

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education As the Early Prophets Saw It *By Darla Isackson*

LDS parents are rightly alarmed about the quality of education our children are receiving in public schools. In part one of this series, I share words of prophets in regard to educating our children. Part Two will disclose why and how the early Saints disregarded that counsel. Obviously, the spiritual level of education in public schools today gives us even more cause for concern than in the time the warnings were spoken. In future articles I will explore various practical solutions LDS parents are finding for today's educational challenges.

In 1998 an eye-opening book was published called *Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools: A look at principle-centered education through the prophets and LDS educational history*, by John D. Monnett (LDS Archive Publishers, Heber, Utah 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 and now lives in Heber City, Utah.

Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools sounds a loud wake-up call to LDS parents concerning public education. I am a concerned grandmother, and as I started reading this book, many questions came to my mind such as:

- “If the early prophets took such a stand against public education, why was their counsel disregarded?”
- “Since all the concerns they stated about the dangers of secular education seem doubly applicable today, why aren’t we hearing more about this issue now?” and
- “What are the alternatives? What can a determined, but financially limited parent do?”

This book, supplemented by other excellent books, answered these questions in a way that enlightened my understanding and motivated me to action. I hope to summarize what I learned in a manner that will similarly

enlighten and motivate my readers. (All "Ibids" referenced in this article refer to the above mentioned book. Official sources quoted by the author, Monnett, are cited additionally.)

Early Education in Utah

First, I will summarize what Monnett tells about early education in Utah.

The Saints entered the valley in 1847, and Mary Dillworth is purported to have started the first school in Utah in the back of her wagon shortly thereafter. The early Utah schools were organized after the pattern the people were accustomed to in the east. They formed school boards, and the president was generally the bishop. He would appoint a teacher who was expected to be an exemplary person. The teacher had to know how to read, write, and add figures, but he didn't need a degree. That pattern continued for about ten years. Students would come to school (generally held in the ward meeting house) two or three months out of the year--at the most, six months. The rest of their education was home education.

The Establishment of Protestant "Mission" Schools

As members of other faiths began to pour into the area, new challenges developed. In 1867, Daniel Sylvester Tuttle, the missionary priest of the territory and later bishop in the Episcopalian Church, conceived of a way to stop what he saw as "the threat of Mormonism." "We'll have a school, and we'll have the best school," he decided. "Those Mormon schools won't hold a candle to it, so they'll send all their children to our school and one by one we'll baptize them." The Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists soon joined in, with money from their congregations in the East pouring in to the "worthy cause" of getting Mormon youth to leave Church-dominated schools.

Generally schools at that time weren't free. Church-led schools charged a minimal tuition--generally three to seven dollars per semester. In the event that a family was unable to pay, work-in-lieu-of-tuition was arranged.

The various Protestant schools offered free tuition. As hard as it is to explain, Latter-day Saint children, in larger and larger numbers, were sent to Protestant schools.

LDS Scriptures are Dropped from Church-dominated Schools

Except for these Protestant schools (often referred to as “mission” schools), the Saints had control over local schools. As more and more nonmembers began to settle in the area a problem arose: the schools established by the Saints were teaching the Restored Gospel and modern scripture along with the Bible. To appease the non-Mormon population of the territory, all scriptures except the Bible were gradually dropped from the curriculum.

A “Saintly” Curriculum is Provided

The apparent view of early Church leaders was that if LDS scriptures could not be used, at least many faith-promoting books could be placed in the classrooms as readers. The great bulk of curriculum published under the direction of the Church during this period was what we might call a “Saintly” curriculum. It consisted of biographical sketches using true events from the lives of exemplary priesthood bearers to emphasize such characteristics as living close to the Lord and following the Spirit. These sketches were published in “textbooks” designed to develop in the youth those specific characteristics.

What were these books? The most popular, distributed under the auspices of the First Presidency of the Church, was called The Faith-Promoting Series. President George Q. Cannon of the First Presidency began that set with his own experience as a young missionary in Hawaii and called the book *My First Mission*. Introducing the book, he wrote that he had grown up in the home of President John Taylor and had often heard him talk about his missionary experiences in France and England. Listening to President Taylor, young George had developed a burning desire to become a missionary. He felt that publishing his own missionary experiences in Hawaii would give the youth in the Church the same desire. *My First Mission*, brought out in 1881, was one of the very first books issued in fulfillment of D&C 55.

A little later, the book, *A String of Pearls*, was published. It was a collection of faith-promoting stories of the early Saints among the Indians combined with some exciting examples of missionary labors and priesthood experiences.

In 1883, one of the most powerful books in the early set was written from the missionary experiences and journals of the Church’s most successful missionary, Wilford Woodruff. The Faith Promoting Series was the published word of the First Presidency who felt that through reading the

books the youth would understand the power of priesthood and emulate the activities that had taken place in the lives of worthy men. All of the accounts were true and were gleaned from Saints living in the territory. These books were used as school readers, and encouraged for home reading and Sunday school classes as well.

Tax-Supported Schools Deprive Saints of Curriculum Control

Faith-based, education still comprised the main curriculum of the schools until government taxation for education began, and curriculum became a political issue. The Church lost more and more control over what was taught, and the percentage of nonmember teachers steadily rose. Tax-supported schools became known as “District Schools.”

