

## MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education Series, Part 4

### Public Schools vs. the Fundamental Purposes of Education

By Darla Isackson

Click here for [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#) [Part 3](#)

*Author's note:*

*I feel it important to offer a preview of the rest of the series. After this article I will move from analyzing the problem to the happier topic of possible solutions. I am currently interviewing parents, gathering information, and planning articles that will include the following:*

*1. Experiences of parents whose children seem to be successfully weathering the storms of the public school system--for example, a family in North Carolina whose children excel in their predominantly non-LDS schools and are staying firm in the faith. I hope to explore what such parents are doing in an attempt to counter the negative aspects of public schools and how they offer extra support to live gospel standards.*

*2. Experiences of parents who are combining public school with home school--possibly teaching academics at home but taking children to school for classes in music, drama, art, sports, or taking advantage of the option of BYU Continuing Education's full schedule of high school classes--online or paper, which can supplement a parent's resources. (Some of these classes can also give high school students college credit.)*

*3. Experiences of parents who have enrolled their children in private LDS academies. How parents can search out available academies or even help start them. I'll give a brief overview of how the academies operate, how they differ from public schools, what parents and students are saying about them, what they are experiencing. Also how some academies mesh their programs with public school music, drama, sports, etc.*

*4. Experiences of parents who are working together in LDS Co-op home schooling. Assessing the ups and downs, the problems and the possibilities, various ways to organize.*

*5. Experiences of parents, and even grandparents who are successfully home schooling. The organizations and the curriculum resources that support them. How to assess your own strengths and capabilities and the potential benefits and liabilities of home schooling for your own children. Where to go for information and support from others who have sailed these uncharted seas.*

*Readers who would like to contribute ideas and experiences for any of the above articles may e-mail me at: [darla2@xmission.com](mailto:darla2@xmission.com). I would love to hear from you!*

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In a talk titled the “Charted Course of the Church in Education,” President J. Reuben Clark Jr. quoted Daniel Webster, “When the mariner has been tossed for many days in thick weather, and of an unknown sea, he naturally avails himself of the first pause in the storm, the earliest glance of the sun, to take his latitude, and ascertain how far the elements have driven him from his true course. Let us imitate this prudence, and before we float farther on the waves . . . refer to the point from which we departed, that we may at least be able to conjecture where we now are” (*The Ensign*, September, 2002, p. 55). This quote eloquently states my intent. Part 1 and 2 of this series referred to one point from which we departed--the educational direction of prophets in the early days of the Church. In Part 3 W. Cleon Skousen took us back to the Founding Fathers, and added the dimension of what *they* intended for American schools--an even earlier point from which we have departed. Skousen summarized with clarity the intention of the Founding Fathers to safeguard the exercise of religion, knowing that the fulfillment of their dream of democracy rested on the ability of the people to stay true to the basic religious tenants they all espoused. They trusted that these tenants would be passed on to future generations not only in the homes, but in the schools. They specifically laid out their plan for schools to teach basic religion and morality as well as secular knowledge. In two consecutive parts, posted on July 2 and 5 you will find the text of pp. 675-688 from Skousen’s book *The Making of America*. If you missed this excellent summary, I suggest you go back and read it. He recounts the history of our government’s turn against the First Amendment and how far off course the storms of Godless education have driven us from the Founding Fathers’ vision.

## Vital Questions

**In this article, Part 4 of the educational series, I want to examine one more “point from which we have departed” in order to more clearly “conjecture where we now are.” In order to truly see what the Lord would have us do in regard to the education of our children, we must first understand why education is so important after all. We must be clear about what we lack in order to improve.**

- **What are the fundamental purposes of education?**
- **How well did the schools in the 1800s and 1900s accomplish these purposes?**
- **How well are the schools today accomplishing these purposes?**

## Searching for Answers

### 1. What Are the Fundamental Purposes of Education?

Respected Church scholar and BYU professor Hugh Nibley, on a tape series called “Preparing for the Millennium,” suggests that the emphasis on education strictly to qualify us to make more money is totally misguided--that true education should refine the soul, make us more godlike. We should be educated not just to make a living, but to build a meaningful life.

