

CHAPTER 1

Public on Purpose

WHY CHRISTIAN PARENTS SHOULD
STILL CONSIDER PUBLIC SCHOOLING

By Troy Temple with Karla Temple

I grew up in a Christian home, and I spent eleven years as a Christian school student. I will always appreciate the sacrifices that my parents made to send me and my three siblings to Christian school. That school provided me with a foundational understanding of Scripture and doctrine that has sustained me throughout my life. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why, when the schooling decision faced me in my own household, it was one of the hardest decisions that I have ever had to make as a father.

At the time, my wife and I did not have the financial resources to send our children to any private school, Christian or otherwise. Both of us placed a high value on being a single-income family so that my wife could stay home with the girls. Although it was not an option I even wanted to consider, public school seemed like our only choice. For my wife, this choice was not nearly as difficult. She attended public school until she went to college, and her experiences were primarily positive.

Not so for me.

During two stints as a student in a public school, my exposure to such education had not been consistently positive. I attended public school in kindergarten. To that school's credit,

I didn't struggle academically when I shifted to Christian school in the first grade. My second taste of public schooling occurred during my junior year of high school. This was a far less positive experience, especially from the perspective of morals and ethics. As a result of that year's experience, I had difficulty even considering the thought of enrolling my child in a public school.

Here is what I eventually concluded, though: God had called us to train our children in the way they should go (Prov 22:6). In our family's particular circumstances, training our children "in the way [they] should go" would entail sending them to public school. In this chapter, I want to help you understand why.

What I am Not Saying about Public Schooling

Before I make the case for Christian consideration of public schooling, I want to make it clear what I am *not* claiming. First, I am *not* proclaiming that all Christian parents everywhere should send their children to public schools. What I *am* suggesting is that Christian parents should not eliminate public schooling from their list of options until they have honestly examined whether God may be calling them to be involved in public school. Placing children in public school requires a personal passion that God Himself places in a Christian parent's heart. Unless you are certain that God has specifically called your family to embrace public schooling, *do not do it*.

Second, I am also *not* suggesting that public schooling is a possibility for Christians in every place. In some schools, especially in metropolitan areas, the schools are so large and the secular influences are so pervasive that a Christian parent's presence and protests will have little effect. Yet, as R. Albert Mohler has pointed out, the effects of the secular revolution in education are "less evident in more rural areas, with local political control more concentrated in the hands of parents."¹ Our family lives in an area where parents have retained greater influence in the public school system. Here, in keeping with Mohler's observations, "teachers, administrators, and students share an outlook that is at least friendly and respectful toward Christianity and

1. R. A. Mohler, *Culture Shift* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Multnomah, 2008), 70-71.

conservative moral values.”² Your community may not have a public school of this sort. If that’s the case, *do not consider public schooling*.

Third, I am *not* suggesting that the choice to place your children in a public school must be permanent. In this present season of our lives, my wife and I are able to partner with our local public school in ways that strengthen our children and bring glory to God. I rejoice in the ways that God is using our witness right now. Still, I know that the day may come when God calls us to remove our children from public school. It is always possible that the culture of this school could shift. Such a shift could be so radical that my children’s faith begins to be torn down. If that occurs, we will pursue other educational options for our children. So should you.

Whose Image Were My Children Created to Bear?

Some have suggested that all Christians everywhere should withdraw completely from public schools. This is the mentality I am seeking to avoid. Such sweeping claims could contradict the divine design for some families. God’s intent for human families was to fill the planet (Gen 1:28) in such a way that God’s glorious character and image would be reflected throughout the world (Isa 43:7; 1 Cor 15:49). If that is the case, the divine destiny of my two daughters is not to replicate my image everywhere they go. It is, instead, to fill the earth with the glorious image of God.

That means if my girls go to college somewhere far from me, they will be responsible to reflect a divine image in the dorm room. It also means that, as my daughters attend their public school, God’s glory can be revealed through them. The same God who said, “Let there be light,” is able to shine His light through them even in the darkest places, including a public school (see 2 Cor 4:1–6). Our family chooses to invest our energies in public schooling because of a calling to reflect God’s image in that sphere.

As you choose your child’s educational environment, I challenge you to recognize your choice as a means to a specific end.

2. Ibid., 70.

This “end” is *not* success in life but the reflection of God’s glory. I want to suggest that, in some contexts, it is possible for public education to provide unique opportunities for Christian children to develop a biblical worldview, apologetic skills, and a passion for the Great Commission that simply cannot occur through Christian schooling or homeschooling.

