

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education Series, Part Six

Back to School: Readers Open Talk about Public Education and Tough Choices

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by Darla Isackson

I have received so many thought-provoking responses to my education series and feel compelled to share a few before moving on to my next subject of Charter Schools.

One reader, Laura Irwin, summarized in a concise and helpful way a number of the options available to many parents in both the U.S. And Canada in regard to the education of their children. She said:

In British Columbia LDS parents are gaining many options.

1. You can register your children in the nearest public school.
2. You can register them in another public school outside your attendance area if space is available. You will have to provide transportation.
3. You can register at a specialist school within the public school system like a fine arts school, traditional school or french immersion school. Usually you are required to transport your child. [In the U.S. the kind of schools she is referring to would probably be included in the category of Charter Schools which be discussed in Part Seven]
4. You can register at a private school and pay fees. Some private schools run by other denominations do not accept LDS students or LDS parents would find it difficult to sign their tenant of faith documents.
5. You can register at a regional correspondence school. These are part of the public system so materials are provided and marked by a teacher assigned to your child. Your child accomplishes the work at home under your supervision rather than in a school setting.
6. You can register your child at a district or independent online school. Some materials and a lending library or online subscriptions (like reading a-z) are provided. You can submit up to \$1000 worth of receipts per year for internet connections, educational materials or experiences for your child. Purchased educational materials submitted for reimbursement cannot be religious materials. They may include books, videos, computer programs, lessons, concerts, etc. In addition some field study experiences and classes are available. You also have the option of having a computer supplied by the school. You must prepare a portfolio of your child's activities and meet three times a year with an assigned teacher to prepare a formal written report to show your child is accomplishing his goals. Although this sounds intimidating the report is like a checklist and is not too difficult.

7. You can register at a private or public school as a home schooler . Only about \$125 worth of materials are reimbursed but little reporting is required.

8. You can register part-time in a local school and teach your child some subjects at home or pay a fee for some courses by correspondence. Usually you negotiate this with the school.

She concluded, "The options continue to grow and open a whole new world to fit your needs and the needs of your child and your family. With challenges on one hand come opportunities on the other."

Many readers chronicled an interesting history of their experiences with choosing different educational options at different times, with different children. Many reported creatively combining options in an effort to meet the needs of individual children. One said "There is no single answer to the education dilemma . . . Each child is an individual; their needs change, situations change, and we constantly need to regroup and reconsider."

Can We Honor Agency and Accept Differences of Opinion?

The need for charity, tolerance, and mutual understanding becomes paramount as we recognize the many possible solutions available and examine the emotion-laden issues involved in education. Since the well-being of our children is such a huge concern, understandably we feel strongly about the conclusions we make individually. We hope our differing conclusions and individual decisions will be respected and accepted. As Latter-day Saints, the most important thing we can do is love and support each other in the basic we all agree on: our shared love of the gospel and all its doctrines, our love for the Savior and our undying gratitude for His Atonement.

We as brothers and sisters in the gospel have every right to differing opinions on other things and there is much we can learn from each other. I am concerned about our general tendency to judge each other's decisions in regard to the way we educate our children. I have received numerous comments, including:

"I have received nothing but negative comments from ward members since we chose to put our two youngest children into a LDS academy, even though we made the decision prayerfully and anguished over the social consequences."

"We have been treated like apostates since we made the decision to home school . . ." These are very tough decisions for parents. We have struggled as we have pulled our kids out [of public school]. There is a stigma attached to "homeschooling" that is negative."

" I have lived in three different places since I started to school my children at home. I have been chided and sniffed at all the way to being treated with vicious contempt by fellow saints, even in the face of the reality of the sad state of public education."

The judging, of course, can go both ways:

One veteran home schooler candidly reports, "I noticed [among home-schoolers] a really strong attitude of superiority and arrogance towards those others who had not taken the *enlightened* step to teach their own at home. I also had this attitude at times."

A mother and grandmother e-mailed: " Right now we are members of a small branch where many families are home schooling their children, and constantly pointing out the negative aspects of public schools, and how we need to protect our children from the negative influences found there. It has made me personally feel bad, feeling like a second rate mother, and I know that others have felt like that, we have some public school teachers in our ward, and they too feel bad about the tendency to put down public schools." [My personal opinion about that is that one hour of service in the classroom as an aid or room mother, or otherwise positively impacting the system is worth more than all the complaining and playing "ain*t it awful" we could do.]

