Integrating Public, Private, and Homeschool Students Into a Cohesive Youth Ministry

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**Abstract**

Parents make agonizing educational decisions for their children and there are more options than ever before. Some opt to teach their children in the home. Others pay handsomely to put their children in the best private schools money can buy. The remaining groups of parents select public, charter, or magnet schools based on those schools’ particular merits or because those schools represent their primary educational option. These subtle lifestyle decisions are building blocks upon which students develop their personality, intellectual ambition, extracurricular interests, and social networks. Pastors tend to be ill-prepared for the unique dynamics families bring to the church from their various walks of life. This paper will examine methods for assimilating public, private, and homeschool students into a cohesive student ministry where they can retain their identity, be enriched by other students’ experiences and, most importantly, be united by their faith in serving Christ in their student ministry and in the greater church body.

Keywords: Youth ministry, public schools, private schools, homeschooling

INTRODUCTION

During any given week, youth ministers find themselves in the unenviable position of balancing church expectations in the areas of growth, visitation, evangelism, discipleship, and counseling. Many of these criteria work against each other and finding proper ministry balance can often prove elusive. Every family comes to the church with different expectations formed from their cultural and family identity. Depending on their religious background, parents may expect fun-filled programming, a tight-knit community, or evangelistic zeal. While healthy youth ministries can offer elements of each of these points of view, there is a need for youth ministers to focus on creating an indigenous faith community for teenagers that is not beholden to any particular agenda.

Complicating this matter are recent cultural shifts that divide communities and confuse cultural consensus. As twenty-first-century American culture continues to evolve, communities are changing from homogenous towns with shared schools and community resources to diverse schooling options and travel-sports. There is a greater tendency for people to isolate and detach from society, preferring online communications to face-to-face relationships.[[1]](#endnote-1)[1] Americans base their social and family lives from their homes, replacing the local cinema with a laptop computer and neighbors with social media. Individualism reigns supreme, commitment is rare, and convenience is highly valued.

In the middle of this cultural shift lies the premium placed on education and activities for children. Parents make agonizing educational decisions for their children and there are more options than ever before. Some opt to teach their children in the home. Others pay handsomely to put their children in the best private schools money can buy. The remaining groups of parents select public, charter, or magnet schools based on those schools’ particular merits or because those schools represent their primary educational option. These lifestyle decisions are partially the building blocks upon which students develop their personality, intellectual ambition, extracurricular interests, and social networks. Neighborhoods, schools, and community activities are often as influential in the formation of a student’s identity as his or her socioeconomic background, cultural heritage, or family milieu. With the erosion of neighborhood relationships and detachment from traditional norms, educational institutions provide a comprehensive solution for busy families to organize the educational, social, and recreational aspects of their lifestyles.[[2]](#endnote-2)[2] Schools, therefore, have become the new neighborhood in American life.

Ministers often find it difficult to reach a proper balance between these different groups because of preconceived misconceptions and assumptions that prevent them from balancing each of their unique spiritual needs. Pastors also tend to be ill-prepared for the unique dynamics families bring to the church from their various walks of life. Thus, this paper examines methods for assimilating public, private, and homeschool students into a cohesive student ministry where they can retain their identities, be enriched by other students’ experiences, and, most importantly, be united by their faith in serving Christ in their student ministry and in the greater church body. In doing so, the paper utilizes popular youth ministry methodologies associated with each cultural group and evaluates the merits of each strategy. Among those methods are the family-based model, made popular by the D6 Conference, the Ecclesial Model, by Fernando Arzola, and the Evangelist Model, made popular by Greg Stier and Dare 2 Share Ministries.

**Literature Review**

Numerous works have highlighted the issue of building and retaining a youth ministry in light of the challenges that face many ministers ranging from culture and worldview to biblical illiteracy and biblical community. *Perspectives on Your Child’s Education: Four Views* serves as a foundational resource.[[3]](#endnote-3)[3] Ham, Beemer and Hillard assert that, contrary to studies that show that many young adults walk away from church upon adulthood, this phenomenon, in fact, is now happening at a much younger age and at alarming rates.[[4]](#endnote-4)[4] They emphasize that biblical teaching and laying a solid foundation will help students grow into mature adults who remain within the church. Powell stresses that while “the former generations have often treated children and teenagers as those who should be ‘seen but not heard,’ there has been a growing number of churches or incorporating teenagers into the regular rhythms of the church's ministries.[[5]](#endnote-5)[5] Clark details the millennial generation’s attitudes, tendencies, and needs and offers suggestions for preventing and healing hurtful choices.[[6]](#endnote-6)[6] In their work on what millennials value, Packard et al. find that there are three experiences that are important to their sense of wellbeing: feeling noticed, feeling named, and feeling known.[[7]](#endnote-7)[7] Mark DeVries discusses how in the wake of churches spending millions of dollars pursuing cultural relevance and popularity through tech upgrades, state-of-the-art facilities, and dynamic programs, some churches have found themselves financially and spiritually bankrupt.[[8]](#endnote-8)[8] DeVries stresses the need to emphasize what makes churches effective without getting bogged down following fads.