Educator and author Dr. Jack Monnett said, “True education is not restricted to the intellect but includes character, morals, habits, and development of Christlike love. . . The prophets explained that a fallacy in public education was the division of moral instruction on one hand and academic instruction on the other. By amplifying the intellect and denying character curriculum, schools had assisted in the creation of an out-of-balanced society that is ‘ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.’ In his letter to Timothy, Paul further explained that learning without knowledge would be symptomatic of the last days because of uncorrected character flaws, such as people coming to love “their own selves, [being] covetous, boasters, proud,

blasphemous, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy" etc. (2 Tim. 3: 1-7). President David O. McKay, formerly an academy principal, a Commissioner of Church Education, and the President of the Church, cautioned that, 'The principle aim of schools and colleges seems to be to give the students purely intellectual attainments and to give but passing regard to the nobler and more necessary development along moral lines.'

Monnett continued, "True education was intended to be more inclusive. More specifically he [Pres. McKay] taught that: 'true education does not assist merely in the acquiring of a few facts of science, history, literature, or art, but in the development of character. True education awakens a desire to conserve health by keeping the body clean and undefiled. True education trains in self-denial and self-mastery. True education regulates the temper, subdues passion, and makes obedience to social laws and moral order a guiding principle of life. It develops reason and inculcates faith in the living God as the eternal, loving Father of all' (Conference Report, April, 1932, p. 64)." (*Revealed Education Principles & the Public Schools*, Jack Monnett, Archive Publishers, Heber City, Ut, 1999, p. 123-124)

Although these words may sound lofty and idealistic, one would be hard put to argue with them. I would even be inclined to add to them that true education should encourage the flowering of individual gifts and talents--the discovery of self, the ability to think one's own thoughts, and the courage to express one's own opinions. To keep all these high-minded goals in perspective we need to see them as stars to steer by, not sticks to beat ourselves with.

Interestingly enough, such ideals are founded in practicality. It is impractical to steep the mind in facts alone. It is also impractical to attempt to press all students into the same mold, because individuality is the imprint of heaven and cannot be erased. It is practical to strengthen character, to encourage individual growth, and to learn the spiritual disciplines that make daily life a practice in right living, not just an intellectual exercise. Monnett said, "The Lord's education program is necessarily practical; real learning includes application [including moral application]. The prophets have always spoken of education in terms of practicality. Brigham Young told the Saints that, "We should seek substantial information and trust little to that kind of so-called learning that is based entirely on theory . . . Let our school teachers seek constantly to fasten upon the young mind useful information" (*Journal of Discourses*. Vol 9, p. 369). "Do not confine their study to theory only, but put in practice what they learn from books" (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 17, p.45, April 18, 1874). (Ibid p. 197)

**2. How Well Did the Schools in the 1800s Accomplish the Fundamental Purposes Stated Above?** Concerns about quality of education are not new. Neither is the trend to substitute strictly intellectual knowledge for wisdom and practical life skills. The following excerpt is taken from the inaugural address of Joseph Smith upon being elected Mayor of the city of Nauvoo. He quoted from a current periodical, *Alexander's Messenger*, to substantiate his views concerning practical versus theoretical education:

"The following observations in relation to false education, from *Alexander's Messenger*, so perfectly accords with my feelings and views on this highly important subject, that I cannot do better than incorporate them in this message,