Preparing to Make Your Choice

“There is,” Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). Just as God is sovereign over the political systems in our country, He is also sovereign over the public schooling systems. That does not mean that everything is going well with public schooling. It *does* mean that God is greater than the problems in public schools. If your family is called to send children to public school, God will use public schooling for His glory.

So what should you do as you move toward the best choice for your child’s education? Here are five suggestions:

1. **Entrust your child’s education to God.** Formal instruction is not everything. Even if your child attends public school, more lifelong learning occurs in your home than in the school. Several years ago, I sat with the parent of a youth from the student ministry that I led at the time. This father was a successful businessman with three children; he was also a faithful Christian. As his oldest child approached high school, he and his wife decided to move their daughter from Christian school to public school. When I asked him how he knew what school was right for his daughter, he said, “Your goal must be to provide the best education you possibly can with the resources that are available to you.” This man clearly could afford any school he wanted for his kids. Yet, as I continued to converse with him, I realized he knew that, regardless of what school his child attended, the most important learning occurred at home. That is the point of Deuteronomy 6:7–9. God’s design is for learning and discipleship to be woven into every aspect of family life—into everything from

vacations to chores, from academics to sports, from rising in the morning to tumbling into bed at night.

Such habits of life require persistent, specific prayer. Our older daughter faced several difficulties in fourth grade. Classmates were disruptive and disrespectful. Maddie consistently came home frustrated and concerned. One night, with tears in her eyes, she asked, “Why do they have to be so rude? I just want to learn. Why don’t they want to learn too?” We began to pray by name for the students in her class and for her teacher. We shared her concerns with the teacher and even told the teacher that we were praying for him. Despite the teacher’s best efforts, the disruptions continued throughout the year. Yet, in the midst of the disruptions, our daughter learned to rely on God to walk with her through a difficult time. She learned how to work with difficult people. She learned through habits of prayer at home that even if her circumstances did not change, she could choose to do what was right. That’s what it means to entrust your child’s education to God.

2. Never forget that every parent is called to homeschool. No, that is not a typo, and no, you have not accidentally flipped to the wrong chapter. Even if your child attends public school, you are responsible to homeschool and to *disciple your child personally*. There is no substitute for your influence and instruction in your child’s life.

It is not the Sunday school teacher’s task to equip your children to serve Jesus Christ. It is not even your pastor’s job. You as a parent have been specifically commanded by God to embrace the task of discipling your children. You possess the primary responsibility for developing a biblical worldview in your child. To be sure, your church should partner with you in this task, but if your church is not equipping parents to disciple their own children, you and your church are both falling short of your God-ordained responsibilities. If you send your children to public school and do not personally disciple them, they will develop the same ethics and beliefs as the world around them. But that is not the fault of what school you chose! It is because you as a

parent failed in your God-given role as the primary discipler of your children.

Discipling your children begins with the consistent practice of family devotions. In our household, it is non-negotiable that everyone arrives in the living room at 7:00 AM on school days. The curriculum is simple: We read from Psalms and Proverbs, and then we pray for specific concerns at school and for at least one friend who is not a Christian. Getting everyone into the living room no later than 7:00 AM is not easy, but this simple commitment helps us to focus on how God has called our family to reflect His image in public school. Even if you send your child to Christian school, you are responsible in the context of your family to train your child in a biblical worldview. If God calls you to send your child to public school, this training at home is not simply an academic exercise; it is real-life training for real-time challenges to biblical ethics and beliefs.

Real-life, real-time training does not end with daily devotions, though. Several years ago, my wife began intentionally teaching our older daughter about modesty. What made the principles really come alive was when they went shopping at the mall. (What pre-teen girl would not want to make the mall her classroom?) As my wife and daughter walked through the mall, they observed the clothes on the mannequins and discussed whether these clothing options matched up with biblical principles. The environment served to clarify the lessons learned through the discussion. That is what can happen when parents called of God send well-discipled children to public school: Because the environment includes real-life challenges, the environment serves to clarify the lessons.

3. Serve your school. Take every conceivable opportunity to invest in the administration, faculty, staff, and students by serving them. I am not talking about gaining access to the school so that you can criticize what is broken. Neither am I describing covert observations and operations so you can change the chosen methods or curriculum. Neither is this an opportunity to hover over your children. What I am suggesting is simply that you serve the school, with no strings attached. Servant-hearted volunteerism

speaks volumes to skeptical staff members, and such an attitude can earn the right to be heard in the school system.

