



Collaborative Homeschooling:

A manifesto for a 21st Century education after COVID-19

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Letter to the Reader:

You have options.

You have always had options.

The thing is, it has never been more apparent than it is right now that you should seriously consider those options sooner rather than later.

I understand the fear that comes into play when the intellectual side of understanding that “school just doesn’t work” for the young heroes in your life goes to battle with the emotional side of you saying that “they could get ‘behind’ if they aren’t doing what the others are doing”.

I’m hopeful that I can alleviate those fears for you.

It’s worth it.

Your kids are worth it.

You have options; and this is just one of them.

Chapter 1: A Story of Disillusionment and Hope in Schools

School is broken. It has been for decades, and it has only gotten worse over the past 10-15 years as we continue to standardize everything, handcuff our teachers, and implement irrational metrics which ultimately determine our funding.

Enter COVID-19. The whole country began to homeschool, and if parents didn't realize that the Emperor has been naked for quite some time, they surely saw him for what he was now. This was something I learned firsthand years ago. As much as I hate that this is the way some light is finally getting shed on the whole situation, here we are.

When I first moved into an assistant principal position at a public K-8 school, around 2010, the Common Core nationally-standardized curriculum was beginning to gain ground--which, not coincidentally, was the same time I began experiencing my initial disillusionment with the nation's traditional schooling system.

I had attended the Fortune School of Education for my California teaching credential, and I obtained my MA in Education from Concordia University. I had taught K-8 physical education, middle-school algebra, and history at a public school in central California. I then received my California Administrative Credential (school principal's credential), which allowed me to move into the assistant principal position.

I was serving a Title I school in an underprivileged community. (As a benchmark of the prevailing poverty, 94% of the students were on free- and reduced lunch, as compared to a national average of 53%.)

Many of the students I served were already in gangs by middle school, and even many of their parents were in gangs. Issues that we confronted in school included knives, stabbings, severe and violent bullying, drug dealing, kids coming to school drunk or high, teen pregnancy, and parents in and out of jail.

I prided myself on focusing on helping these kids create the most solid and supportive lives for themselves possible, while also encouraging them to pursue a life of the mind and prepare for future job prospects.

However, I found myself consistently stymied in these efforts, by the straight jacket of nationally mandated testing, and the cookie-cutter academic standardization. These bureaucratic mandates completely ignored the unique needs of the local community for creating thriving young adults.

Furthermore, as a site administrator in a public school, I saw the behind-the-scenes politics that drove funding and priorities in the school system at the district level. Suffice it to say, the local educational and well-being needs of the students were not the main driving force of the

politicking; in contrast, petty office politics, fiefdom-building, silo budget-defending, and new-and imaginative ways of gaming the grading and testing systems to enhance district standings and budgets ran rampant.

Once I saw how the sausage was made on the administrative side, I simply could not stomach the unethical and even fraudulent behavior I saw among administrators at the district level.

I thought, naively, that this would be better on the private school side. I took a job teaching at a private K-8 school and went from teaching underprivileged kids to over-privileged kids. Yet to my surprise, many of the same issues remained: particularly bullying over social media and drug problems--in this case, prescription meds instead of marijuana.

Also, I saw a problem that was inverse from the problems at public schools. At public schools, the challenge was always to get parents even marginally involved in their kids' education. This created a sense of hopelessness to the kid who feels there is no support and who then must find support somewhere else.

Yet in the private school, the kids had nothing but their support system: because their parents tended to micromanage almost every aspect of their education and their existence, they didn't get the benefit of tackling on their own. They didn't get to achieve anything because mom and dad achieved it for them. The instances in which it was clear that parents had simply done the assignments for their children--or helped so intrusively to the degree that the child barely had any input--were too numerous to count. However, if you are carried your entire life, you never get the opportunity to learn how to walk.

Moreover, I was dispirited to see that, despite having all the freedom in the world to create innovative and cutting-edge curricula and teaching styles and philosophies, basically just mimicked the standardized systems of the public-school curricula. They administered the same standardized tests, taught to the tests in the same way, and used these metrics to guide everything about the school. They did this because they wanted to prove themselves against the public schools, comparing apples to apples--so they became like the apples. After observing all this, there were two final straws that broke my desire to remain involved in traditional schooling in any way--and which ultimately freed me to pursue the pathway to alternative education to which I have since devoted my life.

The first came in the wake of a self-learning project I initiated for the graduating eighth graders. They had been so steeped in by-the-books academic learning, I wanted them to get some street-smart, real-world, problem-solving experiential education under their belt before they went off to more academic schooling in high school.

I gathered the students and gave them their assignments. It was probably the most open-ended assignment they ever received in their entire schooling:

I said, "You're going to join in teams of 4, and in 6 months, you are going to solve a problem for someone. You find a need in society you're passionate about, and I want you to devise a solution. You're going to raise any money you need to implement the solution, you're going to implement it, and you're going to document it, so you can present it to your fellow students and to the school community before graduation. I'll be available to support you if you come across any challenges or roadblocks. I'm not going to give you many more parameters than that."

Six months later, they had to present the results of their project to the community, on stage, with a panel of local entrepreneurs who grilled them on their methodology, Shark Tank-style.

The kids completely crushed this project! One group self-published a faith-based devotional that somehow, they managed to get into the hands of every female inmate in the state of California.

Another group collected donated backpacks full of donated food, clothing, and school supplies for underserved Title I kids in the local area, raising thousands of dollars' worth of goods. Another group figured out how to get a car donated to a poor local veteran. Another group built a wagon for a local homeless person, full of donated supplies, that doubled as a shelter and bed.

The pride beaming from these students at the presentation was palpable, and they aced the grilling from the entrepreneurs because they had been so on top of their projects. The parents unanimously said this was by far the most enriching educational experience their children had ever had.

Given this success and the obvious value of this project to the kids' leadership development, I assumed that the rest of the administration of the school would be thrilled to implement this as an annual project for the graduating eighth graders. I assumed incorrectly.

The other administrators were extremely uncomfortable with this project. They said it needed more structure so that the kids could be evaluated against benchmarks. (The standardized testing mentality had seeped into every corner of their educational souls.)

They agreed to allow the project to continue, under the condition that there was a strict guidebook recommending projects, with clear action steps and benchmarks. Also, they wanted the parents much more involved to provide structure.

Next year, the kids stood up at the same final evaluation and presented an array of weak, ineffectual projects. One group, I recall had attached themselves to an already-existing homeless organization and went and served food one night that their parents had cooked--taking selfies all the while posing for pictures taken by their parents in attendance. The parents had clearly done most of the lame projects for their kids. It was a complete joke. In total contrast with the previous year, there was no leadership developed or displayed among any of the students.

I remember sitting in the audience of this presentation, thinking, “That’s it, I’m done with my participation in this system of traditional schooling.” To me, the second iteration of this project was a perfect metaphor for all the problems with traditional schooling:

The administration wanted standardized control. They wanted this, in my opinion, because the open-end nature of the previous years’ version was extremely confronting to them; it was an “emperor wears no clothes” moment. After all, expensive bureaucratic administrators and state-certified teachers with MAs are not needed to tell a bunch of kids to go out and solve a real-world problem in society on their own.

If the best educational experience the school offered the students, did not require these teachers and administrators, then why were they required at all? In order to justify their experience, they decided they needed to interject themselves to provide what they know best: standardization and benchmarking.

For the parents’ part, as soon as benchmarks and checkmarks and rules and regulations were involved, they kicked into their habitual helicopter parenting and basically did the work for their kids, in order to avoid any uncertainty.

I just couldn’t stomach this anymore. I decided that--like the kids, I had supported the year before in their successful projects-- I needed to go and discover or create a solution myself.

I decided I would learn about alternative models of educating young people, and in my research, I learned about a school called Acton Academy in Austin, Texas. What struck me about Acton was that their entire curriculum and guiding methodology was based around real-world projects like the one I had just sparked among the middle-schoolers at my previous school. I got curious about what an entire *school* based on this teaching philosophy would look like.

I got my first taste when I called Acton and asked if I could visit and observe. Their answer was, “Let us ask the students and find out if they’re OK with that.”

Can you imagine any other school responding that way? In what other schools do the students’ preferences about their learning environment even remotely cross the administrators’ minds as relevant?

The students agreed to my visit, and I was given a two-hour window to observe. What I saw astonished me.

For two hours, I watched a group of 36 middle-school kids (ages 11-13) run what was a more efficient meeting than pretty much any meeting I’d ever seen adults run.

There was an adult in the room for the entire two hours I was there, he said nothing. For the part, they were in a writer’s workshop, and they were reading pieces of their rough drafts of

creative writing to the rest of the class. They had a schedule they had delineated, and they had nominated a fellow student to run the meeting.

This student-leader kept the meeting running more on-point than I'd ever seen in any meeting of any age. Each student had 5 minutes to read their segment and get feedback. The feedback from the other students was concise, specific, and well-articulated. Everyone was engaged with the process, constructive with their feedback, confident with the way they presented it, and OK with receiving it. There was an adult "guide" (as they called teacher-figures in the Acton world) in the room, but this guide said almost nothing.

I admit, in my decade of being an educator at that point, I'd never seen anything like this. To the point where I thought for a moment, I must be in some sort of practical joke, where the students were *pretending* to act this way (like real adults, not rambunctious and rebellious middle-schoolers) just to surprise me! But it wasn't a practical joke; this was their daily reality.

After the writing session, they switched to small groups where each group was working on an ongoing project testing different rocket designs and fuels, competing to create the rocket that would shoot the highest, from scratch.

Again, there was an adult guide in the room, but this guide was simply there observing and taking a few notes. At one point, one of the students asked him something, and his reply was, "How could you go find that information yourself?" At this point, the student asked a fellow student, who helped the first student find the answer.

What I realized at that moment was that the entire reality of the stereotypical teenager who rebels against the constraints imposed on them by parents and educators was created by those parents and educators treating them like stereotypical teenagers.

I saw a room full of self-aware, self-confident young adults, who were taking their own education and future seriously, into their own hands.

What I saw changed me forever. I saw how young adults should be educated and saw what a tragic disservice we were inflicting upon young people by forcing them into infantilizing traditional educational models.

I knew I had to devote my life to spreading the gospel of this new model.

At that time, we had two children, girls who were 2 and 4. I couldn't imagine the idea of sending them through traditional schooling after what I saw; it would just be too damaging to them, and I could never look myself in the mirror if I forced them through that, now that I saw there was a viable and massively better alternative.

When I got home from Austin that night, I told my wife, point blank, “We either need to move to Austin, and enroll our kids in this school, or we need to create a school like this in our community.”

She said, “Well, I don’t want to move to Austin.”

At that point, we decided we needed to create an Acton Academy in Roseville (near Sacramento). And our life path was set out for us.

I put out the word for a meeting in a coffee shop for local families, telling them about this new model. I invited two families, and eight families showed up. My commitment was, if I could open with 10 kids total (including my older daughter), I would go forward with it.

At that meeting, two families were on board, to send three kids total. Now we were at four; I needed 6 more to meet the threshold.