'Among the changes for the worse, which the world has witnessed within the last century, we include that specious, superficial, incomplete way of doing certain things, which were formerly thought to be deserving of care, labor and attention. It would seem that appearance is now considered of more moment than reality. The modern mode of education is an example in point. Children are so instructed as to acquire a smattering of everything, and as a matter of consequence, they know nothing properly. Seminaries and academies deal out their moral and

natural philosophy, their geometry, trigonometry, and astronomy, their chemistry, botany, and mineralogy, until the mind of the pupil becomes a chaos; and like the stomach when it is overloaded with a variety of food, it digests nothing, but converts the superabundant nutriment to poison. This mode of education answers one purpose--it enable people to seem learned; and seemingly, by a great many is thought all sufficient. Thus we are schooled in quackery, and are early taught to regard showy and superficial attainments as most desirable. Every boarding school miss is a Plato in petticoats, without an ounce of that genuine knowledge, that true philosophy, which would enable her to be useful in the world and to escape those perils with which she much necessarily be encompassed. Young people are taught to use a variety of hard terms which they understand but imperfectly--to repeat lessons which they are unable to apply--to astonish their grandmothers with a display of their parrot-like acquisition; but their mental energies are clogged and torpified with a variety of learned lumber, most of which is discarded from the brain long before the possessor knows how to use it. This is the quackery of education.” (Ibid, pp. 249-250) There is obvious application to our educational headaches today.

In 1831 the commandment was given for the Saints to write their own gospel-based textbooks. Yet the textbooks at that time were full of Bible quotes and solid values. For instance, Jack Monnett wrote, “A few years ago I ran across a public school history book entitled *The Village School Geography*. It was written in 1835, just four years following the commandment [to the Saints to write their own textbooks] and the same year that the Kirtland Temple was dedicated. It was written and used in the same area of the country, and was typical of books of those times. You and I would look at this book and we'd say, ‘Hey, this is a pretty good little book.’ For example, Chapter 1 begins, ‘Genesis, Chapter 1: Our Father in Heaven made the skies above and the earth below,’ and it goes on to say that ‘we are now going to talk about all of Heavenly Father's creations.’ All of Chapter 1 is about the book of Genesis. Wouldn't you like to take a history class like that? Wouldn't you feel comfortable sending your children to a school that used *The Village School Geography*? I think you would. The book ends, ‘Now that we've learned about our Father in Heaven's creations, we've learned more respect for Him. We also have to have respect for our teachers and respect for our parents.’ The next paragraph says, ‘Be sure to say your prayers each night, ask for blessings and you'll receive blessings in this life and in the world to come.’

“That was part of the public school curriculum in early Ohio, yet the interesting thing is that the Brethren, in 1831, said that was not sufficient. As good as it was, it was not sufficient. What else did we need? We needed specific curriculum that directly reflected the gospel of Jesus Christ--not the Bible as interpreted by others, but the literal gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus the commandment to write textbooks for our children.” This commandment was given in D&C 55: 4: “And again, verily I say unto you, [speaking to W. W. Phelps] you shall be ordained to assist my servant Oliver Cowdery to do the work of printing, and of selecting and writing books for schools in this church, that little children also may receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me.”) Beginning in the 1880s many gospel-centered textbooks were written--some referred to in my last article and many reprinted by Archive Publishers and available again to the Saints. However, as explained in Part 2, by the late 1880s the public schools in Utah had become tax-supported and controlled by school boards that were predominantly non-LDS. Use of modern scriptures, references to Mormon doctrine, or use of Mormon textbooks was forbidden.

### **3. How Well Did Public Schools in the 1900s Accomplish Education's Fundamental Purposes?**

In the 1915 General Conference, President Joseph F. Smith said, “I believe that we are running education mad. I believe that we are taxing the people more for education than they should be taxed. This is my sentiment. And especially is it my sentiment when the fact is known that all these burdens are placed upon the taxpayers of the state to teach the learning or education of this world. God is not in it. Religion is excluded from it. The Bible is excluded from it.” As the

public schools veered further and further from the religious and character-building goals of education, in the late 1800s the Church had established academies where these true values could be taught--but only 10% of the Saints supported the Church academies, and by 1920, all except those for higher education had failed financially and been shut down.