Kinnaman and Lyons discuss how non-Christians and community members are often put off by perceived negative Christian stereotypes.[[9]](#endnote-9)[9] They urge Christians to shed hurtful traditions and attitudes that are not grounded in Scripture in favor of an authentic faith and ecclesiology more conducive to reaching people who are skeptical of churches and to learn other world views to better contextualize the gospel and communicate it to the world around them. Christie addresses the various problematic behaviors that occur in youth ministries.[[10]](#endnote-10)[10] He introduces insights into proper discipline and counseling to help apathetic and troublemaking students assimilate into a healthy youth program. Kinnaman and Hawkins address the cultural divide that exists between current generations and explains concerns about how those relationships will progress in the future.[[11]](#endnote-11)[11] They assert that younger generations consider churches to be overprotective, shallow, anti-science, exclusive, repressive, and imbued with double standards. However, as McGarry and Meuller point out, if “youth workers continue to overlook the importance of ecclesiology and youth ministry, it will bring significant long-term harm to the local church as a rising generation continues to misunderstand her identity as members in Christ's church.[[12]](#endnote-12)[12] While these works acknowledge the difficulties of making the church relevant to the youth of today in light of exposure to varying lifestyles, theologies, and expectations, the focus of this paper is the challenges faced by ministers when they attempt to assimilate public, private, and homeschool students into a cohesive student ministry where they can retain their identities, be enriched by other students’ experiences, and be united by their faith in serving Christ in their student ministry. This paper specifically examines public, private, and homeschool students and methods in which churches can reach out to these community members.

**PUBLIC SCHOOL MINISTRY**

American public school education began with noble intentions. In the New World, education for all was an idealistic concept that flew in the face of wealthy, elite educational systems abroad. The “common” or “normal” schools were established not only to produce a competent workforce in a burgeoning country but also to instill the democratic principle to new generations born in America.Thomas Jefferson[[13]](#endnote-13)[13] asserted that education was essential to the Union allowing children to rise above family education limitations and preventing dependence upon foreign dictators.[[14]](#endnote-14) [14]

Horace Mann’s vision was for education to be “universal, non-sectarian, and free.”[[15]](#endnote-15)[15] He wanted studies to focus as much on civic responsibility and character development as on academic disciplines.

John Dewey’s influence changed the emphasis of public education as he envisioned the public school system having a greater impact than even family history or cultural backgrounds.[[16]](#endnote-16)[16] For all of the immigrants coming to America, he fashioned school as a vehicle to create cultural uniformity in a less coercive manner.[[17]](#endnote-17)[17]

In the years following World War I, there was a greater emphasis on assimilation. English-only curriculums that favored American history deemphasized the students’ cultural heritage and taught patriotism through pledges, songs, and other customs to “Americanize” the child. Protestant influence was significant, with occasional Scripture reading and adherence to Christian holidays, until later reforms removed prayer and sacred subject matter from the classroom.

The civil rights movement also played a role in advancing educational equality in America. In the case of *Brown v. Board of Education,* the Supreme Court unanimously struck down “separate but equal” in 1954.[[18]](#endnote-18)[18] The court declared segregation unconstitutional and ended the practice over the next two decades.

**Controversies**

From its inception, public education has faced societal challenges that transcend classroom instruction. Clashes between church and state have dealt with educational philosophy, political adversity, and atheistic influences. Another challenge has been the diversity of students who come from diverse national, geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Assimilation of these heritages and viewpoints into a united classroom setting can be complicated and even divisive.

Another issue has been the role of social services thatwork hand-in-hand with public schools to provide lunches, health resources, tutoring, supplies, and before- and after- school programs to meet student needs. The topic of sexual education has always been a controversial issue for public schools. Parents feel that some methods do not comply with their family values or that school is not the appropriate place to discuss sexuality.