We also needed to find a school location. All the meetings with commercial brokers were fruitless. One day, dropping my daughter off her Montessori preschool, we drove by a 160-acre park. There was a building up-front that looked relatively unused. I called the city to see what it was. It was an old library. I asked City Parks & Rec and negotiated a deal to rent it.

Families told families about the school, and the meetings started to snowball. At the next one, we had 8 more families. Then the next few we had 15-20 families. Plus, I was doing individual meetings with families, around 7-10 per week. Many of the families feared the new model, and that was fine with me. I only wanted to work with families who were totally on board.

Within the first three months, we reached a critical mass of 10 kids, and by the summer prior to open we were at 36 students. We launched in September with 56 students, making us the largest Acton launch ever, and putting us in the top 5 of all 80 campuses in the network at that time.

Five months after launching in that small old library, we were growing so fast for year 2’s enrollment we were able to move into two new school buildings occupying 18,000 square feet.

Now in year 3, with 125 students between the ages of 5-18 (including my three children), we have a brand-new 22,000 square foot, \$6 million property on 3 acres, and just purchased a similar property right in Sacramento for a Fall of 2021 opening.

In the new space, we are growing into facilitating opportunities for students to partner with local entrepreneurs and create and operate real-world businesses and offerings that serve the local community. The campus will have a student-created, student-led coffee-shop, theater, and multimedia recording studio. The students volunteer and work on campus, including working directly with our Executive Chef to fully cook and prepare real food for the rest of their peers on campus.

Throughout this journey, the most rewarding aspect has been the transformations I've seen in the children in our school, and the feedback we've received from parents about these transformations.

"We have a different child at home now. My children now have confidence that they did not have before, and they are happier, more at peace, and more driven than I've ever seen them."

This is the most common piece of feedback we get from parents. And movingly for me, I've seen the same thing in my kids. Nothing much changed in our home life since they've been in Acton--we still have the same healthy, happy time together we've always had. But the newfound confidence I've seen in my own two girls, as well as the pride that has seeped into my son is obvious and palpable to anyone who has known them through this time.

Any time I have a challenging day at work, I come back to that: my own children are thriving more than I've ever seen them before. And that makes all the ups and downs of running a cutting-edge, entrepreneurial school worthwhile, a hundred times over

In all my years of education, I've never seen such a rapid transformation among students. The Acton model just works, and I have become a true believer.

It is my pleasure to share the treasures of the model, as well as all I've come to learn in the process of implementing it to great success, as you embark on your own journey of educating your children in a forward-thinking way.

Chapter 2: Common Misconceptions and Fears About Homeschooling

As a parent who cares deeply about the success and future of your children, as you consider the possibility of homeschooling your children, you're probably asking yourself a million questions. And, as you contemplate these questions, it's likely that you're also operating with some common misconceptions about homeschooling.

Here are some of the most common questions and misconceptions.

The #1 Question Parents Ask About Homeschooling:

"Is my child going to be able to go to college?"

Yes. The best question in 2020 and beyond, though, would be, "Is College a good investment?"

Many colleges around the country are clamoring for homeschooled students, as they have seen them successfully navigate the college landscape just as much, if not more than their traditionally educated peers. In many cases, there is even a separate application process (which can mean a great chance of acceptance) for this group.

Here is another "hack" that most people don't want to take the time to realize. A student can simply enroll in a local community college, usually around age 16, and take the two years of general education courses needed to directly transfer to any college or University on the planet.

The question that remains, though, would be, "Is college worth it for what I want to do"? What you may discover is that there are other alternatives that are increasingly more attractive AND relevant for a vast majority of teens and young adults.

After COVID-19, the downward spiral that is our college system will begin it's rapid disintegration. As Jeff Sandefer put it, "Many, if not most non-selective colleges will go bankrupt, and should. It's a crime to admit young people, load them up with debt that cannot be discharged in bankruptcy; only graduate 36% or so in four years and 50% in six years – especially when many can't find a decent job when they graduate. The people involved in this fraud should be ashamed of themselves."

But, yes, your kid will be able to get into college, if that's what you and the child think is best for their future.

However, in this book, you'll also be hearing about alternative programs to college, which are designed with homeschoolers in mind, and which prepare kids for getting a high-paying job quickly and directly, with much less investment of time or money than college.

The #2 Questions Parents Ask About Homeschooling:

“Will I be taking options off the table for my child?”

This question is highly related to Question #1. After all, in our society, we view college as the “general purpose” tool for increasing options and keeping those options open. “With a college degree, you can do anything” is the common refrain.

However, the usefulness of that refrain is now being called into question. With a college degree, you can now graduate carrying an average of \$20,000 in debt. Many students are carrying much more.

Starting off a career in a significant amount of debt actually *decreases* options, because it forces kids to narrowly focus on whatever job will get them the income to pay their debt back quickly, rather than the job that is most aligned with who they are as a person.

That latter statement--“who they are as a person” --might sound wishy-washy, a shorthand for “broke poet” or something like that.

However, every child must eventually develop a sense of where they are going in life, including how they will support themselves doing it. “Broke poet” is not sustainable--but neither is going headlong into a career they don't care about at all and that has nothing to do with their sense of self, values, and mission, while straddled with debt they'll never escape.

The *real* options you want to develop and keep open for your kid are the options of fulfillment, happiness, providing value, self-awareness, self-confidence. Those are the capacities that are most important for your kid, and that *gives* them the most options--much more so than narrow academic performance. Focusing on narrow academic performance generally tends to diminish the opportunity to develop those capacities, as there are only so many hours in the day. Focus on one thing necessarily implies less focus on another.

Homeschooling, properly conceived, educates the whole child, in a way that traditional schooling can barely even pretend to do. Educating just the child's academic mind, and focusing on narrow metrics of grades, does not maximize options later. I firmly believe--and I have seen with my own eyes among the children I teach--that educating the whole child will lead to more options being open over their lifetime.

The #3 Question Parents Ask About Homeschooling: “*Am I going to create a “weird kid” who doesn’t fit in?*”

No.

Most of the confusion around this issue literally stems from the word *homeschooling* itself. The word recalls images of a kid holed up in their bedroom at 1 pm on a Tuesday, poring over books and self-study curricula, rather than interacting with other kids and adults.

However, in this sense, *homeschooling* is a misnomer. While self-directed and solo study time is a part of homeschooling--just as it is in traditional schooling--the best homeschool experiences involve getting your child out into the real world: doing projects, learning in collaborative environments with other homeschool kids, volunteering, playing music and creating art with other kids, interning during their teen years, and of course, participating in sports if they so desire.

An important part of this real-world experience involves interacting with *adults* in real-world contexts. Internships. Paid work. Shadowing parents or other adults at work, to learn about how the real world of employment and productivity works.

All these contexts involve copious social interaction. As long as you are attentive to making sure that your child’s homeschooling doesn’t occur *only* in the home alone or with immediate family, there are zero risks that you’re going to raise some kind of outcast with no friends, who don’t know how to relate to others.

On this topic, I’d like to add one other note. The idea that children should spend the vast majority of their days exclusively with other children within 1-2 of their age--known as “age segregation”--is only about 100 years old, in the 100,000+ year history of homo sapiens.

I believe that age segregation is an unmitigated disaster for the proper development of children. With age segregation, kids interact with older people only as *much* older authority figures (10-15+ years older), rather than interacting with peers 3-5 years older who can provide them with insight and guidance for their road ahead.

Furthermore, in age segregation, kids are trained to see younger children as totally irrelevant (“been there, done that!”) Whereas, in real life, and in non-age-segregated homeschooling environments, children are able to provide mentorship, guidance, and role modeling for other kids 3-5 younger than themselves, which provides a valuable source of leadership and self-esteem for the older child.

Another issue revolves around the *Lord of the Flies* type social dynamics that arise when kids only hang out with other kids their age. Without being embedded in a rich, diverse landscape of different people at different ages, with the different values that people develop at these different ages, all sorts of fads, social hierarchies, cliques, and false power structures reign supreme. (Remember all that from the playground?)

Furthermore, when not embedded within age diversity, kids start to see older people as “foreign,” getting totally absorbed (often in secret) in whatever fashions are reigning within their own age group. They lose the ability to connect with the past and future, and to see how their own development is part of a chain of development in which there is wisdom from the past (older kids and adults), and in which they can shape the future (younger generations.)

There is zero evidence that age segregation is healthy for children and plenty of evidence that it’s unhealthy. It was not created for the benefit of children; it was created for the benefit of easy administration of schooling systems, one hundred years ago. Do you really want the bureaucratic imperatives of a century ago to be determining the social development of your child?

Finally, on the topic of “weird” kids, strict age segregation is totally foreign to the real world outside of schooling. If they’re not going to be in age-segregated environments as soon as they get their first job--if they’re going to be interacting with and respond to people 5-40 years older in the workplace--why is their schooling optimizing for their functioning in age-segregated environments for the 17 years before they get their first job?

“Weird” is subjective, but let’s not pretend that all of the people you grew up with in traditional school were perfectly “normal”. It’s not the schooling that determines who is “weird or normal”, but it absolutely may be the schooling that determines who is self-aware, gritty, and capable.

Question #4: *“What are other parents going to say? What is my family going to say?”*

There’s no way around it. If you’re the only homeschool parent in your own parent network and peer group, you *will* get questions, and perhaps some judgment. All the misconceptions we are dispelling here, you’re going to face from other parents who haven’t done the research yet. Also, these parents may be defensive, because your choice to homeschool your kids, naturally raises the question, are *they* making the best choice for their kids by keeping them in child-prisons (aka schools)?

Who cares?

If you decide to homeschool your children, you should factor in that *some* of the work involved in doing so will be educating other parents, and perhaps your own family members, about the benefits of homeschooling. This is a movement. When you homeschool your kids, you are joining that movement, even if you don't want to be particularly active in the outreach and education about homeschooling towards the traditional schooling crowd.

When it comes to your own family members who may judge, obviously that's an issue that varies from family to family, and you're going to have to find your own way to communicate about this appropriate to your own family.

However, I will say that you should always remember *why* you're doing this. It's certainly not for your own convenience! It's because you truly believe this is what's best for your child. Hopefully, your other family members also want what's best for your children and are willing to have the conversations to understand why you think this is the best choice.

I've found that the best questions to ask skeptical family members are: "What is it that you most want for my child?" And then, "What do you think homeschooling is not going to give my child?"

At that point, you can address their specific concerns, perhaps citing the various answers we're exploring here.

Lastly, when you opt-out of traditional schooling, you are opting into a rich network of highly idealistic parents who believe deeply in this option, and who want to support other families who are engaged in this option.

Think about it. How involved *really* are most other parents in the schools? PTA meetings are nice (uh... not really...) but one of the reasons many parents *enjoy* the schooling system is that it basically acts as an outsourced babysitter for their kids, allowing the parents to mostly disengage from their child's education.

That's never the case with homeschooling. You're going to find parents who are, on average, vastly more engaged with their children's education. And part of that engagement is engaging with other homeschool parents.

The big picture?

Stop allowing yourself to parent based on other people's expectations of you as a parent.

Quit yearning for that Harvard parent bumper sticker to placate the insecurities in your own mind.