### **Encouraging LDS Teachers**

At the time the Church academies were discontinued, David O. McKay was Commissioner of Church Education. In addition to vigorously promoting the seminary and institute programs, he spearheaded a huge movement to encourage faithful Latter-day Saints to enter the teaching profession. The LDS colleges--BYU, Dixie, Snow, and Ricks for awhile became primarily teacher colleges. The idea was to counter-balance the loss of control of the public schools by loading the schools with as many good faithful LDS teachers as possible. Though they were restricted from teaching the Book of Mormon and exclusively Mormon doctrine, they were not at that time restricted from praying, teaching from the Bible, and teaching sound moral values. By the 40s, however, these colleges were no longer primarily teacher colleges and by the 50s and 60s we as a people were no longer providing substantial numbers of LDS teachers to the public schools.

### **The Ruling Against Prayer in Public Schools**

Then, in 1962 came the blow of the Supreme Court ruling against prayer in public schools. Here are some of the things the Brethren said concerning this decision.

Boyd K. Packer said, "Just a year after I had been called as a General Authority, I saw President McKay very agitated. I had not seen him that way before. We were in a meeting in the temple with all of the General Authorities in October 1962, prior to the general conference. When President McKay came in, he was obviously very agitated. When it came his time to speak, he told us that the Supreme Court had made a decision announcing the prohibition of prayer in the public schools." President McKay's printed statement about this decision, which Elder Packer then mentioned in part, was: "The Supreme Court of the United States has made it unpatriotic for public schools to teach your children to pray. By making that unconstitutional, the Supreme Court severs the connecting cord between the public schools of the United States and the source of divine intelligence, the Creator himself. Evidently the Supreme Court misinterprets the true meaning of the First Amendment, and are now leading this Christian nation down the road to atheism." ("Parental Responsibility," *Relief Society Magazine*, Dec. 1962, p. 878. Also printed in the *Church News* June 22, 1963]. Elder Packer continued, "That statement and his anxiety was prophetic of what has come now and the drift that we have seen." (Boyd K. Packer, David O. McKay Symposium, BYU, Oct 9, 1996) The First Amendment reads "Congress shall make NO law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In Part 3, Cleon Skousen explained in detail how badly that First Amendment has been trampled, how much the free exercise of religion has been restricted.

Just four years ago, when President Hinckley was asked by the Press: "What about prayer and meditation in public schools?" President Hinckley replied: "We took a terrible step backwards some years ago. I don't know whether we'll recover from it." (Gordon B. Hinckley, Speech to National Press Club, Q&A Session, March 8, 2000)

### **The Danger of Minority Rule in Public Schools**

Even though the vast majority of parents who send children to public schools believe in God and believe in the Bible, the minorities who do not believe in these things have taken control of what is

taught. Although minority rights should always be protected; the rights of the majority should never be sacrificed for those of the minority. This is possibly the greatest danger of public schools. In a 1970 general conference address, President Benson quoted this prophetic insight:

“The tenth plank of Karl Marx’s Manifesto for destroying our kind of civilization advocated the establishment of “free education for all children in public schools.” There were several reasons why Marx wanted government to run the schools. . . One of them [was that] ‘It is capable of exact demonstration that **if every party on the State has the right of excluding from public school whatever he does not believe to be true, then he that believes most must give way to him that believes least, and then he that believes least must give way to him that believes absolutely nothing, no matter in how small a minority the atheists or agnostics may be.** It is self-evident that on this scheme, if it is consistently and persistently carried out in all parts of the country, the United States system of popular education will be the most efficient and widespread instrument for the propagation of atheism which the world has ever seen.” (*Improvement Era*, December, 1970, p. 49)