She concludes. " We need to be supportive of parents no matter how they choose to educate their children...public schools, private schools, home schooling, and I feel very strongly that the topic of how to school our children has no place at church . . . My two sisters and I were the only members of the Church in our school, and I do believe it made us gain stronger testimonies, we had to stand firm, and we saw clearly the different values some of the other students had...again, it was because of the teachings we received in our home, that we were able to be in the public school and not be part of all the parties and negative activities, etc."

Two final examples show the intensity of feelings on both sides of the public school question:

"Well, I've wound up and spewed out a lot of stuff that does bother me about people who are so "pure" that they have to take themselves and their kids out of the schools, leaving those of us who are lesser beings to fight Satan alone. I would love to retreat to that purity. I would love not to have to fight the fight I do every day. I am happy for people who don't have to. But we can make a stand and gather people in rather setting ourselves apart and setting other people aside."

"The public schools are cesspools. Should we risk our children and expect them to swim in the mire when we wouldn't stand for a similar work environment for ourselves. Do we have to hear the 'F' word from every co-worker around us? Do we have to see such blatant immodesty from our co-workers? And we think our children should take a stand nearly alone in such a place? It's not just the students but the teachers have political agendas that would curl your hair. I was told at a faculty meeting to encourage girls to invite their girlfriends (sexual partners) to the dances so we wouldn't discriminate against the lesbians in the student body. Do we really think our young children can 'take a stand' and 'be a light' to that insidious influence?"

One reader who has tried several of the options said in summary

"It has been interesting to be on both sides. There is so much distrust and open criticism on both sides of the issue. The homeschool moms are a little judgmental of the public school moms and vice versa. Sorta sad that we can't just all take a deep breath and relax...trusting that most parents are doing what they truly think is best for their family at any given time.

"Having been on the receiving end of much open criticism, especially when we were *unschooling* in the beginning, I can assure you that this is NOT what homeschool moms need or want.

"In all of our decision making for and in behalf of our children, what has ultimately comforted us the most is Heavenly Father's promise that as long as we are on the path, ALL THINGS will work together for our good. So I am grateful to have been a mom who has dabbled in several different approaches to education."

It is this author*s sincere desire that we refuse to "take sides" against each other, but see

ourselves on the SAME side--the Lord*s side. We would be wise to follow this mother*s advice--take a deep breath, relax, and trust each other in the wise use of the agency God gave each of us in regard to educating our children. Most importantly, I hope that we will love and support each other regardless of our differing opinions and the various options we might choose. How wonderful that we HAVE options, that we HAVE agency, that we have prayer to guide us and the right to make the decisions that we truly think will be best for our children--and the right to change our minds and try something different as conditions change and children grow.

More Pleas for Parent Involvement

Now, before we leave the subject of public schools, I want to share a few more letters from readers, the first from DJ Stutz, president of the Nevada PTA: "I was appreciative that in your last article you addressed the need of parents to be involved in school and in the PTA. As president of the Nevada PTA and a member of the National PTA Board I can't tell you that your Arizona reader was right when she wrote "What imperfect public schools need is more involvement by LDS families, not a retreat to the way things were." It breaks my heart when I have to fight against members of the church who are promoting the wrong notion that PTA is pro abortion or pro gay marriage. While there are individuals that would like to push PTA in that direction, it has been the involvement of strong LDS parents and those outside the church with strong moral values that have kept PTA from taking such stands. I believe that Satan knows what would happen with the retreat of people of moral strength and is using these falsehoods to accomplish just that."

Important Suggestions from Professional Educators

Now, letters from two readers who teach in the public schools. They raised important issues in regard to the attitudes we teach our children and the way we support or fail to support the public schools our kids attend:

Brother R. K. Steadman, who has taught in the public schools in Utah for many years, summarized many of the problems, but gave some important specific suggestions for parents of children attending public schools. He said, "Let me state for the record that I and the greatest percentage of my colleagues agree that there are serious problems in education in general, and public education in specific. Yes, the law prohibits religious education in the classroom in the USA. However, morals education is and has always been part and parcel of what most (not some, as you stated) teachers deliver many times daily. There are literally hundreds of thousands of upstanding educators of all faiths in this country who are doing their best to prepare the kids for their future lives. We teach them to respect each other, even if their beliefs, skin color, language, or clothing aren't the same as the others in the room. (By the way, this is a huge problem in the state of Utah--stemming for the most part from LDS students. This, because their parents instruct their young ones that they shouldn't associate with "non-members" and those of a different race or from another lingual heritage, even if LDS.) Honesty is paramount in my classroom, as it is in every classroom I've ever visited. Yet, time and time again, many (again, not some) parents rush to their children's defense when caught in the act of cheating or even stealing! In 25 years, I have lost count how many times parents have insisted I ignore assignment deadlines, excuse chronic absences or lateness, or overlook blatant fraud because their child is somehow better than the others.