Question #5: *“Will my kid be able to follow instructions in a work environment after homeschooling?”*

A major myth about employment locations is that bosses just love giving a bunch of orders and having them followed by mindless employees like robots.

While organizations may have existed like this as recently as the 80s, in the Internet-fueled, rapidly changing economic landscape we are now in, those businesses get weeded out. The only businesses that survive and thrive treat employees as potential leaders and value creators, independently of just going along with easy-to-follow orders.

When I’m not educating a schoolhouse full of kids in Acton, my second job involves traveling around the country teaching corporate executives how to have better success managing and leading Millennials and Gen Z

Over the last several years, I have been traveling the country speaking to corporations on the topic of how corporations “Bridging the Generational Divide” in the 21st-Century Workplace. I have spoken to audiences that ranged from 12 Board Members to 15,000 attendees at companies and organizations such as American Eagle, Hershey, Cedar Sinai Hospital, Caterpillar, Lockheed Martin, Wells Fargo, Purina, Wendy’s, and Bank of America—and universities such as Stanford and the University of Colorado at Boulder.

What I have heard again and again from managers across and industries--in a chorus so loud it is impossible to ignore--is that young Americans graduating from college are not equipped with the skills they need to succeed to lead in the modern-day workplace.

Current organizations are struggling because kids are coming out of college and all they want to do is follow instructions, to the degree that they rarely take initiative in their environment. They want to have their hands held and will do just what is asked without attempting to understand how to see their role in the big picture of the organization. They’re not willing to get it wrong. They want to ask their bosses everything, which no boss wants to deal with.

How did this happen? How did an entire generation get educated in a way that makes it difficult for them to provide the value in organizations that will get them ahead?

Boomers entered their schooling in one of the greatest periods of economic expansion in American history, at a time when attending college was a ticket to success in that growth. Thus, they came to focus narrowly on making sure their kids were optimized for academic success. This led to the rise of “helicopter parenting” in which parents

micromanaged every aspect of their kid's lives to maximize one simple metric: get the best grades, to get into the best college.

But businesses don't operate on grades. They operate on value. And getting good grades may be indicative of some learning of academic topics (or it may not be), but it has little correlation to providing value for other people in a business context, particularly an entrepreneurial context.

For that, you must think creatively, take initiative, and avoid roles that can be fulfilled by following the simple types of instructions that teachers traditionally give. In school, that kind of rote order-following work gets good grades. In the business world, it gets outsourced to India or the Philippines, or now, to robots. If anything in the work world requires a formal rubric, it's exactly the type of position that gets outsourced.

Bottom line: you should not be worried about your kids' abilities to follow simple instructions in a rigidly structured environment. That's exactly what employers are screaming that they *don't* want. You should be much more worried about your kids *only* following instructions, rather than taking initiative and developing leadership.

Homeschooling is the best path towards developing those leadership skills that will *make* your children stand out and get ahead in the workplace.

Question #6: *"Is this going to be overwhelming? How will I be able to continue my own career? Will I ever have any time to myself?"*

When parents try to recreate the traditional schooling environment at home, yes, they tend to get overwhelmed. Imagine lording over your children the way teachers do, five periods a day. That doesn't sound appealing, or workable, does it?

The only way homeschooling works sustainably is to get out of the school mindset and get into the self-education mindset.

You are a guide to your child's self-education. Most of the day can be driven by your child, including 5 or 6-year-olds. As you will find, there are now so many tools out there to allow for self-directed education. Set particular goals, have conversations around what do you want to learn, where do you want to go with it? I like to say that in homeschooling you are a "guide on the side rather than a sage on the stage."

The key to homeschooling that is sane for parents is understanding how to structure the day. Your kids truly don't need 8 hours a day of focused teaching from you or anyone else.

They need time and space to engage in their own projects, self-directed by themselves, and with their homeschool peers.

What they need is supervision, but it's largely a "hang back and make sure they're safe and on point" supervision, rather than hovering over them and forcing them on.

As an educator, I've found that the best mix is around 2-3 hours of academic focus per day, and 2-3 hours of self-directed, non-academic projects in line with their interests and self-development.

The last part of this equation that makes all the difference in the world: Parents need to be leading by example. Plain and simply; if you are a lazy person (read: not disciplined in moving forward in your own journey) don't be surprised when your student follows suit. On the other hand, when you show a work-ethic and impeccably consistent character, your child or children will do the same.

Question #7: *"How will I know if my children are progressing, if they don't get grades?"*

How do you know if you're progressing at work if you don't get grades? How do you know you're progressing at playing guitar? How do you know you're progressing in your relationship with your spouse?

In most of the ways we try to develop and excel as adults, we do *not* get grades. In fact, my guess is you haven't received an official "grade" for anything since the last time you were in formal schooling, either college or high school.

Why is it so easy for us to understand that we can measure, compare, and track progress without grades as adults--but we can scarcely imagine what it would mean to measure, compare and track the progress of kids without grades?

I have a radical proposition for you: the kinds of ways we tell whether someone is progressing or not in any given field, are roughly the same whether they're an adult or a kid:

- Are you able to engage in increasingly complex activities and accomplishments in that realm?
- Are you achieving improving real-world results in that realm? (Hint: real-world results are rarely measured by grades).

- Are other people experiencing your work in that area as adding value to their lives? (Again, few people express the value they receive from someone else through grades--though they often do through money!)
- Are you able to work, play or compete in this area with more advanced players?
- Are *you* experiencing an increasing sense of mastery in this realm?
- Are your peers, friends, or other people seeing you as increasingly masterful in this realm?

The point is that we never have an objective, numerical evaluations placed on our work as adults. On the contrary, things like “how much money did you earn?”, “What level of the tournament did you get to?”, “How long did it take you to complete the race?”, “What is your customer satisfaction rating?”, “Did you make more money this time around?” and “How long did the relationship last?” all have measurable, objective, and comparable answers.

The point is these types of metrics are based in the *real world*. They have to do with actual, measurable results of work (such as money earned or a race time), not a made-up standard. They have to do with how the “end consumers” of your work, so to speak, perceived the value you created, and how they evaluated and credited you with that value creation.

This isn't the evaluation of one--usually tired, stressed and rushed--authority, who has no skin in the game and is receiving no value from the creation, arbitrarily decided to evaluate your work because they're getting paid to do so.

In addition--unlike with grades--these types of real-world metrics are usually accompanied by qualitative feedback.

Imagine, in a couple's counseling session, if your partner, or therapist, said, “I give you a B on how you're showing up in this relationship.” And that's all. You got your grade, walked out of the counseling session, and were left to your own devices to figure out how to get a B+, A-, A or A+.

Or imagine if you walked into your annual performance review with your boss, and she said, “This year, you got a B+”. And then sent you on your way. Would you have any idea of how you did, and how to improve?

How ridiculous would these scenarios in the counseling office or the boss's office be? Yet, this absurdity is exactly what we subject our children to every day for 17 years of

traditional schooling. No wonder kids often come out of this training, having a poorly formed GPS for how to navigate success in the world of adults.

The metric and navigation system we were guided by for 17 years, automatically disappears and becomes irrelevant the day we graduate from our last class of formal schooling. And they've received little training of the new GPS system they're supposed to use for measuring success--the one adults use.

As an alternative to the irrelevant performance and evaluation system of grades, at Acton Academy Placer, we use evaluation systems that are modeled on the best peer-based models of high-performing corporations, and badge systems denoting mastery in various tasks.

Did you get real feedback from your peers in school? Neither did I. But the kids here surely do. This is a whole new ballgame: kids going through this program are able to understand the specific ways they can improve in *all* areas of their life, with a level of detail and undeniability that few students have ever experienced before. The progress they're able to make with this real-world GPS is astounding.

Chapter 3: Why Academic Standards Are BS

My guess is you probably think that “academic standards” are a good thing. (And if you don't, I'm happy, because that means you have less de-programming to do.)

If you do think they're a good thing for your child, you probably think they're good because, hey, why would you want your kid to fall short of any “standards”? That sounds horrible. So, by extension, if falling short of academic standards is horrible, then the academic standards must be important and good.

I'm here to tell you that, no, they're neither important nor good.

As an educator, how can I say that? Does that mean the school I run has no standards?

Yes, in fact, we do have standards at Acton Academy Placer, but they aren't *academic* standards, as traditionally defined and implemented. They are *leadership* standards, *character* standards, *self-direction* standards, *growth* standards and *self-development* standards, which are defined in relation to the child's unique talents, interests, and goals. They are *not* defined by any state-mandated, grade-level, cookie-cutter standardization.

Does that mean that, for example, if a child is having difficulty in math or English, that we don't try everything we can to help them improve?

Of *course*, we try everything we can. We help give them the tools to continue to make progress and take steps forward every day. Progress every week, month and year is our goal.

But we don't pretend that they need to be at a certain level at every single subject, at predetermined timeframes (and particularly, not timeframes that are predetermined by some bureaucrat in Sacramento or Washington DC).

All students, ranging from 5-18, are setting their own weekly academic goals, based on where they're at with is subject, and what their priorities and interests are.

We never force students to be at a certain point in a subject at a certain time. And most importantly, we don't force students to keep up in lockstep with other students in the same subject.

I can't emphasize enough how important this last point is. Do you remember how humiliating it was when you couldn't keep up with a subject that others seemed to be acing? Either your needs and pacing around the subject were overruled and you remained lost.

Or perhaps worse, the entire class was held up while you were forced to do “remedial” work in front of everyone. The main takeaway lesson for the student, with this type of forced learning, is not the subject matter, but rather, the humiliation and shame.

In our model, the focus is not for every student to be at the same place in the same material as 30 other students randomly collected around them. (What an insane focus, if you think about it!)

Rather, the focus is for each student to be making steady progress, moving forward in what we call their “challenge zone.” Not their comfort zone, where boredom kicks in. And not their panic zone, where they freeze up, and all learning ceases, overtaken by stress, fear, and humiliation.

Excellence in a Few Areas vs. Mediocrity in Many

At Acton, we don't pretend that excellence in every academic subject is going to be crucial for every child's future success. When you push for excellence in one area, you are taking time and attention away from excellence in another.

We'd rather have a child achieve mastery in *one* or *two* areas--that align with their natural talents, proclivities, interests, and passions--and “satisfice” in all the other areas. (Satisficing means, focusing on one or two areas in which to shine, and doing well enough in most areas to get the basics. But not attempting to become a shining star in every subject. It is much better, in my opinion, to focus attention on excelling in a few areas.

The mainstream academic model pushes excellence in *every* traditional academic subject--math, science, English, history, foreign languages--and shames children who don't measure up in one or all of these.

However, only in Garrison Keillor's fictional town “Lake Wobegon,” where “all the children are above average,” would this model work.

Outside of Lake Wobegon, in the real world, different people are above and below average at different things (by definition!), and shaming people for that basic fact of human existence is insane.

No one is going to be above-average in everything--that's not even possible logically. By trying to create such an outcome, what we end up creating is what I call “uniform mediocrity”: students who have become average at everything, but who excel in nothing. A classic jack of all trades, master of none.

With global communications technology available on everyone's laptop now, most employees are competing with a global talent pool. That means organizations can hire among a talent pool of the top 10% or even 1% in any given field.