Both parents and leaders were concerned about what was happening. John Taylor, President of the Church from 1880-1887 said, “And above all other things, teach our children the fear of God. Let our teachers be men of God, imbued with the Spirit of God, that they may . . . teach their students how to approach God, that they may call upon Him and He will hear them, and by their means, we will build up and establish Zion.” (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 20, p.59)

First Presidency Asks for Independent Church Schools

The following Epistle, written by the first presidency, President John Taylor, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith, was delivered at the October, 1886 General Conference: “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. Our children should be indoctrinated in the principles of the Gospel from their earliest childhood.” [We now use “indoctrinate” in a negative sense; at that time, Webster’s dictionary defines “indoctrinate” as “to teach or instruct in rudiments or principles.”]

The Epistle continued, “They should be made familiar with the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants. These should be their chief text books, and everything should be done to establish in their hearts genuine faith in God, in His Gospel and its ordinances, and in His works. But under our common school system this is not possible.” (Messages of the First Presidency, Vol. 3, p. 59, Ibid, p. 249-250)

The Brigham Young Academy in Provo and the Brigham Young College in Logan were commended, and then the First Presidency concluded, "We would like to see schools of this character, independent of the District School system, started in all places where it is possible."

At the time, John Taylor was the Territorial Commissioner of Schools as well as President of the Church! It was his job to hand out federal tax money to support the schools, which was difficult for him, because his personal stand was that the people should shoulder the cost of their children's education in order to maintain control of what they were taught.

Monnett said, "Because of previous and ongoing conflicts with government agencies, the Saints were reluctant to release parental authority and place it in the hands of the State. It was a case of the interested passing control to the disinterested when they themselves had been vested with divine authority to educate their children. (D&C 68: 25-31, 93: 41-50) (Ibid, p. 40) A year later, in 1887, John Taylor was illegally stripped of the territorial position under the Edmonds-Tucker Act.

President Wilford Woodruff Carries Out Counsel on Church Schools

President Taylor died in Kaysville in July of 1887. The new prophet, Wilford Woodruff took up the gauntlet. He made the announcement in the 1888 April General Conference that the Church would be officially organizing schools for all the Saints, then sent a letter to all thirty-two stake presidents which 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. Religious training is practically excluded from the District Schools. The perusal of books that we value as divine records is forbidden. Our children, if left to the training they receive in these schools, will grow up entirely ignorant of those principles of salvation for which the Latter-day Saints have made so many sacrifices. To permit this condition of things to exist among us would be criminal. The desire is universally expressed by all thinking people in the Church that we should have schools where the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants can be used as text books, and where the principles of our religion may form a part of the teaching of the schools. To this effect it will be necessary the funds be collected. The Church will doubtless do its share; but it cannot carry the entire burden. The Saints must be appealed to . . . 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."

The letter was signed by Wilford Woodruff, who was not only the President of the Church, but Chairman of the Church Board of Education and George Reynolds, Secretary (Ibid, p. 246-247)

What Did the Church Schools Teach?

The Church schools were usually referred to as “Academies.” “Not only scriptures, but other gospel doctrine and lessons were integrated into academy instruction. As Utah’s pre-eminent teacher and educator wrote, “the cornerstones of Zion’s schools is theology” and religious teachings are “to permeate all other work.” (*Karl G. Maeser, a Biography by His Son*, p. 168) “The entire school day in the church schools was gospel-centered. Theological classes were conducted daily, there were daily devotional exercises, and weekly priesthood and missionary meetings. Brother Maeser recommended in the *Juvenile Instructor* that the curricula for stake academies should include:

- “For the Advanced Grade: Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Story of the Book of Mormon, Deseret Sunday School Leaflets, and the Compendium.
- “For the Primary Grade: Sunday School Cards, Picture Bible Charts, Articles of Faith, Lord’s Prayer, Ten Commandments, etc.” (*Juvenile Instructor*, Vol. 23, p. 32)

“Coupled with daily theological instruction, a general theological class including testimony bearing and student talks) was held each Wednesday. Theological instruction was obligatory and all students were expected to participate. Also conducted weekly were missionary meetings patterned after those at Brigham Young Academy and designed to increase scriptural knowledge and prepare students for future missionary service. Priesthood meetings were held during the week for young men attending the academies. In the words of one academy principal, they were “given further opportunities to bear their testimonies, learn public speaking, learn the duties of the priesthood, and acquaint themselves with the scriptures [and] the history of the Church.” (Ibid, pp. 165, 166)

Brother Karl G. Maeser, the first superintendent of Church schools, encouraged superior training in academic areas, he emphasized that nothing was to be ‘taught in any way conflicting with the principles of the gospel. Church doctrine was not only taught openly, but its “spirit underlied all teachings and disciplines.’ (Circular for the Brigham Young Academy, 1885-1886, p. 4, BYU Archives.) Sounds like heaven, doesn’t it? How would it be to have all our children today in such schools, instead of just a

fifty-minute seminary class, at best?

What Happened?

So what happened? Why did the Church schools fail? Why did the Prophet, Moses-like, have to go back up the mountain and get a lower law because the Saints would not live the higher law?

Part Two in this series will attempt to answer those important questions

For more information concerning the book Revealed Educational Principles & the Public Schools, or to obtain copies go to: www.archivepublishers.com or call Brother Monnett at 435-785-8090

[Click here to sign up for Meridian's FREE email updates.](#)

© 2004 [Meridian Magazine](#). All Rights Reserved.