Many believe we are now experiencing a prohibition of the free exercise of *any* religion in the schools—except the negative “religion” of atheism. In a talk given to graduating students at the University of Utah and later printed in the *Ensign*, Elder Packer said, “There is a crying need for the identification of atheism for what it is, and that is, a religion—albeit a negative one, nevertheless it is a religious expression. It is the one extreme end of the spectrum of thought concerning the causation of things. Those who are spiritually sensitive recognize God as the cause, a living being who rules in the affairs of man. The so-called atheist declares that God is not—not just that he isn’t the cause of things, but that he indeed is *not*. We put sunshine and rain under the heading of weather. It would be a little ridiculous to talk about clear weather and cloudy and claim that the two are not related and could not be considered as part of the same discipline. It is equally ridiculous to separate theism from atheism and claim that they are two separate matters, particularly when we condone, in some instances encourage, the atheist to preach his doctrine in the . . . classroom, and then at once move with great vigor to eliminate any positive reference to God. He is protected, as they say, by the principle of academic freedom.” He continued, “I submit that the atheist has no more right to teach the fundamentals of his sect in the public school than does the theist. Any system in the schools or in society that protects the destruction of faith and forbids, in turn, the defense of it must ultimately destroy the moral fiber of the people. Is any lesson more abundantly clear in our present society?” (Boyd K. Packer, “What Every Freshman Should Know,” (*Ensign*, Sept. 1973, p. 32)

Two decades later, Elder Packer said, “Moral values are being neglected and prayer expelled from public schools on the pretext that moral teaching belongs to religion. At the same time, atheism, the secular religion, is admitted to class, and our youngsters are proselyted to a conduct without morality.” (“The Father and the Family,” *Ensign*, May 1994, p. 19)

Joyce Kinmont said, “There is something especially interesting about that quote: So many parents think their children need to stay in the school system to be missionaries, but President Packer says it is *our children* who are being proselyted!”

#### **4. 2004 and the Fundamental Purposes of Education**

Although we may still find many upstanding and committed teachers in public schools, many of the best are leaving because of the constraints of the system and various negative conditions. It seems evident that our schools in general have resigned from the basic purposes of education stated earlier.

One of the most eye-opening books I've read on that subject is *Dumbing Us Down* written by John Taylor Gatto. Gatto was a public schoolteacher for 30 years, and was New York State Teacher of the Year, yet is one of the most outspoken concerning the inadequacies of the system. In the first chapter, called "the Seven-Lesson Schoolteacher" he says that although he was certified to teach English, that he, like all other public school teachers, was actually paid to teach confusion, class position, indifference, emotional dependency, intellectual dependency, provisional self-esteem, and that you are under constant surveillance and can't hide . . . Such a curriculum, he says, produces physical, moral, and intellectual paralysis. (pp. 2-11, 14) He says, "It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things. . . . [Yet] only a few lifetimes ago things were very different in the United States. Originality and variety were common currency; our freedom from regimentation made us the miracle of the world; social-class boundaries were relatively easy to cross; our citizenry was marvelously confident, inventive, and able to do much for themselves independently, and to think for themselves . . . From Colonial days through the period of the Republic we had no school to speak of . . . yet literacy at the time of the American Revolution . . . was close to total . . . Senator Ted Kennedy's office released a paper claiming that prior to compulsory education (which happened around 1850) the state literacy rate was ninety-eight percent and that after it the figure never exceeded ninety-one percent, where it stood in 1990." ( pp. 12,22) "Were the Colonists geniuses?" Gatto asked? No, the truth is that reading, writing, and arithmetic only take about one hundred hours to transit as long as the audience is eager and willing to learn . . . The continuing cry for "basic skills" practice is a smoke screen behind which schools preempt the time of children for twelve years and teach them the seven lessons I've just described to you" (*Dumbing Us Down*, New Society Publishers, 2002, p. 12).

In another of Gatto's books, *The Underground History of American Education*, he expresses his view of public schools "as a conflict pitting the needs of social machinery against those of the human spirit, a war of mechanisms against flesh and blood "

### **Textbooks Today vs. Spiritual Roots**

What kind of textbooks are our children studying in the public schools in 2004? Are they learning respect for God and parents and the Bible? Are they learning respect for the Founding Fathers and other prayerful leaders? Are they learning the spiritual aspects of history? In the book *The Rewriting of American History*, the author, Catherine Millard, gives numerous examples of current public school history textbooks that have stripped all references to the spiritual dimension of history. For instance, what do our children learn about Columbus today? Do they hear anything about the fact that he felt spiritually led?