In this globalized, highly competitive environment, it is "winners take all" in every field. If you are not in the top global 10% of aptitude in any area, it's unlikely you'll have an opportunity or a need to capitalize on that skill in a professional context.

If you're in the 75th percentile in calculus, you're not going to get hired to perform calculus--even though you're better than 74% of the population!

In that case, you should learn the practical basics of each field in order to be a functioning, informed member of society, while focusing most of your efforts in areas where you truly have the potential to be in the top 10%.

We should make a concerted effort to discover what things each child truly has the potential and desire to excel at, and not force or shame them into cookie-cutters they don't fit into.

"But what if you miss the next Einstein or Mark Twain by not pushing them in traditional academic subjects?" (Interestingly enough, Twain was a fifth-grade dropout, and Einstein dropped out of high school at age 15.)

As an educator for 12 years, I have seen again and again that the children who excel at various academic subjects, show an intrinsic, unstoppable interest in absorbing as much as they can about that subject, without any external pushing or rewards. It's as plain as day. You can see the kids who are passionate and skilled at different topics.

While I never rule out the idea that someone could become passionate or skilled at a subject *later* in their education or life, this I can be sure of: their interest and passion and talent in that subject will *not* be developed or discovered by *forcing* them to engage with it, and/or shaming them if they resist.

What about a child who excels at *none* of the traditional academic subjects? Shouldn't we put that child in remedial school, and/or summer school, and force them to hire expensive tutors, until they can keep up with their peers?

Remember, the traditional academic subjects, that everyone is now supposed to excel at in schooling--math, science, history, English, foreign languages--were decided upon by a bunch of white guys in the late 1800s and early 1900s (before most of America's industrialization!)

Often, we've seen that some kids just don't naturally respond well to *academic* learning at all.

But we must distinguish between *academic* learning and *learning* in general. Academic learning is but a small subset of all the things a child could learn about, and all the things that might contribute to their successful participation in society later in life.

What if the child has a natural aptitude for selling? Or public speaking? Or leading teams? Or building things with their hands? Or problem-solving social, technological, or physical systems? All these areas can lead to a satisfying, productive life, with great earning opportunities and a sense of mastery and pride. And none of them are covered by traditional academic subjects.

We're not going to save little Jimmy from his socioeconomic situation, my making sure he does calculus derivatives by hand if that's not his clear aptitude.

Chapter 4: An Education in Providing Value

While traditional schooling is touted as a mechanism to prepare young adults to become integrated, valuable members of society and well-paid participants in the economy, it actually doesn't train students at all for the main skill they'll need in order to do this thing: the skill of providing value to other people.

In 17 years of a traditional school track, from K-college, how often do kids learn anything that provides actual, tangible value to someone else--a value that someone else would pay for.

Writing boring term papers on arcane subjects--which teachers must be paid handsomely to read and grade--doesn't provide value to anyone. Taking tests doesn't provide value to anyone. Memorizing formulas that are now available on cheap phone apps doesn't provide value. And, as much as I'm a fan of school plays, most people are attending either to see their friends or as a favor; strangers don't usually buy tickets.

Then, when kids graduate college, we wonder why it's so hard for them to find well-paying jobs. Maybe it's because people don't pay other people to memorize historical facts and spout them back on tests. No one wants their ad copy written in MLA format.

As someone who tours the world speaking to companies about how to work with and integrate the Millennial and Gen Z workforces, I can say this with high confidence (and it ain't pretty):

Employers generally view entry-level employees these days as liabilities, not assets. And these employees will remain liabilities for several years of on the job training. And much of the training they have to do with these young adults fresh out of college is training them out of all the useless mindsets and bad habits they've accrued from 17 years of factory-farm schooling.

The only way young people coming out of this schooling system know how to operate in a company is to perpetuate the academic frame. They continue to look for the same well-defined rubric, with clear instructions for how to get the best grade, for everything.

But that does not have business works. The best-paid functions in business require knowing how to deal creatively with uncertainty. In contrast, kids coming out of traditional schooling have an allergy to the slightest uncertainty in their assignments. They don't want to mess up, because they've been taught messing up is wrong. They will sit and wait until they get clear directions.

But any job that can be fulfilled by simply waiting for and following directions, is being outsourced, offshored, or replaced by robots or AI algorithms. Kids who just wait to follow directions simply aren't that valuable to companies--and they get paid accordingly (if they even get offered a job).

That's why so many employers are moving to a skill-based, prove-your-skills model. Companies like Amazon, Microsoft, and Google are starting to waive their requirement for degrees, if you can show them and prove to them what you can accomplish, in the form of results-based tests, or a portfolio of past results achieved. "Show me your skills, show me what you can do, show me how you can add value," these companies are saying, "and if you can tell me that story in a true and convincing way, then I don't care if you have a degree or not."

Imagine that: the main reason we tell kids to invest 17 years of their life, and potentially tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars--the job credential of a degree--is now being waived.

And frankly, the kids who are racing ahead without having wasted so much time on this increasingly irrelevant credential, are the kids who have followed educational paths like the one described in this book.

Chapter 5: Future Job Prospects for Gen Alpha (and What That Means for Their Education Now)

The economy is changing more and more, at a faster and faster pace. As we write this, in 2020, here are cutting-edge technologies and industries that are clearly in their infancy, and likely to become massive parts of the economy:

- Virtual reality and augmented reality
- AI and machine learning
- Robotics
- Drones
- Blockchain and cryptocurrency
- Solar energy and green tech
- Political organizing - (Whatever type of politics you hold, the current political system is clearly breaking down, and anytime there is a breakdown, there is an opportunity for younger generations to come in and exercise leadership to create systems that actually *do* work. Millennials are storming politics, as evidenced by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the first millennial and youngest woman ever in Congress. Regardless of what you think of her politics, she is clearly a bellwether of current generational trends.)

While of course, academic training (such as mathematics, engineering, and sciences) can massively help someone participate in these revolutions that are washing over society, it would be utter folly to pretend that *only* academically-trained people can drive these revolutions forward.

Every one of these revolutions has already benefited from (and in some cases were even created by) “tinkerers” with no formal academic credential or certification in their field. And, every one of these revolutions has room for non-academic contributions from people with genius in marketing, communications, business models, entrepreneurship, and app-driven creativity (which does not necessarily require high technical knowledge.)

These are the business prospects, trends, and opportunities looking forward from 2020. Let’s imagine we back were in 2010, looking forward. What would we see? We would see mass, early opportunities in:

- Social media and online networking
- Mobile apps
- Video media
- Internet-driven small business and “solopreneurship”
- The gig economy; “Uberization”

We’re not saying there still aren’t massive opportunities in these areas, they just don’t have the “freshness” now in 2020 that they did in 2010. Remember when the iPhone and all its apps

seemed revolutionary back then? In today's economy, just *one decade* has a massive impact on what we see as "the new normal."

The point of all of this is, there are countless ways for young people to excel (and in fact, to be the leaders in innovation) in areas that the dead white guys from the late 1800s *literally* could not have even imagined when they were deciding upon the subjects they thought every child should learn in compulsory academic schooling in order to be functioning members of society and the (then barely-industrialized) economy.

The Shifting College Landscape: Schools that Invest in Earning Power Workplaces that Don't Require Degrees

While traditional college will probably be a popular aspirational choice for young people and their families, for decades to come, a vibrant ecosystem of high-quality entrepreneurial educational programs--designed to ready young people for the workplace without the crippling debt or the 4 years of lost income--are cropping up.

The basic idea of these programs is simple:

One of the major purposes of a college education is to prepare young people for being contributing, productive adults in society--and particularly, adults who have a job and don't live in their parents' basement.

In other words, when colleges tout this mission, they are saying, in part, *we exist to increase the lifetime earning power of our students.*

They often tout statistics showing that people with college degrees earn twice as much on average as those with only high school degrees, which translates on average to \$1 million more in lifetime earnings. Even if college costs \$200,000, they argue, that's a good investment to get an extra million!

One of the problems with this argument--and there are many--is that *correlation does not equal cause*. Yes, having a college degree is *correlated* with higher earnings, but that doesn't mean that college education itself necessarily *caused* higher earnings. In our society's traditional conveyor belt from primary education to secondary to college to a job, the most ambitious and intelligent kids are funneled from a young age into the college path.

Of course, there are many exceptions, and there have always been many brilliant, ambitious young people who *don't* go to or finish college. But on average, the kids more likely to earn more anyways, are funneled into college. And then college takes the credit.

It would be like if champion athlete moving their workout from 24-Hour Fitness to Crunch, and then Crunch taking the credit for that athlete's next championship win--even though the athlete was doing pretty much the same thing at 24-Hour Fitness.

In turn, the new breed of college alternatives *makes sure* that they are playing a specific, measurable, focused *causal* role in student lending and succeeding at their first job immediately following the program. (And, as a cherry on top, often connect them directly with that job opportunity--making the traditional college job fair look like typewriter enthusiasts' convention in 2020.).

I call these the “**Shared-Risk Educational Model**” (SREM) because the institutions share the financial risk--and in many cases, take on *all* of the financial risks--of the educational investment.

They SREM programs say, in effect, “if we really believe that our educational program adds to the lifetime earning power of a student, then we should stand by that statement and provide the education as an investment, taking a fair portion of the ‘profits; [i.e., a percentage of future earning power] to pay back the investment later.”

This shifts the risk of the educational investment from the student, who in the past has had to finance the investment with expensive student loans that can never be discharged in bankruptcy court, to the institution, who is in a much better position to pool and absorb the risk. Since a lot of these institutions are private, it also allows the financing to come from a wider range of equity investors in the program.

Essentially, the program becomes a conduit for adult investors to literally invest in the future of the upcoming generations. Given how much we pay lip service to clichés about “investing in our kids’ future” when we talk about traditional schooling, somehow the same people get offended when asked to *actually* do what they’re claiming they want to do--invest in the future.

Instead, what proponents of traditional college are really talking about is vulnerable teens taking out mortgage-size debt on their own future, absorbing 100% of the risk in a totally non-diversified way.

Think there’s no risk of taking on student debt for a traditional education? Think again: according to a report by the Urban Institute, [as reported by CNBC](#), **22% of student borrowers are currently in default**. That’s more than 1 million students each year going into default. Currently, student debt in America stands at \$1.5 trillion, far outpacing both consumer debt and auto loans. What’s more, the report says, by 2023, **40% of student borrowers will be in default**.

These statistics sound bad enough just as numbers. But here are some of the real-world consequences behind these numbers, which are as heartbreaking as they are infuriating:

“Negative effects of student loan default can be wage garnishments, tax offsets, and other methods of loan collections,” one expert quoted in the article says. “In addition, some states

suspend or revoke state-issued professional licenses, and some states suspend a driver's license because of a defaulted loan.”

The article also points out that “defaulting on your education debt also increases the balance, likely due to collection fees and the accumulation of interest. After default, the Urban Institute found, a student loan borrower will see their balance balloon by around 10 percent.”

This is madness. By 2023, according to these projections, sending your kids to college is almost a coin-toss as to whether they'll be in *default* on massive, non-dischargeable debt, which may haunt them into their 40s, 50s and even in some cases the rest of their lives.