Since the moment our older daughter was enrolled in public school, my wife has volunteered at the school. She has made photocopies, dusted, re-shelved library books, and helped in dozens of other ways. During that time, Karla has earned the trust of many parents and educators. Not everyone shares our worldview, but Karla's service has created a context of trust in which conversations about our worldview can occur freely. Our involvement testifies to a conscious effort to engage our culture instead of retreating from it.

In the past year, I have volunteered to help a group of children with math facts—and it made a difference in their success. It also gave me the chance to know students in my daughter's class. They saw me as a trustworthy adult and as a caring parent. As a direct result of helping children with math facts, the principal asked me to serve on the Parent Advisory Council that meets monthly with the school superintendent. My wife was privileged to spend time in prayer with the president of the PAC. Can you see the potential impact here? Because of our efforts to serve the local public school, Christian parents now have a voice in shaping the educational environment of every child in this community. How could such an influence have occurred if we had decided to abandon our local public school?

My wife was also asked to serve as a parent reviewer when the school adopted new reading, writing, and spelling curricula. Public school curriculum is a battleground for cultural conflict, and it is a battlefield from which we refuse to retreat. By investing ourselves as servants of our school system, God has provided opportunities for us to have an impact on the curriculum used in our public school.

4. Network with believing teachers, staff, and parents. As we wrestled with the initial decision to send our daughter to public school, my wife and I visited the school to observe the facility and to meet the principal. During the visit, my wife briefly observed a first-grade classroom. That next Sunday, she pointed out a young woman in church who was the same first-grade teacher she saw

the previous week! God used that moment to catalyze the calling to become involved in public schooling. It was a reminder of how many committed believers faithfully serve in the public school system. Remarkably, that same woman became my daughter's first-grade teacher. Since that time, we have discovered many other committed, Christian teachers.

Our younger daughter Katie has a strong sense of what she wants, but she becomes easily frustrated. Getting dressed often presents a challenge. One particularly difficult morning, she was unable to push past the frustration, and she was late to school. When she and my wife Karla arrived at school, Katie remained visibly upset. As Karla and Katie walked into the classroom, Karla motioned for her teacher and quietly explained that it had been a rough morning. Later, the teacher shared with my wife that she had approached our daughter and asked her if she was okay; then, she placed her hand on my daughter's shoulder and prayed for her during the moment of silence that our school observes each morning. My wife was able to share with our daughter that her teacher had prayed for her. In this way, Katie glimpsed faith in action inside a public school.

When our oldest daughter Maddie started second grade, we learned that her teacher was a Christian man, involved in a local church. During our first parent-teacher conference, we discovered that he and his wife attended the same church we did! Shortly after that meeting, they joined a Bible class that I taught. Several years later, he and his wife are committed to a church planting effort in our area, and he serves as a deacon. He and his wife remain influential people in both of our children's lives. This same teacher begins each school year by praying by name for each student before they arrive on the first day of school. The more we have immersed ourselves in our local public school, the more we have seen how God has stationed His people in this strategic arena.

As you network with Christians in your school, look for ways that you and your fellow-Christians can serve other families in the school, especially "the orphans and widows" (James 1:27)—families and children disadvantaged through death, di-

voice, or uncaring parents. As you see the needs, you can either be appalled by the plight of these people, or you can search for opportunities to serve them.

5. Be a Christian witness in your conversation and communication. This could be the most critical point of this chapter. Getting your Christian witness wrong will instantly confound your capacity to impact public schools in any positive way. Avoid the run-of-the-mill gossip at the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. If adjustments do need to be made in your child's curriculum or context, follow the appropriate chains of command. The problem is *not* that you will sometimes need to address specific concerns with the school, because you will. The problem is whether you do so in a way that honors God. Scripture provides clear guidelines for how to approach conflict and for how to respect authority (Matt 18:12–20; Rom 13:1–10). Unless the public school is asking our family to dishonor God, we must respect the authority of the local public school. In doing so, we are responding to God's authority in our lives, as we can see in Romans, chapter thirteen.

Part of being a Christian witness includes assuming the best about the school's faculty, staff, and administration (see 1 Cor 13:7). There are many public-school educators who possess active and living faith in Jesus, and though they cannot openly express this faith, their belief remains even in the classroom. Their character and commitment can provide excellent examples for your children.

