

PERSPECTIVE

Earl Palmer

Should today's youths go to public schools, or should they attend private schools or Christian schools—or should they stay right at home for home education? Many parents and youths face this questions every spring and summer when decisions must be made about enrollment in the fall. Youth pastors, teachers, and youth leaders are consulted by parents and students, for decisions about education are formative and formidable decisions for both students and families.

If a family opts for at-home education, then parents need to figure out how the benefits of socialization skills and friendship building are going to happen for their boy or girl, since home-schooled children are not physically present in the schoolyard and classroom experiences, which are the typical sites of growing-up experience of other youth.

Another big question: How intellectually and academically capable are the parents as teachers?

If such questions can be satisfactorily answered, then I believe home education can work—though I have not personally seen enough examples of success to be sold on home schooling. Show me solidly positive results, and I will be convinced.

The Appeal of Private Schools

Private schools, both secular and Christian, have a very strong appeal to many families because they are highly focused and deliberate in their goals for education. In the case of Christian schools, the goals include commitment to Christian values and encouragement to disciple and be disciplined.

Yet I ask myself the same questions

about private schools that I raise about home education: How will friendship building happen for the youngsters? With whom shall it happen? Will the exclusive nature of private education and the usual distance between private schools and their students' own neighborhoods create an undesirable isolation?

Here, too, I must ask how intellectually and academically capable are teachers in the private school a family chooses. Is there an adequate lab for a chemistry class? Is there an adequate physical-education class and sports program? Does the Christian school's discipleship training express the kind of Christian theology and teaching that is both true and healthy? I have seen private schools of both sorts: those that are the very best choice for a particular boy or girl, as well as the disappointing others.

Public schools educate most American youths now and probably will do so well into the future. What are the prospects for boys and girls facing thirteen years—kindergarten through twelfth grade—in public schools? I know something about this question: my two daughters and son went the whole way in public schools. Their elementary school drew from suburbia, but their secondary schools drew from the inner city and were consequently multi-racial.

We also felt the strong appeal of private education. There was a time while our kids were in high school when we and only two or three other families in our neighborhood had our children in public schools. I think the public schools were right for our kids—and so do they. They received a good education, and they lived at home the whole time. The mixture of these two is vital to my family. Furthermore, our children each made friends during their kindergarten-through-grade-twelve journey, and

they learned how to get along with people who are different from them. With the ability of my kids to live at home during these years, this necessity of mixing with those unlike themselves ranks highly among my criteria for a good education.

A Full Canvas on a Choppy Sea

Most of all, our three children turned out to be young adults with Christian values and convictions of their own; they know what they believe and how to hold onto their faith. I have pictured each one of them as a ship that kept its canvas full of air on a choppy sea with haphazard winds. While still fairly near the harbor of family and church and tradition, they figured out how to trim their lines and keep from becoming swamped at sea. The public-school experience provided just enough choppy water and fitful winds to help them learn those skills.

Yet it is difficult growing up in America regardless of where families decide their students are to learn reading and writing and computing. The only question may be this: How are we, who care about youths, to help these inheritors of earth, of culture, and of the future? How do they learn to tend the earth, preserve the culture, and live in hope?

First, parents should stay close to their kids. Maybe some boarding schools are academically outstanding, but you cannot stay close to your sixteen-year-old at a boarding school. I would sacrifice some quality in my sixteen-year-old's academic program if that was the price to pay for having him home for dinner each night. I would rather have him learn a little

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less in our local high school than to hear over the phone from a lonely son or daughter about the mystery-meat meals in the common dining room at boarding school.

There is no substitute for supper together each evening while these inheritors of the whole planet are growing up. There are no academic advantages that match the chance of catching up on each other's lives each day. Yet I am not fooled into thinking that same-address proximity alone implies emotional closeness. To stay close to each other during the years is a scheduling challenge; just to eat together regularly is nearly impossible sometimes. We worked hard on those meals; we still do. It is the logistic topic each morning to find out just when everyone can be together to eat that evening.

Schools create possibilities for families to stay close. If parents are smart, they will volunteer for everything. Driving whenever a car is needed is a prime way to stay close and to listen to the pre-driving-age boy or girl. PTA room-parent assignments, Girl Scouts, and Cub Scouts gave Shirley and me simple ways to get to know our children and our children's friends better.

Attend all games, plays, concerts. Contribute every dollar you can to everything your school raises money for. Do these things for no other reason than to stay close as a friend to the grand enterprise of education. If you see a door beginning to close because of bad teaching or a missed stepping-stone near that doorway, do everything you can to keep the doorway open, whether through tutoring, a different course with a different teacher, or a summer session. Stay close to your student—not as a critic,

but as one who cares, one who respects the integrity of that young boy or girl who is becoming a man or woman.

Above all, stay close with simple warmth and humor. There is no building block for the future as important as the experience of uncomplicated love in a home.

If staying close to one's kids is a fundamental parenting task regardless of the kind of school the children attend, then a second fundamental is to step back far enough from one's kids in order that they can catch their own stride. We go to school in order to learn the knowledge skills that set us free and make us independent. Parents (as well as those who serve in schools and churches) must help this healthy and necessary independence happen.

The Mark of a Mentor

Teenagers develop healthy independence as they choose mentors and positive role models from among friendly adults at school or church. This borrowing is one of the marks of those youths who succeed academically, athletically, and socially. Why is it that every day we meet boys and girls who come from unhappy homes—and yet they still pull things together and even succeed in the face of the obvious and real disadvantages of their unhealthy families? Largely because, I think, they borrow non-exploitative and healthy adults who become for them mentors and encouragers.

More than programs and parties and sermons, we must offer our youths good people so that they can choose adult friends as encouraging reference points for their own task of finding their way through the complicated roadways of conflicting values and temptations. Just as they need Holy Scripture as a map, they need

adult friends to help them unfold and hold the map.

For independence as a creative quality in the character of a teenager does not happen as that youth is disconnected and isolated from other people. To the contrary, teenagers learn to make decisions follow through, and should or responsibility only in relationship with other people. All of this takes time, and there are very few shortcuts—for we are describing here the making of a resolved personality, a whole person.

In fact, this is the challenge of both parenting and education. The goal of a Christian father is not to rear teenagers who are obedient to his leadership, but to cultivate age-appropriate maturity and healthy independence so that his teenagers catch their own stride. The goal is teenagers able to think clearly, to make decisions that really matter, to move on to the next part of the journey alongside of their friend Jesus Christ, the Lord of the journey. ♦



Earl Palmer is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California.