You might think, “Yeah, but my kid wouldn't be one of the 40%.” We would hope so. But do you really want to take the risk?

Especially now that there are programs which--handily--will *take the risk for you and your kids...*

As mentioned, a number of reputable college-replacement SREM programs have arisen based on this newer and better way of thinking about higher education.

This new model massively improves the alignment of incentives between buyers and sellers of educational opportunities.

If you're selling education, and you have no skin in the game, it's fine for you to:

- get lazy and rely on old-school curricula that haven't been substantially updated for 50 years
- Rely on grade inflation to keep college kids as “consumers” happy
- Turn the campuses into what amount to massive athletic country clubs and sports franchises, encouraging a social life revolving totally around athletics and partying rather than academics, because it keeps the student-consumers happy as well. (Hey, I'm all for athletics, and even for kids having fun (safely) while they're still kids--but you don't have to spend \$20,000-\$50,000 a year to participate in athletics or go to parties.)
- Bloat up administrative costs
- Engage in massive marketing campaigns, among B- and C- and D-tier institutions, to recruit many students who are really not a good match for capitalizing on academic training, yet who can take on massive debt to receive that training
- Do all of this with no concern for tuition costs, because you know that your “consumers” can just take out more and more government-issued loans to finance it

Basically, if you have no skin in the game, as most current colleges don't, you really don't give AF what your graduates' earning power is (beyond hoping to get some donations from them later).

Whereas, this new breed of college-alternative--the Shared-Risk Education Model--has 100% skin in the game. If you as a student don't earn more because of the education they provide, they don't get paid. Imagine how that changes the incentives!

SREM alternatives to college have the incentive to:

- Stay on top current trends in business, the economy, entry-level job prospects, and train young people in a relevant way
- Prepare young people for the jobs, workplaces, recruiters, and hirers they're *actually* going to step into after the program
- Provide a curriculum that focuses like a laser on business and entrepreneurial skills, and also personal development skills that make someone much more likely to succeed as a team member and leader
- Keep the timeframe of the program short and efficient so kids can get out in the workforce, earning their income quickly. (Why did we decide that 4 years was the amount of time needed to educate a young adult to prepare them for work? Because it keeps the customers coming back and writing tuition checks year after year.)
- Only recruit students who they believe can fully capitalize on education. While elite colleges generally do this, the 2nd-tier and lower colleges often engage in aggressive direct marketing campaigns to recruit paying students, come one, come all, no matter how likely (or unlikely) they are to benefit from the education.
- Keep staff lean--be merciless about administrative bloat, as every extra "Dean of Student Affairs" blah blah blah cuts out of your profit.
- Cultivate networks of potential employers and be sure that students are connected to this network ASAP
- Encourage students to develop all the other benefits they get from a traditional college experience--such as socializing, networking, athletics, and having fun as a young person--outside of the school environment, on their own volition. It's a lot cheaper for them that way, and it's actually how they're going to have to learn to do these things as an adult.
- Make sure students learn all the "soft skills" that will massively impact their future job prospects and success, including:
 - Networking
 - Public speaking
 - Teamwork adaptability
 - Conflict resolution
 - Self-motivation
 - Self-presentation
 - The ability to take criticism
 - Discipline
 - Decisiveness
 - Creativity
 - Time-management

Current SREM programs include [Lambda School](#), App Academy, [Praxis](#) and the Acton Academy's soon-to-be-created "Next Great Adventure".

Some of these programs focus on developing specific, marketable industry skills such as programming, product design or marketing. Other programs, such as Praxis, focus on helping young people develop general skills that make them a useful employee of a fast-paced startup.

While the "investment" model differs from program to program, a common model in many of them is that tuition is free *until* the student receives a job at around \$50,000-60,000, which is close to double the US median individual income of \$31,000. This threshold is just about the level of US median *household* income.

When students reach that threshold, then they pay usually around 15% of their salary, until tuition is paid backed, often around \$30,000 total.

Think about this model for a moment, and how it differs from the traditional model of financing educational investments.

These programs are saying they believe in the value-add of their programs, and they believe in students' capacity to benefit from that value-add, enough to absorb *all* or *nearly all* of the financial risk of students taking the program.

And, they are saying, if their program does not launch students into a career that earns vastly above the median individual income, in their early twenties, *students pay nothing*.

That is called "standing by your product."

Furthermore, SREM programs are doing this for a fraction of the cost of traditional elite colleges. A \$30,000, 1-year SREM program is about half the cost of a single year of some of the most expensive 4-year programs in the country (now charging close to an eye-popping \$60,000 per year.)

One year of an SREM, and they're giving you a job at US median household income. 1 year of an expensive 4-year college program, for double the price of that year, and they're telling you that in one *more* year, you'll have the opportunity to pick your major.

Given the comparative financial and time advantages of the SREM programs, it's no wonder that they're popping up left and right, often founded by experienced Silicon Valley figures who have their finger on the pulse of the training needs of dynamic, growing, fast-paced startups.

If I were the president of a traditional college, I would be very, very worried about the competition posed by these upstarts. The SREM programs are truly disruptive, in the sense of providing an efficient, accessible alternative to *all* the inefficient and nearly fraudulent aspects of traditional higher education.

If I were in board meetings for planning the future of traditional college institutions, I would definitely be placing SREM programs in the “T” column of the board’s “SWOT” analyses (“Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.”)

It’s hard to see how the traditional model will compete with the SREM programs in the coming decade; it’s going to be like vacuum-tube computers trying to compete with laptops. You can try to build a more efficient vacuum-tube computer, but good luck.

While there will always be demand for elite colleges, I suspect that in the coming years we will see more and more 2nd-tier and below colleges going out of business and shuttering their doors, and their potential customers go to a vastly better and more efficient alternative.

Objections to the SREM Model

Now I know what you’re going to say:

“But college isn’t all about work and jobs and earning power! What about critical thinking? What about culture and history and literature and developing character and being good citizens?”

These are fair points. But my first response is if you *really* look at what’s going on at college campuses today--including rampant grade-inflation, demonstrable lack of learning, and hard-partying cultures--can you honestly say that these things are being developed at college?

And second, can you really say that 18-22-year-olds cannot develop these things on their own? If the whole point is to develop character, well, real character traits are best developed by going out in the world *doing things*, not by sitting and listening to lectures.

If your concern is that the child won’t have the motivation or context to develop these non-academic aspects of themselves outside of college, there are now so many different non-degree learning opportunities for kids in every field--offline and online--that provide substantially the same educational value, without the eye-popping price tags.

And as far as liberal arts learning goes--learning about literature, history, culture, etc.--there are now nearly infinite opportunities for world-class, low-cost learning in these topics online, including programs such as [Khan Academy](#). (Their present motto is “You Can Learn Anything. For Free. For Everyone. Forever.” Currently, 900 colleges are offering [Massively Open Online Courses](#), making their courses available online for free to non-degree students.

The MOOC model de-couples the educational aspect of higher education, from the credentialing aspect. It makes the educational part free and makes the credential essentially a “premium” on the free content.

If your concern is that that, in a MOOC program of literature or history, for example, your children won't be *motivated* (or *forced*) to learn these things on their own, whereas they will be motivated or forced to learn them in college, then at that point, you're really talking about a matter of young-adult babysitting, not education.

\$50,000 per year is an expensive way to *motivate* or *force* people to learn things that they could potentially learn on their own, online.

Whereas, at programs like Acton, where I teach, we find less expensive ways to develop motivation and self-learning among children. Our cost per child to develop what is essentially a motivational mindset is vastly lower than traditional models.

Because traditional colleges grant degrees, and degrees have traditionally been a job requirement, they have had a functional monopoly on the entrance to the workforce. Like any monopoly, they're able to dangle out the goods they've intentionally made artificially scarce (degrees as the only possible job qualification) to manipulate consumers to use their services exclusively--all while naming their own price.

If you're absolutely certain your child needs to go to traditional college in order to get this job credential, remember that colleges have been accustomed to admitting homeschool children for decades. It's not a new concept to them, and there's every indication that homeschool children are just as likely to get into college as those who have gone through traditional schooling. And in fact, there may be ways that homeschool kids have an advantage--as they've usually accomplished real-world projects that are much more interesting than being captain of the debate club, etc. [<https://www.businessinsider.com/homeschooling-is-the-new-path-to-harvard-2015-9>]

However, remember that one of the hottest trends in job recruitment now is finding potential employees who haven't been through the traditional schooling system at all. As we've seen, more and more top-tier employers are waiving their previous college degree requirements, as they understand that many young people without degrees have been out of the classroom gaining real-world experience, as opposed to memorizing facts about Roman empire wars.

Also, if your kid is inclined towards entrepreneurship, remember that college provides near-zero preparation for the open-ended, self-motivated, chaotic environment of start-ups. Nor does it provide education in *coming up with the ideas* for creating good start-ups.

Lastly, as we've seen, SREM programs have a job-placement track record that makes the college career center look like antiquated sleepy backwaters.

Alternative programs generally allow students starting at around 16 or so, which would be an extreme outlier case for starting traditional college. But why shouldn't 16-year-olds be allowed to develop career skills? These students starting young are already getting so far ahead of their peers in college, that pretty soon the decision to go to college--unless you want to be a doctor or

lawyer or engineer or research scientists--is going to look like a frivolous and financially disastrous choice.

The only circumstances that I recommend a child go to a traditional college are if that child is absolutely certain they want to become a doctor, lawyer, engineer, or enter some other profession that requires a graduate degree and/or a license, which itself usually requires a college degree.

Remember, though, that 18-year-olds are not necessarily in the best position to determine clearly a career path that will take them 6-8 more years of education and credentialing to even enter the starting gate of that profession. Waiting a few years to truly understand themselves and know with certainty they want to go that route, is probably a wise decision.

In sum, if a child does not need to go to college immediately at age 18, or at all, then the child not only saves the 4 years of college (and all the attending tuition and debt). He or she also saves the wasted effort of 4 years of high-school-age schooling, aimed at getting into the college. There is a tremendous opportunity cost associated with all the schooling required just to prepare for traditional college.

If you don't have college as the goal of adolescence, your adolescence can become both much more fun and healthy (not being stuck inside all day sitting at desks), and also much more tailored to actually getting prepared to be an earner, as early as possible.

Recently, in a conversation with my 7-year-old daughter, she said, "I don't know if I want to go to college."

I said, "that's totally fine, we have a long time until we get there."

She then replied, "But I'm glad other people are going."

When I asked why, she said, "If I don't go to college, and I start a business instead, I'll need a lot of people to work for me, and that's where I'll find them."

Chapter 6: Quests, Experiential Learning, and Self-Actualization

Do you think your child will become self-actualized by memorizing facts about the War of 1812 and spitting them back on a test?

Do you think your child will become self-actualized by writing term papers comparing and contrasting *Hamlet* vs. *Macbeth* (with points docked if it is not in MLA format)?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against children learning the normal content of all the traditional academic subjects. I'm all for it.

But I *am* against an education that *focuses* on that (often in a rigid, imposing, and even forceful way) instead of focusing on something vastly more important:

Your child's self-actualization.