Parents as Primary Teachers

To give you a biblical reference point for your decision about your child's schooling, take a look at early biblical history to see how God instructed His people. One of the earliest recipients of God's teaching was Elihu, one of Job's acquaintances. Elihu listened to Job's ranting and became angry with him "because he had justified himself rather than God" (Job 32:2). Three times Elihu references God as our teacher (Job 33:16; 35:11; 36:22). There is no mention of school or any other system of education,

just God as our teacher. What we see here is that education is not primarily the formal time spent in the classroom. It can include interaction with divine truth in any and every part of life.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, it is clear that the primary instruction in children's lives comes through interaction with parents. One responsibility that God required from Abraham was to "command his children and his house after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just" (Gen 18:19). The apostle Paul informed the Galatian church that the Old Testament law "was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we may be justified" (Gal 3:24, KJV). And how was this law learned? Primarily, through the parents. The seventy-eighth psalm puts it this way:

He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers to teach to their children so that a future generation— children yet to be born— might know. They were to rise and tell their children so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God's works, but keep His commandments. (5–7)

Parents taught by example (Deut 6:5–8; 31:12), through verbal communication (Deut 6:6–7; 11:18–19), through informal discussions (Deut 6:7; 11:19), by answering their children's questions in ways that called attention to God's glory (Exod 12:26; 13:14; Deut 6:20–21), through object lessons (Deut 6:9; 11:20), and by participating together in worship (Deut 16:16). Even after Hebrew parents in some areas began to send children to synagogue schools around the sixth century BC, the parents were still perceived as the primary educators in their children's lives.

What is my point in this?

If you are a parent, the education of your child is what matters most. Formal education is not everything. And especially as a public-school parent, it is your responsibility to train your children to view everything they learn in relation to a biblical worldview. That is what God intended from the beginning, regardless of your context. In contemporary society, this is especially true when it comes to science and history. These moments of learn-

ing become teachable moments for you as the parent when you help your child to view every part of life from the perspective of God's Word. Public-school parenting requires the greatest intentionality in this regard.

You cannot expect that your children will gain everything that they need to know about a Christian worldview simply by growing up in your home or by going to church. You are responsible to train them in this worldview, using Scripture alongside their school curriculum to move them toward Christ-centered thinking about every area of life.

Criticisms of Public Schooling

There are two primary and legitimate criticisms of public schools: *poor educational quality* and *exposure of children to worldly attitudes and behaviors*. Let us look together at the foundations for each of these criticisms.

Exposure to Ungodliness? Sheltering your child should never be a priority. Jesus told His followers to expect persecution, rejection, trials, and testing (Matt 5:10–12). Our family has chosen public school, in part, to provide our children with a relatively safe context where they can learn to deal with persecution and testing. We are providing real-time, real-life opportunities to apply what we have taught them. In this way, their faith is strengthened.

It would be absurd for a basketball team to practice for years without playing a game. It is equally absurd for children to train for years to follow Jesus without placing them in contexts where they are challenged in any significant, real-life ways. I am not saying that our children are ready to “play in the pros,” so to speak, but they *are* experiencing consistent challenges that force them to live what they have learned at home. They are learning in a real-life context how to reflect the image of Christ in dark circumstances.

Put in the simplest possible terms, shelter and safety should not be our priority as Christian parents. “Making safety the priority tells our children that we think God is incapable of doing

what he said he would do for his children.”³ Sin surrounds our children throughout their lives. A parent can modify behaviors for long periods of time by limiting the child’s exposure to “the world.” Eventually, however, children must have the opportunity to submit their wills personally to God and to witness His sovereignty in the world. Jesus said, “You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world” (John 16:33). If all Christians segregate their children in homeschools or covenantal Christian schools, can they really claim that they are “courageous” or that they are teaching our children that Jesus has already “conquered the world”? Can they state with confidence that they have gone “into the world” at all (John 17:16–18)?

Poor Educational Quality? One of the most common criticisms of the public school revolves around academic performance. E. Roy Moore has claimed, for example, that despite attending the best-funded schools in the world, American students rank near the bottom in math, science, and physics.⁴ This is a driving impetus for what he has called “the Exodus Mandate”—the supposed responsibility for all Christians to remove their children from public schools.

