

CHARTING A COURSE FOR HOME SCHOOLING: Public setting still best

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Public schools are still the best place for children to get an education. They promote student achievement successfully because of the strong system of accountability behind them, which home schools do not have.

Furthermore, public schools offer many worthwhile experiences and opportunities not available through home schooling.

The most important reason public schools provide an excellent education is that teachers are required to be highly qualified. They must acquire and maintain a license to teach. In order to earn this teaching certification, they must demonstrate proficiency in all basic skills, study their subject area in depth, learn effective techniques of instructing all kinds of learners, and get on-the-job training under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

To maintain their license, they must continue their own education and training throughout their entire teaching career. Teachers are also held accountable by an ongoing process of evaluation. State laws that provide the requirements for teacher certification and evaluation are regularly reviewed and updated. On the other hand, there are no requirements that parents doing home schooling be trained, experienced, certified or evaluated - or have any particular qualifications.

The accountability in public education is also extensive in the area of academic standards. Public-school students must demonstrate adequate academic achievement.

Colorado public schools have rigorous content standards required for all academic areas, and schools' success in upholding the standards is evaluated by regular statewide and district testing. This process has been strengthened by recent law directing the state to base its accreditation of school districts primarily on their performance in the assessment program.

On the other hand, home-schooled students are not required to demonstrate academic achievement on the state assessments, and their curriculum is not compelled to include any standards.

Public education in Colorado is enhanced by another kind of accountability as well, one that calls for involvement of parents and community members in school improvement planning. All schools and school districts in the state are required by law to have a committee of parents, teachers, administrators and community members. These "accountability committees" must evaluate the success of the school or district in providing for student achievement and a safe learning environment, and they advise on strategies for improvement. They are also charged with consulting on the use of taxpayers' money in the budget.

The input from the diversity of people making up these committees provides public schools with a kind of broad oversight and opportunity for new ideas not available to home schools.

Besides the kinds of accountability already mentioned, public schools also provide a commitment to building and maintaining the basic values of our society and our democratic system of government. The Colorado Constitution provides for a "thorough and uniform system of free public schools."

The people who govern public schools are elected by the public and expected to uphold the shared values of the community. School board members receive frequent and regular feedback from the public about their management of the district.

Also, principals, teachers and other school staff receive feedback from parents, parent groups and accountability committees. The public ensures that there is ideological control over public schools.

In home schools, there is no assurance that values such as citizenship and acceptance of diversity will be encouraged. The importance of these values to our nation's survival prompted our founding fathers to support the right to a free education.

In addition to instilling values related to citizenship and acceptance of others, public schools boost children's development of social skills and employability skills that are critical to their becoming successful adults.

Because the classes in public schools are large, students are not "spoon-fed." They are forced to take more responsibility for their learning; this helps them gain more independence and initiative, which makes them better employees.

Children in public schools have to deal with many different personalities and temperaments, helping them acquire the skills to interact with the diversity of people in the world at large. They also learn to adapt to the varied leadership styles of teachers. Home-schooled children experience a homogenous group of people, sometimes only their parents.

Public schools help children become more cultured, discriminating and enlightened because they have a wide variety of resources and activities. Schools have music, sports, clubs and other student groups that give children an opportunity to learn more than pure academics and have many kinds of experiences.

Despite the few recent incidents of violence, public schools do provide children with a safe environment in which to learn. In fact, many more incidents of children's gun deaths occur in homes.

Gully Stanford, member of the Colorado Board of Education, explains best why public education surpasses home schooling. "In an increasingly diverse and technological society, the paramount need is to prepare our youth for productive citizenship: No home, no matter how well equipped, can duplicate the nurturing and coping experience of a public school education," he said.

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