By "self-actualization," I mean your child understanding their *specific* talents, potentials, and visions for their future life.

This is not the typical "When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut" type of stuff. Of course, we're not against kids having big dreams such as "becoming president," etc.

But what we're more interested in is kids discovering *who they are now*... what their deepest values are, what they care about, how they want to treat others, how they want to be of service and provide value to others, how they want to show up in the world.

These are the inquiries that will take them as far as they want to go in life.

"What problems am I excited about solving, and how am I uniquely positioned to solve them?"

These are the two questions we keep coming back to again and again at the educational program I run, Acton Placer.

Our assumption is that the world does not need more people spitting back facts about frog anatomy on multiple-choice tests.

But the world *does* have a lot of problems and needs young people to grow into the kind of leaders who can solve those problems.

(And if a kid really does want to solve a problem involving, say, a type of frog that is becoming extinct, *then* they can learn frog anatomy in detail. It's just the *force-feeding* of arcane subjects which a kid has no natural interest in, that we're against.)

I believe that a child's curriculum should be based on what that child *cares* about. Not just what they're moderately "interested" in... but what keeps them up at night? What about the world can they not stop thinking about? What do they see as a problem or challenge in the world, that needs to be changed? And what are they uniquely bringing to be able to address that?

At Acton Placer, where I teach, we give children a broad exposure to as many things as possible. But as they pursue these things, we begin to see patterns of interest and behavior, and we're able to identify what they're most passionate about and talented at.

These different topic exposures are called “quests.” Unlike a traditional academic course, a quest is a 5-6 week hands-on, real-world-based, collaborative project, with a goal and public exhibition of the results at the end, but without a clear roadmap on how to get there. (The kids must create the roadmap, and that the main point!)

For example, consider a theater-based quest we have our kids go on, versus the typical “school play.” In the typical “school play,” almost every aspect is created and managed by the teachers or parents: the play selection (of a play someone else wrote); the casting and directing; the stage props and costumes; the venue location and organization; the marketing and promotion. It’s not clear exactly what part the *kids* are supposed to play, other than memorizing some lines and reciting them while looking cute.

In contrast, in our theater quests, at the beginning of the 6 weeks, all kids know is, that in 6 weeks, they’re going to perform a play they wrote, directed, and are acting in, with costumes and props they created, to an audience that they sold tickets to.

They must figure out: how are you going to write a script? How are you going to market this play to the community? Build the props? Keep a budget and proper accounting? Who’s going to act?

Everything is up to them, including--most importantly--figuring out who is doing what. Basically, it’s a real-world project that adults would take on, but it’s a group of kids

What we find is that, quickly, the students are magnetized to the jobs that bring them alive the most. Some kids want to write the script, others want to act, others want to create the costumes, set, and props, others want to handle the lighting and A/V. Others want to organize the event and budgeting. And others want to market the event and sell the tickets.

Thus, kids have not only learned *how* they want to do these things but even more important, they’ve learned *what* things they want to do!

This is the crucial step missing from most traditional education, which simply *tells* kids what to do (under the assumption--now false in the entrepreneurial economy circa 2020--that kids need to learn how to simply follow orders.)

Over the course of several years, the various quests give students exposure to virtually every discipline that’s out there. As adult guides in the studios, we’re able to look for patterns that emerge. If students do seven different quests in a year, not only is each student naturally drawn to different quests, but they are each naturally drawn to different functions within the quest.

This serves the traditional educational function of finding out “who has an aptitude and passion for what.” Finding this out is one of the main arguments for traditional schooling. The problem is because traditional school is so impoverished in terms of non-academic,

real-world projects, students are choosing from a limited menu of *only* traditional academic subjects. It's like shopping from just one aisle of the grocery store!

What if a student is not particularly drawn--as many students aren't--to anything that involves sitting at a desk all day, poring over notebooks and tests? What if *no* option from that limited menu gets the student hungry for learning?

In a traditional schooling environment, that student would almost certainly be seen as a "bad student." Perhaps scolding or other public shaming and humiliation would be inflicted, remedial courses. Parents and counselors might be consulted to discuss the student's learning problems. Perhaps therapy or even medication would be suggested.

Whereas, the real issue is, this student is a whiz at marketing, or at managing teams of employees, or fundraising for causes, or building things. But she has never been given the option to let that talent shine naturally, in a way that adults can pick up on and encourage her to pursue further.

Another advantage of the quest model is that students get real-world feedback. If your quest was to start a business--let's say a custom pajama business, an actual quest one of our students undertook. Your goal was to make \$1,000 profit during the quest. And you lose \$500.

The divergence between goal and results is an objective "grade" --not some arbitrary evaluation made by an adult, pursuant to that evaluators own tastes, moods, and prejudices (including, perhaps, prejudices against specific students.)

Furthermore, this "grade" of objective real-world results opens a massive opportunity for reflection and feedback on what could have gone better, to achieve the goals.

At the end of the 5-6-week quest, the students put on a public exhibition of their work. They are completely responsible for the outcome. This exhibition may receive feedback from judges from the community, a la "Shark Tank." Sometimes the feedback comes from other students or the parents. And if the quests were to create a product or business, the most basic evaluation is, "How much money did we make"? And "how could we have made more?"

This feedback is so much more detailed than a grade, which provides zero feedback on what went right, what went wrong, and how to improve on the next iteration.

For some students, their projects that began as quests, continue as passion projects outside of school. (Though of course, the term "outside of school" is porous, since what they're doing for the project when it was part of the school, versus after, is essentially the same.)

Imagine that! Students create real-world “jobs,” projects, and businesses for themselves--some of which can bring in significant revenue, by a young student’s standards--while they’re still in school. That project is ready and waiting for them to continue once outside of the school context.

“Self-esteem” and “self-confidence” are massive buzzwords within traditional schooling. What do you think will build more confidence--getting an A on a memorized test, the facts of which will never be used again and will be promptly forgotten?

Or building a real-world project, with real-world results and iterative improvement, which the student continues beyond the classroom?

In the quest model, students are involved in a collaborative dialogue with the guides, and with other students--who also weigh in--as to which quest areas and functions might be a good life path for them.

This process is to the traditional “career counselor” meetings in high school, as a Ferrari is to a go-kart.

Traditional schooling tends to put a bubble-wrap around your children, protecting them from contact with the real-world, so that they might not fail or damage their “self-esteem”--a goal that has become the centerpiece of schooling.

It provides easy-to-follow instructions with little chance of total failure. It’s a highly managed environment, which creates a perfect bubble where there’s no real struggle.

Laura Sandefer, one of the founders of the Acton model of education, says “Acton Academy exists to free children to be richly competent in a world where others around them have parents who seek ease or a false prestige as the ultimate value; thereby refusing to let their children fail and continue making their paths easier.”

At Acton, and in other real-world based learning environments described here, we believe It’s OK to let kids struggle a bit to figure out what they actually want to do, and how they’re going to accomplish it--with few instructions or orders from adults.

We believe kids like to struggle a bit to figure out their path because they know it’s a struggle *they* are choosing. Which makes it not a struggle, but a quest towards self-actualization.

**Employers Want Young People Who Already Know Their Path--
Not Kids Who Are Figuring It Out on the Company’s Time and Dime**

I travel the world talking to companies about how to work with Millennials and Gen-Z. Bosses routinely tell me that they are dealing with young people who have no idea who they are, or

what they want out of their career in life. They have no idea because they've been told what to do, like sheep, for 13 years of traditional schooling.

These schooling-sheep then come into the workplace treating it like a paid opportunity to "find themselves," which usually ends up in them wanting to change positions or jobs right away. This means that employers have essentially paid for the career-discovery process of the young people they've hired before that employee moves on when they realize the entry-level job, they've taken is not a good fit.

Employers are not happy about this. They'd much rather hire a young person with the self-knowledge and self-possession to know exactly what career path they want before saying "yes" to the job.

I believe that "figuring out what they want to do in life" is one of the main goals of education. And I believe that traditional schooling does a horrendous job of encouraging this self-actualizing. No one self-actualize through memorizing facts for multiple-choice tests on arcane subjects that have no relation to providing value to others and getting real-world results through their work.

If we can take care of this self-actualization earlier, young people can choose a career path out of the gate that aligns more with their sense of self. Rather than using the employment ping-pong of their twenties to figure it out.

Chapter 7: Discipline & Values Contracts, and the Hero's Journey

One of the most common questions parents who are considering homeschooling ask is, "How will my children learn discipline? And how will they be disciplined if they don't follow through with rules?"

Parents know just how much teachers in traditional schooling environments discipline kids: from grades to rebukes and shaming in the classroom for those who don't follow orders and rules, to setting up the "good" kids as examples for the "bad" kids, to visits to the principal's office, detention, suspension, and even expulsion.

(In fact, 19 states still allow corporal punishment in public schools--though if you think that's an appropriate form of punishment, I doubt this book is for you!)

Aside from corporal punishment, though, my guess is at least part of you as a parent views the "outsourcing" of discipline as a relief. You'd probably rather have someone else doing it during the day when necessary than taking on that burden yourself.

The key here, however, is to realize the amount of discipline a child needs, and the best means of achieving it, is not some fixed fact about the child; it's highly dependent on context.

To put it bluntly, if you want to treat kids like cattle, you're going to need "cattle prods."

In contrast, if you want to create a context where kids are presumed to operate out of their own interests, in pursuit of their own goals and passions, they are much less likely to need major "carrot and stick" interventions.

The learning and collaboration with other students are the carrots and doing anything that would require a "stick" would be a distraction from doing what they are already excited to do.

Instead of discipline being a punishment for not following the rules foisted upon them, it is a set of intentional, routine behaviors in pursuit of a goal, and standards of excellence, that the student has bought-in and consented to.

Very few students in traditional schooling environments "consent" to anything going on during the day: what they're studying, their schedules, the rules. These are all *forced* upon them, with not even the slightest pretense of getting input or buy-in from the students. Schools pigeonhole students into a set of rules and goals they did not agree to--not unlike the rules of a prison (which the school buildings often resemble closely). This is a form of socially approved mass coercion of youth.

This socially approved mass coercion of youth came about because of a 19th-century conception of youth as lazy and self-indulgent ruffians who will not do anything productive or worthwhile on their own unless prodded and forced to do so. The students are presumed to have no valid interests or goals of their own; the schooling is supposed to impress these interests and goals upon them as if they were mounds of clay or wayward animals.

And then we wonder why kids rebel and need discipline!

From my experience teaching kids of many ages, across a wide range of public and private traditional schools, “classroom management” is a massive percentage of teachers’ energy and time in schooling. Depending on the school district, teachers can spend 50-70% of their classroom time just trying to maintain civility.

Carrots and sticks range from checkmarks on the board to countdowns and timeouts, to popcorn parties if kids comply or reach goals. To more severe measures, like detention, weekend school or suspension.

In contrast, for modern homeschooling, we recommend a “values contract” system of discipline, which I will describe below. It’s a proactive model, which bypasses the need for most traditional forms of school discipline while giving students opportunities to define themselves, set their own goals, and create their own self-regulating discipline towards those goals.

