

How do  
Christian  
parents make  
good choices  
about the  
education of  
their  
children?

RESOURCE PAPER 9, 2017



**“Train a child in the way he should go,  
and when he is old he will not turn from it.”**

Proverbs 22:6

### A biblical perspective on education

Raising their children is the great task entrusted to Christian parents. One aspect of this that requires careful thought is their schooling. For some, because of location or cost, there is little choice. But for many Christian parents choosing the right schooling for their child is one of the most important decisions that they have to make.

There are various options available: the government-provided public education system, explicitly Christian schools, denominational independent schools, and home schooling. Parents need to make the choice depending on their particular situation, and their particular children. In some cases what is right for one child in the family is not the best for another. Wisdom is needed.

We spoke to four families that have ended up making different education decisions. Each of them have their own story about how they reached their decision. We asked them to share the key reasons others should consider the same option.

While these parents may have come to different conclusions for their children, some things are held in common:

1. The first responsibility of Christian parents is to see their children grow in faith. Ephesians 6:4 instructs fathers to bring their children up “in the training and instruction of the Lord.” This has to be the primary goal of any Christian parent. While we value other aspects of learning, learning the truth of the gospel comes first.
2. While seeking the help of others in the raising of our children is vital, the final responsibility lies with parents. We cannot just ‘pass the buck’ either to church or to school, expecting ‘them’ to do it for us. The primary place of Christian nurture and instruction has to be the home.
3. Schooling is an important part of the ‘armoury’ in helping our children develop into mature adults: firstly, with the formal curriculum that helps them develop knowledge and skills in various subject areas; but also in developing relational and social skills as they grow into maturity.

## Christian community schooling ... the Barnes family story

Here are two key reasons why Christian parents should consider Christian schooling.

The first is that Christian parents have a God-given responsibility to raise godly offspring. They are to make known the revelation of God to their children in such a way that Christ is modelled to them (Deut.4:9-10; 6:7; Ps.78:1-8; cf. Luke 6:40).

This involves teaching about God's Word, prayer, and worship, but should encompass all education, because all truth is God's truth. The spiritual and moral integrity of the home is a great part of what is required to raise godly offspring (Mal.2:15). Parents shouldn't hand over their children to those who may undermine trust in God's Word - unless there are very compelling reasons to do so.

This might sound like an argument in favour of home schooling, but the reality is that as the subjects to be studied become more detailed, the teaching of them usually proves itself beyond the capacity of most parents. Children also need to learn how to interact with people outside their family circle.

The second reason is that the Christian faith must be the foundation of all education: it should permeate all subjects, and not be simply added to the others. Scripture is clear: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, not an add-on (Prov.1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Ps.111:10; Job 28:28).

State education is not based on fear of the Lord, nor is it neutral. It is, in fact, increasingly hostile to the Christian faith in terms of curriculum, discipline and ethos. While Moses survived an education in Egypt (Acts 7:22), and Daniel and his three friends in Babylonian (Dan.1), they cannot be read as examples for Christian parents to follow. Another crucial point is that a state monopoly on education is dangerous in the extreme.

As well as lacking neutrality, education today lacks an "integrating factor". The story is one of fragmentation, in which faith tends to be separated from reason and the real world. Many educators would be bewildered by, even hostile toward, the notion that faith is the foundation for all of life. In their view, if faith and the fear of the Lord have a place at all, it is confined to the margins of life, the spiritual realm of our relationship with God, with prayer, and worship. Science, history, and other subjects are viewed as standing on their own two feet. The state system



is, thus, a house that has not even begun to be laid on the right foundation.

Only the Christian faith provides a satisfying answer to the related problems of lack of integration and the faith/reason dichotomy. Christians know that the God of the Bible is the God of everything: of history (Isaiah 10:5-19); of music (Psalm 150); of art and technology (Exodus 35); and of nature (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20). Since God is the Creator, nothing in the creation can fail to be of interest to the Christian who worships Him. In fact, without God, there is no basis for order and discovery, and hence no basis for education. As C. S. Lewis said: 'There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.' Hence unbelief needs to be confronted and defeated, that every thought be brought into captivity unto Christ (2 Cor.10:3-5).