Statistics are not telling us the whole story. I agree that public schools in the United States can and should improve. Yet, when we compare academic achievements in public schools with Christian schools and homeschools, it is important that we compare in *categorical equivalents* instead of *categorical generalities*. What I mean is that in American public schools, every child is tested. Because American schools are so diverse, test scores include children from middle-class, suburban, two-parent families as well as children whose families have only been in the United States for a few weeks, children whose kitchens do double-duty as methamphetamine labs, and children with undiagnosed learning disabilities. The diversity of American public schooling skews the statistics downward. Neither homeschooling nor Christian

3. T. Kimmel, *Grace-Based Parenting* (Nashville, Tenn.: W Publishers/Thomas Nelson, 2004), 116.

4. E. R. Moore, *Let My People Go* (Greenville, S.C.: Ambassador-Emerald, 2002), *passim*.

schooling includes the same breadth of diversity as American public schooling. For that matter, few other nations in the world encompass the same diversity in their schools as American public schools.

With that in mind, what are the educational realities when true categorical equivalents are compared? Here is how Paul Fahri summarized the real situation:

No nation included in the major rankings educates more poor students or as ethnically diverse a population as does the U.S. When compared with students in the world's most industrialized nations, U.S. students were on par with the others. ... Every Western country, not just the U.S., lagged behind Japan in math and science. The issue of academic achievement is not an exclusive American one, but a global, east-west one.⁵

In the end, Christian parents are responsible to secure the best education possible with the resources that God has given them. In many public school systems, it is entirely possible to achieve excellence in education.

This reality raises another concern. If it is possible for your family to be involved in your local public school without compromising your faith or your child's education, is Christian schooling or homeschooling truly a wise investment? If you are a resident of the United States of America, you are already investing in your local public school through your taxes. Materials for homeschooling can range from a few hundred extra dollars each year to several thousand. Christian school tuition in some areas exceeds ten thousand dollars per academic year. Suppose that these sums were invested in local missions, relieving financial stresses on fractured families whose children attend public schools. What impact could such investments have on the kingdom of God?

5. P. Fahri, "Five Myths about U.S. Kids, Outclassed by the Rest of the World," *The Washington Post* (January 21, 2007), B-02.

Public on Purpose and the Priority of the Great Commission

Ultimately, for our family, this issue is about how we have been called to carry out the Great Commission. This does *not* mean that I am expecting my children to serve as full-time missionaries at school. I have friends who contend that they send their children to public schools as missionaries. I respectfully disagree with such a strategy. My children's calling is *not* to be campus evangelists or missionaries; they are young believers who are being equipped at home to carry their faith with them through their attitudes, behavior, and speech.

The kindness and gentleness of our daughter Maddie has a tremendous influence on her friends. She shares her faith through the ways that she responds to others. But I do not expect her to be a missionary. My wife and I are the missionaries, not our children. That calling will gradually—and prayerfully!—pass to our children as they mature and grow. Yet, as David and Kelli Pritchard have pointed out, “the main job for a Christian child or teenager in public school is simply to be a good student, a good citizen, and a servant-leader—to model what Christianity actually is.”⁶

Climbing in With Them

When each of my girls was about eight months old, I began to teach them to swim. As a teenager, I worked one summer as an infant swimming instructor. So when I had children of my own, it was only natural for me to teach them to swim.

The process for teaching babies to swim was very simple. The mothers climbed into the pool with their babies and held them close as they moved around the shallow end. This continued for several weeks, and new skills were added one by one. The goal of this phase was simply to help infants overcome their fear of the pool. After a few weeks, I took mothers and babies to the deep

6. D. Pritchard and K. Pritchard, *Going Public* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Press, 2008), 191–92.

end. We climbed in together, then floated or treaded water—but we never let the babies go.

Ultimately, the infants needed two opportunities to succeed: First, they needed to know that their mothers would be there for them. Even when we began to put distance between mothers and babies, the children needed to see that mom was there for them. Second, the children needed the chance to try new skills. Not every infant was instantly agreeable in the water, and some children took longer to recognize that everything would be okay. Eventually, though, even these children learned to tread in deep water—but this required the parents to let go of the child while still remaining near.

If you conclude that God's calling for your family includes public school, let me provide one last encouragement: *Get in the water with your children.* You cannot simply choose a school, enroll your child, and walk away. You cannot entrust your child's worldview to the public school. You must release them to try new skills, but never at the cost of sacrificing their educational development to a secular school system. They are not ready to go it alone, but with the knowledge that you are there for them and with training at home, they can tread waters far deeper than you may expect.

Not every Christian family is called to public schooling, and public schooling is not a viable option in every place. Yet, for us and for many other Christian families, it is a divine calling that allows us to reflect God's light in a dark place.