"There is no doubt that for all the good things dedicated educators are doing in the public schools, there are a few (less than 5%, I would venture) who are, as you said, in it for the paycheck (although in Utah and many other states, that idea is laughable), or are unsuited to teaching. These people and their behaviors are deplorable and should be discharged. My colleagues and I want them out as badly as you do. They give us all a bad name that seems to be

perpetuated even in your series.

"Discipline in public schools has eroded tremendously, and yet for the most part, not because of the teachers or even administrators. Again, due to parents who believe their children are incapable of wrong-doing, and that, of course, the problem must be the teacher's fault, laws have been enacted in virtually all states that tie our hands, both figuratively, and in practice. The fact that "Johnnie" or "Sue" can do almost anything including swearing, threatening and assaulting teachers and other students, vandalizing, stealing, and even using illegal substances, yet will be, in most cases, returned to the SAME classroom, sometimes after only a perfunctory "time-out," makes our jobs at the least, difficult, at the worst, downright hazardous. Then when the child is suspended and the parents take him or her to a private school, after only one or two rules infraction the errant child is thrown out of private school and is not readmitted. Consequently, he/she is back in the public school again. Of course education seems to be going more smoothly in the private schools; they don't have to put up with bad behavior.

"You are absolutely right that the parents are the driving force when it comes to how their children are to be taught. I am one of those "hard" teachers who demands respect for all, expects hard work, refuses to condone mediocrity, and rewards students when they have achieved (and not just because they are present!). My students know what I expect and know they will earn the grade they receive. For this, I am sometimes labeled "mean." It's very interesting to me that the parents who get to know me and want the best for their kids, are the ones who are the most supportive, even when their student may not have done his/her best. On the other hand, parents who think they know how my subject should be taught, complain when I expect their kids to do more the bare minimum to get by.

"So what can parents do to see that their students (and all the others) get the best possible education in public schools? Exactly what you advocate--get involved. I'm in one of those "less than 40% attendance at Parent/Teacher conferences" schools. However, enough parents want them that we still do them twice a year without fail. Understand that almost always, the teacher isn't "out to get" your child when discipline becomes necessary, then back the teacher. Believe us when we tell you there is a problem. Make sure your student comes to school dressed appropriately, well-fed and well-rested (a MAJOR problem), with the understanding that school is the student's "job." Don't do their homework and don't excuse them for not doing it. We all know there are emergencies and most of us do what we can to accommodate them. Don't make up emergencies to get your student out of the assignment. By doing such things the kids learn that they can circumvent the system, because Mom will take care of it. But, what happens when Mom can't fix it out in the *real world?*

"Let your school boards and state legislatures know you want the students to be taught, not just tested. In Utah, a recent set of laws was put *on the back burner* because the parents refused to allow their students to be deprived of the level of music, art, PE, drama, and technology now available that the new laws would curtail. Mind you, this was from the parents, NOT from the teachers of those subjects. You do have a great deal of power.

"Make sure your state legislatures are giving the education of your children top priority. As great as the 2002 Winter Olympics were for Utah, the money taken from education to help fund the infrastructure has yet to be recovered, and may never be. Education is expensive. Be willing to do your part to help pay for it--and not just for your child's sake, but for all the children. After all they are your brothers and sisters too. . . When we attempt to give support only to private and home schooling (both viable options), many students lose out. All young people deserve to be educated, even when their parents can't afford the luxury of private schooling or can't (for whatever reason) give them home education opportunities.

"For all the power parents have, please realize that almost all teachers have been well-trained to do our virtually thankless jobs. Although we welcome your input, understand that we are the *experts* when it comes to our classrooms. Even in Utah, and even among active LDS teachers here and elsewhere, issues do crop up that one a parent might find offensive. Don't be afraid to go to the teachers (especially if you know they are members) when there are things you don't feel comfortable with. The important point is to go to the teachers first. Too many times parents with concerns voice them around the community and go to the teachers' supervisors before getting the teachers' views. If you have a problem, see us first before jumping to conclusions. Young people don't always see things as they are--only as they perceive them to be. When a parent has come to me with a concern, we have been able to come to agreement in 99% of all the situations presented--without rancor on the part of the educator or the parents, thus allowing the student to feel comfortable in the classroom, and the teacher to still remain as the authority figure in that classroom. "If someone offend thee..." [go to them one-on-one.]