Christian education is not just a chapel service and a little discipline added to secular learning. It is not simply a place of refuge from evils in society. Nor is it a week-long Sunday School, or the provision of sound biblical teaching in the doctrine course. Neither can it take the place of the Holy Spirit who sovereignly joins God's people to Christ.

What a Christian school *can* do, however, is offer Christian families an education in which every area of life is built upon the basis of faith in the God of the Bible. It is an education that says, as does Douglas Wilson, that Christianity does not add a planet to the solar system, but provides a different sun.

All things were created by Christ and for Christ (Col.1:16), and in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col.2:3). Bonhoeffer wrote that 'Man only knows who he is in the light of God.' Without that light, education becomes a means for dispensing darkness with only occasional flashes of light.

Not all experiences of Christian schooling will be the same and not all Christian schools will be worthy of support, but speaking personally, Christian schools provided what was largely an encouraging and faithful framework for the education of the six Barnes children.



## Home schooling ... the Galvin family story

Homeschooling is a legitimate and outstanding educational choice for Christian parents to seriously consider.

It offers a number of distinct advantages over the more traditional institutionalised educational options, as follows:

1. Most importantly homeschooling provides maximum opportunities for Christian parents to disciple and raise their children to know and love Jesus. God calls all parents to the serious undertaking of raising godly offspring, and homeschooling provides a parent with quality and quantity time to model, teach and train their children in the knowledge and love of Christ. The time available to parents in which to do this is limited and fleeting, and sadly so often restricted to brief, tired and busy moments in the afternoons or on the weekends. Homeschooling gives children back to their parents at their best times of the day.



2. Homeschooling strengthens the family unit, develops stronger family relationship, teaches conflict resolution amongst the most personal of ties, and offers enormous opportunities for character development and training (on both the child's AND parent's part!)

3. Amongst many other advantages, homeschooling is also both flexible and efficient.

It's flexible in terms of the educational model one can choose (eg. structured, unstructured, classical, eclectic etc), the programs (eg. if a maths program is not working for a particular child, throw it out and try another!), the style of learning (oral, written, hands on etc), the pace of learning (quicker or slower, depending upon the child), the hours (choose optimal times for your family – mornings, afternoons, & choose your school holidays), the places (in bed, in the car, when shopping, on the lounge, on holidays – in fact, all of life!) and so on.

Homeschooling is also efficient. The 'teacher' to 'student' ratio is far smaller than in schools and each child receives far more one-on-one time, thus reducing the need for long hours and homework (many homeschoolers finish at lunch, for example). Children have more time to play and 'be kids' and extra time to pursue hobbies, study subjects of their interest and learn life-skills (household chores, cooking, gardening, etc).

Other advantages include: the joy of learning with your children, precious moments with your child, organising as many 'excursions' as you choose, seeing your children learn and grow before your eyes, taking a day off when it is needed, etc.

Homeschooling, however, is not for the faint-hearted. It requires a great deal of time, commitment, planning, financial outlay (including one parent choosing not to be in paid employment) and an initially confusing plethora of paperwork, including registration with the Board of Studies. There are many choices to be made and, because it is not always seen as an acceptable alternative, or is misunderstood, one may receive negative comments and have unsupportive family or friends. It is a massive learning curve for the parent and doubts can sometimes arise.

However, contrary to general thought, homeschooling in no way negatively impacts an average child's socialisation skills. In fact, the opposite is usually the case, with less bullying and peer group pressure and more opportunities to socialise with a wide range of ages ... there is no segregation into age groups.

To conclude, homeschooling offers many advantages over institutionalised education and all Christian parents are encouraged to seriously consider this as a choice for their family.



## Denominational church schooling ... the Powell family story

Independent schools are an important sector in Australian education. Many parents decide that they are willing to pay extra for education which reflects their beliefs, values and aspirations, in a church school. There is no single right model of schooling for everyone, and there are valid reasons for choosing one particular model over another depending on circumstance and context. What follows is a summary of why I would suggest that parents seriously consider sending their children to a Church school.