Values Contracts

In our family living room, there is a beautifully framed, large document entitled “Beaudreau’s Family Rules”

Beaudreau
FAMILY RULES

BE HONEST

BE A COPYCAT

BE AN EMOTIONAL NINJA

BE THE HARDEST WORKER IN THE ROOM

BE THE NICEST PERSON IN THE ROOM

NO COMPLAINING: FIX IT

THINK: MOST PEOPLE WON'T

DISCIPLINE EQUALS FREEDOM

MEMENTO MORI

YOU ARE PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE

THE RIGHT THING IS ALWAYS

THE RIGHT THING

Some of these, such as “Be Honest,” is pretty self-explanatory--but even still, we have our own family “take” on what the concept means its fullest expression. Other terms, like “Be a Copycat,” will no doubt require explanation. So, let us run down the rules as we mean them here.

Of course, you can come up with your own rules more appropriate to your own family, and/or you can “Be a Copycat” and borrow ours!

1. *Be Honest*: When we talk about being honest, we mean, first start with yourself. This is about honesty, unflinching self-awareness. Being honest about the things we’re good at, being honest about the things we’re struggling with. What are the patterns you notice about yourself? Only when we’re honest with ourselves first can we expect to be fully honest with each other.
2. *Be a Copycat*: Of course, we’re not talking about plagiarism here. We’re talking about copying those traits and behaviors of others, who are successful at what you want to be successful at. If you see someone, and you admire certain traits and behaviors in them, then copy those behaviors. Create yourself into an image into the hero of your own story. Pull some of these traits from other people you admire.
3. *Be an Emotional Ninja*: “Learn to let that which does not truly matter slide,” said the character Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*. Be the calmest person in the room. If you’re able to be calm, you can think with clarity. If you’re in a panic, you lose your ability to think clearly. Of course, emotions come up, and they must be felt and respected. But we’re talking about learning to *get a grip* on wild, unproductive emotions and outbursts before they get a grip on us.
4. *Be the Hardest Worker in the Room*: Hard work is still the magic pill that most people won’t swallow.
5. *Be the Nicest Person in the Room*: Treat everyone with respect. Get ahead by putting others ahead. That said, it’s also important to know when things need to be communicated *without* sugar-coating or sweetness. Righteous anger is sometimes an appropriate--even necessary--thing to express. But it must be tempered with an overall commitment to kindness, support, and compassion.
6. *No Complaining - Fix It*: The best way to complain is by creating the solution.
7. *Think - Most People Won’t*: The masses are the masses for a reason. Most people will do what the majority is doing in any given scenario. But just because most people are doing something, does not make it right. It doesn’t necessarily make it wrong, either. But, to avoid being mindless sheep in a herd, each person must think for themselves and come up with their own, coherent, personally meaningful, effective understanding of what to do and why they are doing it.
8. *Discipline Equals Freedom*: Jocko Willink, a former Navy SEAL, says, “Motivation is fleeting.” Motivation comes and goes. To get where you want to be, you need discipline--which is what gets you to do something when you are not motivated. Working on whatever your personal goals are, a little bit, every single day in the long run. The tortoise wins over the hare if the tortoise keeps going slow and steady every day, while the hare burns out.

9. *Memento Mori*: Again, from Tyler Durden: “This is your life, and it’s ending one moment at a time.” Once the day is over, you don’t get it back. So, make the most out of every single day, because this is the last time, you’ll have that day.
10. *You Are Personally Responsible*: Everyone is going through their stuff. People with this and that didn’t happen. But I always remind my children: someone else had it harder than you, and they were able to make something happen. That means you can make it happen too.
11. *The Right Thing is Always the Right Thing*: Decisions are usually simple. Don’t waste time over-analyzing it. Usually, something hits you as the right thing or not. If you’re operating as someone with good character, what would the person with a good character do? It’s usually a quicker decision than not.

These are rules that everyone, including me and my wife, have agreed to in the family. Thus, there isn’t the typical “parent enforcing their rules on the kids” dynamic, which often breeds resentment and rebellion.

What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. Our children know they are following rules that *everyone* in our family, including the parents, must follow to make our family work the way we all want it to.

If someone falls short of these values, the conversation is very simple. In fact, there doesn’t even really need to be much of a conversation. More like, pointing to the framed contract! *That’s* the conversation!

As one example, one recent night at dinner, I was talking about an employee I was having trouble with. Clearly, my talking had veered into the territory of *complaining*.

Within minutes, my six-year-old pointed to the Contract, and said, “It sounds like you’re complaining. What is your solution going to be, Dad?”

Quickly, I came up with a plan of action that would address the problem I had been talking about.

Values contracts are a tool for keeping the *adults* in the room accountable, as well as the kids! And when kids see that the adults are accountable to the same rules, they stop rebelling against those rules. Because they see that these aren’t rules foisted upon them by adults to control them, but rather, rules that apply to everyone, and thus, are just and fair.

Values Contracts in the Homeschooling Environment

At Acton Academy, we also create Values Contracts for every studio. (Studios are mixed-grade groups comprised of students from 3-4 traditional grade levels.)

Contracts are what takes the emotion out of the studio when talking about rules and violations of the rules. Instead of being harsh, emotion-laden chastisements when kids don’t follow the rules,

Values Contracts allow for objectivity in these discussions. They facilitate direct, adult conversations centered around specific behaviors that go against the learning environment *they* want to maintain.

We spend a good part of the first session of the year, between 5-6 weeks, talking about our values, the learning environment we want to create for each other, and the promises we make to each other in our studio.

Through this process, we agree to 7-10 bullet points we're promising each other. These focus on:

What are the things should we do, and the things we should not to, in order to create the learning environment, we all want?

What are the traits we want to see in ourselves, what are the traits we don't want to see, as we commence our learning journey together?

Lower Elementary Contract

While I attend Acton Academy Placer, I will:

Be humble and kind

Try new things and enjoy learning

Be resourceful with my time and things

Be respectful to me, others, and our space

Be safe, honest, and encourage me, and others

Show integrity, and make things right when I've done wrong

Middle School Contract

I will conduct myself with integrity on campus, and online

I will set a standard of excellence for those around me

I will support my fellow travelers in pursuit of their goals

I will use every tool available to me in my pursuit of education

I will be unafraid to call others out and will accept when I am called out by others

I will be open-minded, and willing to consider new ideas and opinions

I will respect studio space and the belongings of my peers

In addition, we have had several meetings with parents to get them on board with a *parent* contract, outlining the duties and responsibilities that parents must agree to, in order for their children (and themselves) to be a part of the Acton community. This contract has been developed over many years, with collaboration from parents.

Parent Contract

As parents at Acton Academy:

We long for our Lion [our school mascot, a character symbol of each student] to discover a calling that will change the world, as promised in Acton Academy's mission. We will allow our Lion to fail early, cheaply and as often as necessary without intervening, and in the event our Lion struggles, we will refer to the Hero's Journey for Parents note for counsel before reacting.

We welcome Acton Academy as a self-paced environment where Lions run the studios through the delegation of certain rights by owners and parents, with access to dozens of experts for instruction, allowing Guides to focus on challenges and questions.

We will celebrate our Lions' progress in earning Weekly Points, Badges and Positive 360 Peer Coaching Reviews according to a learning plan we create, and act if needed to: remove distractions like gaming, video or social media; lessen resistance or overcome feelings of victimhood so our Lion can soar.

Further, for our own Hero's Journeys as parents:

We will remain lifelong learners and each will always have an active learning project (such as a book or self-improvement project) to discuss with their children. Our family will develop and post a Family Plan by September 15th and have Family Meetings at regularly scheduled intervals.

At least one of us will attend at least two of the three Parent Meetings each year, where Socratic discussions will focus on our Hero's Journey as parents.

We will deliver our Lion to campus before 9:00 am and understand Lions who arrive late may not be able to participate in that morning's activities. Please sign and date below.

Parent:

Date:

At the end of the studios' process of developing their own contracts, we have a contract-signing ceremony. This is a large group experience, with all the students in all the different studios in attendance, and all the parents.

The contracts are read aloud, and the students of each studio come on stage and sign their contract in front of everyone. The parents sign their contract on stage as well.

We do make it clear that people aren't *forced* to sign the contract, but if they do not sign it--thus not agreeing to the values we have co-created as a community--then they cannot be a part of the community.

Because homeschooling is not compulsory or state-mandated--it is a matter of parents' and students' choice--the requirement to sign the contract is one of the voluntary choices among parents and students. This means they are agreeing to follow rules voluntarily, not being forced to follow rules set by government administrators.

If the following rules are coerced, you don't get buy-in from students, and that's when discipline problems arise. When following rules is a co-created commitment, discipline problems are few and far between.

The Magic of "Discipline" When Values Contracts are Co-Created

By getting your children in touch with their own learning goals, desires, and values, and then helping them create a set of rules--a contract--by which they commit to these, you get full buy-in from them. "Discipline" becomes a simple matter of helping them remember what they already want to do in order to reach their goals.

After this process, disciplinary problems among students are almost comically lower than in traditional schooling. I say comically because parents of traditionally schooled kids literally can't imagine there's such a well-run, self-managed class environment, with so little adult intervention. Until they see it with their own eyes.

In the rare cases that a student disrupts the group learning environment, almost always it's the other students who stop them. After all, they're learning what *they* decided they *want* to learn, so why would they tolerate someone preventing them from that?

When this does happen, usually the students communicate with the disruptive student in a manner that is even more mature than many adults communicate in such situations. They will say things like, in a calm, polite tone, "You're preventing me from focusing on my own work and goals. I've asked you twice now. If this continues, I will need to go to a guide to deal with this."

They are not seen by other students as "tattle-tales" or "teacher's pets" when they do this; they are leaders who are protecting the sanctity and integrity of the shared goals and learning environment.

There is no "teacher vs. student" dynamic anywhere in sight. Instead, students learn how to maturely assert their *own* boundaries in relation to other students who are preventing them from their desired learning.

In the one case in which we had a major infraction, we handled it collaboratively as a community. A 16-year-old wanted to create his own workspace out of a smaller, older office area, and to do this, he took it upon himself to cut some dangling wires. This shut off the sprinkler and alarm system for the entire system.

The next day, the school gathered as a community in a morning town hall, and we asked the student how we wanted to deal with the situation. Other students asked him: how did your behavior accord with the contract? How did it follow one of the contract rules of respecting the sanctity of the studio as a learning environment?

The student was asked how he thought he should be held accountable. He himself suggested that he pay for the repairs, which were about \$600. He took on a second job to earn it and asked if it was reasonable for a 3-month payment period.

He scheduled the repairman himself and paid the cost back within 6 weeks. The community trust was repaired, and the students' standing and respect in the community was restored. Everyone moved on.

Imagine, instead, how this would have been handled in a traditional schooling environment. Stern lectures and yelling from adults. Suspension, thus harming the student by *decreasing* their learning time. No public taking of accountability. And no input from other students on how they felt harmed and disrupted by the behavior.

The adult-led punitive model (rather than the student-led restorative model), simply teaches kids that when they misbehave, bad things happen to them. It's a Pavlovian model that treats them as having no more refined consciousness than hungry dogs. It doesn't facilitate the student getting any buy-in as to why that rule is valuable, not only for the community but also for themselves as a member of the community.

