not always strive with man.' (D&C 1:33) The same verse introduces its warning by cautioning that "he that repents not, from him shall be taken even the light which he has received.' The scriptures, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, all of the prophets and virtually all of the

General Authorities have said that the standard works should be a major part of our children's educational curriculum. The Saints in the late 1800s rejected their teachings [in this matter] and determined to follow the pressures and conventional wisdom of the period which taught that religious training should be kept distinct from secular learning. Alma explained that prophets are instructed to only give 'the portion of the Lord's word which he doth grant unto the children of men according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him' In other words, as we 'harden our hearts' to the revelations of God, we will receive the 'lesser portion of the word' (Alma 12:9-11)." (Ibid, p. 92)

Many prophets since those quoted in this article have addressed the subject of education. Their views, their warnings, and the escalation of problems in the arena of public education since the close of Church academies in 1920 up to the present will be the focus of Part 3 of this series.

Note: For more information about the book Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools, or to obtain copies go to:

www.archive.publishers.com or call Brother Monnett at 435-785-8090

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