1. *Excellence in education:* Church schools have a commitment to academic excellence. The school boards actively seek to employ the best educators in their respective fields, and parents - who often pay a lot of money for their child's education - have an expectation of academic success. My observation is that those who pay extra for their

child's education are invested in the process - they work with the learning culture of the school to encourage personal discipline and a work ethic that delivers strong academic results.

2. *Sporting opportunities:* Church schools employ specialist coaches and often have state of the art sporting facilities. One of the greatest benefits is that training times and programs are integrated into the school schedule. Church schools provide an alternative to Sunday sporting competitions that might otherwise stop families from going to Church.

3. *Extra-curricular activities:* The opportunity to develop and excel, especially in music and the arts, is tremendous. Key to this is the employment of specialist staff. Church schools, because of their size and funding, often have large choirs and orchestras. Many Church schools foster student exchange programs that provide excellent cross cultural opportunities for service and growth. Students also have opportunities to express their talents through experiences such as overseas study tours.

4. *Professional support:* Church schools have a Christian focus on pastoral care, and an eye on financial resources. This means they can provide excellent support to students who are struggling academically and socially. Denominational schools can provide excellent psychological and in-class support to children diagnosed with special needs.

5. *Christian worldview:* Church schools explicitly defend and support a Christian worldview, and seek to present the gospel (through classes on divinity, chapel services, chaplaincy programs etc.) to those who would otherwise not have much of an opportunity to hear and respond to it. What's more, they provide an excellent forum in which Christian children can bear witness to their non-Christian peers. As our society becomes increasingly secular and hostile to the Christian faith, and traditional Biblical values are

attacked through programs such as “Safe Schools”, this is particularly important.

6. *Boarding:* Church schools provide students from rural regions with a great living away from home experience as they continue their schooling. I’ve heard first hand from students at PLC Armidale and Scots Bathurst about how much they appreciate the opportunity to board. It provides a fantastic environment for learning as well as providing many recreational and social activities that may not be available in their home town.

7. *Personal discipline:* Church schools are well known for their discipline, not just in correcting poor behaviour but in developing good character. This is achieved by a school “culture” that includes everything from the official uniform, study habits, and expectations of staff, to the general ethos created by the leadership and tradition of the particular institution.

With all of these benefits also come real dangers that any parent should be aware of before embarking upon the commitment of sending their child to a Church School.

1. *Elitism:* Church Schools offer such a great “product” that it is very easy to become proud and look down on the educational opportunities of others. This is a trap that both parents and children can fall into. Scholarships and special programs notwithstanding, Church schools are also quite narrow demographically – serving only the top ten percent of our social strata.

2. *Worldliness:* Church Schools are by no means exclusively Christian, either amongst the student body or, sometimes, amongst the staff. While on the one hand it is a great opportunity for conversion, that can also go the other way! Children from Christian homes will mix with those who come from homes that often tolerate Christianity without embracing it. What’s more, since Church schools are often very traditional in their presentation of the Gospel it may not be as engaging as one would expect or hope.

3. *Cost:* Church Schools are notoriously expensive and will often consume the salary of at least one of the parents. There is a large upfront cost in securing a place and tuition fees can be in the tens of thousands of dollars each year.



## Public education

### ... the McMillan family story

Public education is a great option for children from Christian families. Yet, so often it seems to be not even considered. Obviously parents need to consider the particular school and their particular children. But I want to suggest why the local public school should be considered, firstly for the gospel, and secondly for the children.

#### 1. *Choosing public education is good for the gospel.*

The recent public debates about ethics classes as an alternative to SRE, and about government support for school chaplaincy, highlight a change that has been happening in our schools. To a large extent Christians are leaving the public education system.

This is part of a wider societal trend. Between 1993 and 2003, Government school enrolments in Australia increased by only 1.2% while enrolments in non-Government schools increased by 22.3%.<sup>1</sup> The anecdotal evidence I have encountered is that Christians are largely choosing private education over public.

In addition, while it is very difficult for a newly trained teacher to ‘break into’ the public system, it is less difficult for a Christian teacher to find a job in a Christian school. This means that, as well as fewer Christian students and parents, there are also fewer Christian teachers involved in public education.

No wonder those voices opposed to SRE and chaplaincy are so dominant. There are less alternative voices in the system.