Part of why it doesn't get that buy-in is that the schooling system has not gotten any buy-in *at all* for that student even being there for a year, let alone 17 years. It's a penal-based system. Thus, the student simply tries to re-assert his own power, in a powerless situation: just as prisoners do when they act out in prison.

Passively receiving a negative experience as punishment (such as detention, or in 19 states, corporal punishment) *at most* gets them to fear to do the thing again and therefore avoid doing it.

But it doesn't turn them into a responsible citizen of a community. It doesn't give them a path towards building their confidence in their ability to be a responsible adult and functioning, a respected member of a community. It also doesn't facilitate the student to grow into the kind of person who takes responsibility for their actions.

In short, homeschooling usually requires *far* less disciplinary measures than traditional schooling, because you are not “disciplining” the child for the basic problem that they’re being forced to be where they don’t want to be.

That will always require plenty of discipline. Creating environments where the student *does* get excited about the day’s learning, will always require far less disciplinary measures; or none.

Who knew that discipline--the bane of almost every public school’s existence--could be solved so decisively, in a way that makes students feel great?

Every one of our students knows.

The Hero’s Journey

If you are inspired to create your own family’s Values Contract, and/or a contract for any homeschool environment you’re a part of, and you’re having trouble coming up with the specific values you want to name and commit to, I recommend thinking of the values in terms of what we at Acton call a “Hero’s Journey.”

The idea of a Hero’s Journey is that each of us is the central character--the hero--in our own movie that we are writing, directing and acting in!

Because--by definition--a movie hero doesn’t know exactly what will happen next in the story, what’s crucial for the character, is to actually focus on--you guessed it! --*character* traits!

Instead of focusing on narrow, reductive academic standards, I recommend focusing on character-based standards in your contracts:

How hard are you going to work while you’re here?

How are you going to treat other people?

How do you want to communicate with other people?

How will you handle it if you fall short of your values or commitments?

What problems in the world do you want to solve?

Chapter 8: Solo Homeschooling vs. Collaborative Homeschooling

If you've been reading this book so far, almost certainly you are thinking about homeschooling your kids, if you aren't doing so already.

In this section we're going to talk about two main options for homeschooling your kids:

The first option is solo homeschooling, which is just within your household and family alone.

The second option is one you may not have known about. It's called "Collaborative Homeschooling".

In the most basic sense, Collaborative Homeschooling (CH) simply involves more than one family pooling their resources and time towards homeschooling a group of kids together.

This can be done informally, or formally, and we'll be talking about both options in the next section.

But before we talk about CH options, we should talk about whether solo or collaborative homeschooling makes more sense for you, because each has advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages of solo homeschooling are that you get complete control of how it's done. So many different parents have different conceptions of how their children should be educated. And compromising your vision and values, towards someone else's, can be very confronting and challenging.

After all, it's your children we're talking about here--the most important people in your life. What do you do if someone else involved in their education has a different idea of how your children should be educated?

These are important questions, which we will address in the CH section below. But here, we'll just say that solo homeschooling allows you to bypass these concerns. You can tailor the environment and curriculum exactly to what your kids need.

The disadvantages of the solo are that, to a certain extent, it does play into the stereotypes of homeschool kids being isolated and not having social interactions with their peers and other adults outside the family.

Of course, these concerns can be allayed in solo homeschooling, simply by getting your kids involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and volunteering.

However, CH has the advantage of building social interaction into the “school day” itself and includes that interaction as a major part of the curriculum and learning mechanism.

Another disadvantage of a solo is just the time and money cost. Any cost of curriculum or supplies or learning technology such as computers is your responsibility alone; it is not being shared over multiple families.

Even more important is the time aspect. Homeschooling is extremely time intensive. Being responsible for 100% of the teaching, care, and oversight during the day is overwhelming for many parents, if not totally infeasible given work schedules.

That’s where collaborative homeschooling comes in. At the most basic level, CH takes advantage of economies of scale, moneywise and timewise. If an educational toy will be valuable for the group, the group can come together and buy it, meaning each individual family’s fraction of the expense is much smaller.

But the time savings for individual parents is the real kicker for CH. One adult can usually supervise and guide up to 15 younger kids and 30 older, more self-directed kids.

Having 5-10 parents involved in an informal circle of local homeschoolers means there are vastly more adult supervision and guidance time available to the group than in solo. Which in turn means you have more spaciousness to continue your own work-life outside of the home, without it completely disrupting your family’s work-life balance.

It’s a saving grace for so many parents, who often feel trapped when doing it alone, as they’re not getting much adult interaction either day in or day out. Adults need interaction with other adults, just as much as kids need interaction with other kids!

The Two Main Options for Collaborative Homeschooling: Informal, and Formal

If you think solo homeschooling might be the best option for you, there are many resources available to you, with home curricula and all other kinds of guidelines and teaching aids. (See the Resources section for more details.)

This section is for you if you’re considering the Collaborative method. There are two basic options for you to explore in CH: informal, and formal.

Informal Collaborative Homeschooling

Informal collaborative homeschooling involves a group of parents getting together, usually in the same neighborhood or within close driving distance, to share time and resources, and plan collective events and learning together.

Sometimes these groups are tight-knit circles of friends who have known each other a long time and go all-in together in supporting the education of all the kids in the group; sometimes they are a looser confederation of families with varying levels of participation.

Sometimes the groups are formed around specific values the families share. This is particularly evident in religious circles of homeschool families. But these days, families are also coming together and starting circles for non-religious reasons. An increasingly common focus is fostering entrepreneurial and business-building skills among students.

In this option, everything is done in a somewhat ad-hoc manner. Families decide collectively when and where group learning experiences will happen, and what the activities will be. Sometimes these schedules will be made week by week, depending on family's schedules, kids' interest, and other educational opportunities out in the wider city (museum exhibits, events, etc.).

In fact, informal collaborative homeschooling can often resemble "unschooling" --simply taking kids out of the frame that they are in school at all--because it is less structured, and generally more focused on real-world activities and less focused on academics

The advantage of informal arrangements is that there are next-to-no startup costs. You already have space where most of the learning will happen (your various living rooms!) You don't necessarily need to spend lots of time, money and research creating a curriculum up-front. You can improvise it based on families' preferences and desires, and what interests and passions the students evolve week by week and month by month.

The disadvantage of informal collaborative homeschooling is that there's no long-term vision for the kids' development or the development of this group over time.

There is value in teaching kids to be spontaneous and adapt to changing circumstances--as modern entrepreneurial workplaces place a premium on this skill. This is where informal collaborative arrangements.

But many parents are concerned that, if their kids' educational track is *too* improvisational, it will leave them with not enough structure to flourish, and with no ability to deal with plans, deadlines, and long-term goal-directed activity.

Here's the way I like to think of the different options:

Traditional schooling says treats your kid like a boat, tied to a dock. They're given a telescope, and shown, "Hey, here's this all over here, across the waters!" But they are never really allowed to go and explore those things. They just sit tied to that dock (i.e, rows of chairs in classrooms) learning about all the things they could be explored if they weren't tied.

Informal homeschooling (akin to "unschooling") is like taking the boat away from the dock, pushing it in the middle of the water, and seeing: "Where does the wind blow? Where do the currents take it?" If you're in that boat, you get to see and experience way more than if you're tied to the dock. But it's kind of random what you see, and you're pretty much at the mercy of what's around you. The kids go wherever the currents--even their own internal currents in the form of their interests and passions--take them.

The next option I want to talk about is formal collaborative homeschooling. I believe that this option is like taking the boat off the dock, putting a map and GPS onboard, putting a motor on it, and going exploring, in an intentional direction.

Formal Collaborative Homeschooling

In many respects, a formal Collaborative Homeschooling arrangement might look like a "school". There's often a specific physical location that looks like a schoolroom or school building. There are set schedules. The kids are age-segregated to a certain degree (though not totally). They advance through their curriculum together. And they learn from specialized, dedicated teachers and guides, not just whichever parent happens to have the day free.

However, formal Collaborative Homeschooling arrangements are vastly different from traditional schools, in many important respects:

- High individualization of curriculum and pacing for each child when it comes to the academics
- Each child has a say in how the systems are put in place. There is some amount of democracy and participatory curriculum design
- Flexibility in the projects and curriculum used
- Agility in incorporating new technologies, tools, topics, cultural trends, and methodologies, quickly without years of red tape
- A focus on character development and leadership as much as academics
- High priority on leadership through educating younger children in the program, and other volunteering opportunities
- More room for education and mentorship in the outside community and with adults doing real-work projects
- No standardized curriculum from the state or "teaching to the test"

- No standardized testing at all!
- Testing is usually experiential and focused on constructive feedback (like they'll receive in the real world) rather than imposing arbitrary letter grades, which they'll never see again outside of school. (When was the last time your co-worker or boss gave you an A- or B+ on anything?)

There are several established networks of quality formal collaborative homeschooling programs. Probably the first in the nation was the [Sudbury School](#) model. [Agile Learning Centers](#) began with one location in Manhattan in 2012 and now has quite a few locations.

The formal Collaborative Homeschooling program I am most familiar with is, of course, Acton Academy Placer. I want to make it clear that not all Acton's are set up in this regard, as many of them in the network are official private schools. Either way, we all are in agreement that young people are geniuses, and should be guided to driving their own learning.

I am the founder of [Acton Academy Placer](#), about 30 miles outside of Sacramento, CA, with another location coming to Sacramento in the Fall of 2021. This is one of over 200 Acton locations in the US and in 25+ other countries.

The reason I was drawn to Acton was the understanding of the entrepreneurial mindset fostered among students. The Acton model encourages children to become active creators in their own education and growth, and in the greater world around them, starting from day 1.

I was particularly drawn to the focus on self-awareness, and self-confidence based on having accomplished something in the real world. This is so different than the traditional model of education in which kids learn about everything in the world *except* themselves--and are not encouraged to accomplish much outside of their desks and tests.

It's a call to adventure--to something greater in their life (and greater than a row of desks!) A hero's journey of connecting to the mentors and opportunities that will take them far in life.

The Acton community is based on parents and educators who buy into the same belief system: a total belief in the sovereignty of young people to take responsibility for their own lives, their own education, and their own results and impact in the world.

Next Steps

Well, friends, we have come to the end of this journey. My goal has been to give you everything you need to know to make smart initial decisions about if and how to homeschool your children.

Now it is time for the next leg in your journey--making decisions and acting based on what you have learned here! But none of that starts until you have had the courage to ditch the fear of detaching from the traditional modes of schooling and take on the Hero's Journey of a real education.

I would love to hear from you as you continue your homeschooling adventure with your family. If you'd like to stay in touch, I encourage you to connect with me at @MattBeaudreau on Instagram or Twitter, or at Matt@ActonPlacer.com.

It would also be great if you would check out The Essential 11 podcast where some of the top entrepreneurial minds in the world join me to give advice to young heroes.

Lastly, if you know of a young man, age 13-18 who is going to be looking for the next step in developing his Hero's Journey, I'd love to connect with you about our Fall of 2020 launch where we will be building up young Sheepdogs to lead the way in the 21st century!

Until then, stay free.

Yours in Education,

Matt