"Lastly, make it your responsibility as parents to "teach them diligently" in the things of the Lord. This is not, nor should it be, the purview of the schools or the Church, for that matter. These organizations exist to assist the parents, not do their jobs for them. Don't expect me to preach. (On the other hand, don't expect me to put aside my own beliefs either.) Rather expect me to teach the students to the best of my ability in my subject area. I will do my best to prepare them to be good citizens, to make informed decisions, take responsibility for their own actions and words, and hopefully, help them see (without using the words) that they are children of a loving Father in Heaven. None of us is perfect, whether parent or teacher, but together we can raise a *righteous generation.* I know my colleagues, regardless of belief system, want to do the best they can for your children (and, by the way, ours too!) to help them to see and someday, reach their potential. Work with us please!"

Don't you wish that every teacher had the common sense, solid values, and commitment to the students that we hear from Brother Steadman?

Sister Patricia Alto, a teacher from California said, "As a public high school teacher...and the mother of four children who have come through our high school, I am very interested in what you have to say. Your series has been very helpful to me.

"The first thing I want you to know--to put this in perspective--is that I am a committed, active LDS mother who has held many Church positions working with women and youth. I love the Church and I love the people in the Church. But I also absolutely adore my students who are not LDS too. They love me and they love my classes and the way I respect them. Yes, I have had influence on many of them and I've had the *payday* of attending many, many baptisms and speaking at missionary farewells of many of my students who have embraced the gospel. I am also proud to say that I have encouraged many of my students to become more active in their own churches and they have stood up to people who would say that we [Mormons] are not Christians. They say they KNOW Latter-day Saints are Christians because Mrs. Alto is a true Christian and is LDS. That has helped our efforts in this community a great deal more than it would had we set up a private school that somehow told everyone that we think we're better than they are. We aren't you know. We have the STEWARDSHIP, not just the truth.

"One thing I wish we could get across to our kids as well as to teachers and administrators, is that we are not tyrants concerning our beliefs, refusing others theirs. [She has seen unfortunate things happen when LDS students are rigid and try to impose their standards on others in an unpleasant way.]

"We must protect our children, of course. I think you offer many good suggestions. I disagree that

we will be "taken out of the world" because there is so much good in the world. It is there for us to find...yes, even in public schools. Our job is to learn to find it and to play it up so that it overtakes the evil!!!

"When they came to me a few years ago and asked me to put a rainbow triangle in my room to show it is a safe place for gay students I told them I would only if I could also have a black triangle, a red triangle, a white triangle, a yellow triangle, a red triangle...a triangle to show that EVERY single kid in my class was safe. I told them that some kids who weren't even the bigots they might be made out to be, would feel unsafe with the rainbow triangle hanging above them. Since the kid who was doing this was a gay kid from my class, he realized just what I was saying. He knew I loved him no matter what he was, and guess what? HE stopped the triangle crusade. It took only a couple of months before the "Gay/Straight Alliance" fizzled out. I don't know how much I had to do with it, but let me tell you, it wouldn't have fizzled had I stood out there with my chin out ready to be punched--or treated that boy as less than he was (a child of Heavenly Father whether he knew it or not.)

"By the way...that young man is now the editor of the local newspaper that I have to deal with as ward and stake Director of Public Affairs. Guess what kind of coverage the Church gets in our local paper....Guess what kind of infamy he would include had he been treated poorly as a human being? I TOLD him I didn't agree with his choices and joked that he didn't agree with mine, but that we could still get along and guess what. We do. I truly like him. And he truly likes me. Isn't that what President Hinckley is mentioning to us time after time in Conference talks, warning us to be good to our neighbors?

"Our school has some really radical stuff going on in a very radically liberal area...but those things can be worked around and actually USED. If we retreat, then Satan is going to have at it and will take even the ones who will have no other way of learning about the Church. I am so grateful for a group of Christian mothers who gather each Monday to pray for the teachers who would help their children in public schools. I feel those prayers...even though not one of [the prayer group is] LDS.

"We spend a whole lot of time in the Church teaching our kids about morality as a sexual issue. We need to spend more time teaching our kids about morals as an ethical issue as well, so they can see the good in others and learn to accept the good and eschew the evil."

Thanks, Brother Steadman and Sister Alto. I appreciate so much that you would take the time to share your thoughts with all of us. I pray that each parent who leaves his children in public schools will be involved with those school--and be respected for that involvement. I also pray that each parent who chooses other options will be equally respected. Let's unite in love and respect for each other and for the gospel. "If ye are not one, ye are not mine."

About the Next Article in the Education Series

We can all learn so much from each other and from sharing our experiences. I have received many e-mails concerning Charter schools and the amazing variety of ways they can be implemented. My next article will define and explore these interesting options

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