Jesus calls us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness”, while trusting him with meeting our other needs (Matthew 6:33). I believe being involved in public education is one way of expressing that priority, as we seek to influence our community for the gospel.

By our choice, our three children all attended the local public primary and high schools. They were all leaders who were open about their Christian faith. One non-Christian English teacher, teaching the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, often deferred to our daughter and another Christian boy in the class to help the class understand Donne’s Christian viewpoint.

As parents, we were also able to be a Christian presence in the school. I was president of P&C of both primary and high school. I remember tipping the balance each year at the primary P&C to assure ongoing financial support by the P&C for SRE material. My wife was on a selection panel for a number of staff appointments, including principal. We developed friendships with our children’s friends’ parents.

One thing we noticed in our years in public education is that, while the percentage of Christian families was lower than the community average, the number of children from Christian homes selected for school captaincy positions was disproportionately high. God can use our presence in the schools for his glory.

#### 2. *Choosing public education is good for our children.*

Not only that, but when Jesus called on his people to “seek first his kingdom,” he added, “and all these things will be given to you as well” – he promises to look after us.

He certainly looked after our three daughters, all now adults, and all, by God’s grace, believers who are active in their churches. Two are teachers – one in a public primary school, another in a gospel-minded denominational high school.

It seems that some Christians are frightened that public schooling will somehow undermine their children’s growing faith. We have seen no evidence of this. Indeed, our experience was that involvement in comprehensive schools with teachers and students of any or no belief has

helped build a resilient faith. While faith was sometimes challenged at school by both peers and teachers, this proved to be an opportunity for growth.

We can no more ‘wrap our children in cotton wool’ spiritually than we can physically. Just as they learn from the bumps and bruises they get on the playground, so they learn by bumping up against life – all in the context of a loving Christian home and church that will help them sort out truth from error. In this way, our children grew to understand what it means to be ‘in the world but not of it.’

While at some independent schools children can encounter a confusing array of the theological spectrum, all with the authority of teachers, at public school they learn that the beliefs that matter most come from home and church, not school. For example, I remember an opportunity to teach my 6 year old daughter about the Trinity, when she had a Jehovah’s Witness friend in year 1.

Our desire for our children was that they grew to be mission-minded. We believe their experience in public schools helped with this. They all learnt

what it meant to share their faith with their friends, and took opportunities to invite their friends to church. By contrast, my wife was teaching a Sunday School class about evangelism in which the children saw no need to talk about Jesus with their school friends because they were at a Christian school!

I know of no research into the spiritual results of any method of schooling, but the anecdotal evidence I have witnessed over the years suggests that children from Christian homes are certainly no less likely to develop mature Christian faith if they attend a government school. Indeed I know many who are now, as adults, strong in their faith.

All Christian parents need to decide for themselves where they will send their children to school. I hope that they seriously consider public education. Because it is good for the gospel. And it is good for our children.

## References

1. Dr Adrian Beavis, “Why parents choose public or private schools”, *Reynolds: Research Developments* No. 12, Summer 2004, p.5

The Gospel, Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on social issues expressed by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. They have not been approved by the Assembly and so do not represent the official view of the Presbyterian Church of NSW.

For more information about The Gospel, Society and Culture committee see [www.gsandc.org.au](http://www.gsandc.org.au)

The research and writing for this Resource Paper was conducted by Sandy McMillan, with contributions from Peter Barnes, Karen Galvin, and Mark Powell. Sandy is the senior pastor at Drummoyne Presbyterian church, and father of 3 adult children. Peter is the pastor of Revesby Presbyterian Church, and father of 6 adult children. Karen has 4 children of primary school age, and is married to Todd, the pastor of Charlestown Presbyterian Church. Mark is an Associate Pastor at Cornerstone Community Presbyterian Church, and has 6 children: one adult, 4 at school and one about to start.

Image page 1: Shutterstock image ID 291769466

Image page 3: courtesy Sheryl Sarkoezy

Image page 5: courtesy Sheryl Sarkoezy

Image page 2: Shutterstock image ID 394617913

Image page 4: Shutterstock image ID 585127669

Image page 6: courtesy Sheryl Sarkoezy

All images used by permission or from the public domain.

© Gospel, Society and Culture committee, PCNSW, 2017.