The Church published a pamphlet in 1976 for the bicentennial containing four family nights lessons; the second was called, "A Land With a Divine Mission," It contained the following quote from Columbus: "From my first youth onward, I was a seaman and have so continued until this day.... Wherever on the earth a ship has been, I have been. I have spoken and treated with learned men, priests, and laymen, Latins, and Greeks, Jews and Moors, and with many men of other faiths. The Lord was well disposed to my desire, and He bestowed upon me courage and understanding; knowledge of seafaring. He gave me in abundance, of astrology as much as was needed, and of geometry and astronomy likewise. Further, He gave me joy and cunning in drawing maps and thereon cities, mountains, rivers, islands, and harbours, each one in its place. I have seen and truly I have studied all books—cosmographies, histories, chronicles, and philosophies, and other arts, for which our Lord unlocked my mind, sent me upon the sea, and gave me fire for the deed. Those who heard of my enterprise called it foolish, mocked me, and laughed. But who can doubt but that the Holy Ghost inspired me? (Jacob Wasserman, *Columbus, Don Quixote of the Seas*, translated by Eric Sutton [Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1930], pp.19-20; cited in *The Great Prologue*, p. 26)

Instead of teaching the children that Columbus felt led by God to America, the new textbooks report that he was motivated strictly by greed and hope for riches. What difference does it make? All the difference in the world!

Martin Luther summed up the problem we are faced with when God, the scriptures, and all references to things of a spiritual nature are left out of the classroom, "I am much afraid that schools will prove to be great gates of hell unless

they diligently labor in explaining the holy scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not increasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt."

### **What Are Our Children Really Up Against?**

Speaking to the David O. McKay School Education at BYU, President Packer said, "In many places it is literally not safe physically for youngsters to go to school. And in many schools--and it is almost becoming generally true--it is spiritually unsafe to attend public schools." (Boyd K. Packer, David O. McKay Symposium, Brigham Young University, October 9, 1996)

Dr. Jack Monnett, in his book *Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools, Summarizes* the problems parents are seeing in the current public school system:

"Despite the counter-balancing efforts of the Church's aggressive religious education program, many parents have still sought other educational solutions to public schools. Their motives for an alternative education have apparently been sparked for five major reasons:

- (1) Often published school curricula is at odds with revealed truth
- (2) Peer influence--language, discussion groups, accepted behavior--in some public schools is seen as undue unrighteous influence.
- (3) The understanding that revealed gospel truth should act as a thread binding all academic subject matter.
- (4) Time spent in public schools could be used to greater advantage through better-structured academic programs.
- (5) Group conformity in public schools frequently stifles individual initiative. (*Revealed Educational Principles*, p. 233)

Here is a composite of responses to my first article: "Our family does not attend R rated movies, (in fact we rarely go to PG 13 movies anymore.) We work hard to have a good spirit in our home, and my husband has chosen to work in an environment where he is not exposed to bad language or other degrading influences. Yet every day we send our immature children to schools where they are exposed to X rated language and bad influences and expect them to magically spread light and sunshine and emerge unscathed. It's not working. I'm desperate for alternatives."

### **What is a parent to do?**

Many parents are feeling the pressure. Many would like to do something different but have no idea where to begin or what to do. Beginning with my next article, Part 5, we will explore options and share exciting answers that prayerful and committed parents are finding every day.

Note: *For more information about the book [Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools](#), or to obtain copies go to: [www.archivepublishers.com](http://www.archivepublishers.com) or call Brother Monnett at 435-785-8090*

*For books and tapes by Darla Isackson, go to: [www.rosehavenpublishing.com](http://www.rosehavenpublishing.com)*

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