Schools have tremendous influence in local communities, and that position places schools at the center of political issues. Whichever side wins the schools’ favor has the best chance of advancing its agenda. This influence, however, has created an educational system that can overstep many boundaries and that delves into areas inappropriate for educational systems to dictate. As such, some feel that teachers and administrators should not be responsible for the social, religious, and societal issues that people face in everyday life.

**Public School Challenges to Youth Ministry**

Youth pastors find two key challenges in integrating public school students into local youth ministries: access and worldview. Regarding access, twenty-first-century schools have stricter visitation and volunteer guidelines. Legal and political pressures also cause schools to distance themselves from faith-based organizations. In addition to impregnable facilities with limited visitation, schools now offer an expanded slate of extracurricular activities, many of which meet virtually every night of the week, including Sundays. Pastors are not only discouraged from influencing the school, but their church activities may compete with a robust school schedule.

The public school worldview can also create tension at church. Many private schools and homeschool students favor a theistic worldview, which can include creationism, eschatology, and moral stances. The problem is not so much that the public school students disagree; it is that their entire point of reference may be different. Secular institutions often teach a worldview that is either indifferent or antagonistic toward theistic worldviews. An agnostic point of view can taint theistic students’ opinion of Christians and cause them to approach spiritual matters with skepticism. To the naturalist, a theistic worldview can appear naive, sheltered, or strange.

**Outreach and Integration in Public Schools**

The primary complication in reaching public school students for the gospel is availability. Legal and educational policies frequently prohibit the access of clergy onto school property during school hours. Youth pastors find themselves unwelcome on public school campuses, and they must be careful not to create legal ramifications for the church. In addition to limited access to students because of strict visitation laws, closed campuses, and public scrutiny, youth pastors also have cultural issues to address with the public school system.However, public school students who are properly discipled can view their environment as a fertile mission field rather than a negative influence. Youth pastors need to make sure these students have the support they require. Many public school students have faith that thrives in that setting, but others struggle to reconcile biblical truth with their educational environment.Learning to contextualize one’s faith is paramount in reaching public school campuses for Christ.

To prepare their students, the local church may design and implement an intentional discipleship plan. Though students will face the onslaught of contradictory information that can damage their faith, through guidance they might be able to speak to the lives of their fellow students and to preach truth in a hostile environment without compromising their witness through frustration and ignorance.

**Gospel-Advancing Youth Ministry and Dare 2 Share**

Youth ministry student leaders are commonly part of the effective ways to reach others in public schools. This strategy can be accomplished through clubs, prayer groups, and influence of the teenagers and is often associated with the Dare 2 Share methodology by Greg Stier who advocates a *Gospel-Advancing Youth Ministry* that is less grounded in passive meetings and more rooted in participation through hands-on experience.[[19]](#endnote-19)[19]

Stier’s resources and training teach students the gospel: how to tell their story, how to naturally initiate spiritual conversations, how to answer objections without coming off mean or condescending, and how to inspire and train friends to do likewise. Vital elements of a *Gospel- Advancing Youth Ministry* include equipping teenagers for relational evangelism, teaching teens how to share stories, and presenting the gospel relentlessly in youth group meetings.[[20]](#endnote-20)[20]

Another advantage of Dare 2 Share, beyond the obvious evangelism and church growth implications, is leadership development and self-reliant/self-multiplying Christians. If a student’s faith is going to survive a hostile worldview, the student must view his or her faith as a personal responsibility and take ownership of his or her spiritual growth.

Adults are a crucial element in implementing this model.[[21]](#endnote-21)[21] Adult sponsors must be examples of these principles for students to emulate.[[22]](#endnote-22)[22] Further, parents ideally should coach students in evangelism.[[23]](#endnote-23)[23] This process not only equips students but also helps parents grow in their spiritual life and boldness.[[24]](#endnote-24)[24] Finally, church leaders must embrace these teachings in order for this model to be effective.[[25]](#endnote-25)[25]

The end goal of this strategy is to saturate public school campuses with evangelism via trained students. These students share the gospel, invite people to church events and activities, and even personally disciple people one-on-one. Using their sphere of influence with their peers and within their activities, these students can be powerful advocates for the gospel.

**PRIVATE SCHOOL MINISTRY**

The National Center for Educational Statistics describes an American private school as “any school for which the facilities and funding are not provided by the federal, state or local government; as opposed to a ‘public school,’ which is operated by the government or, in the case of charter schools, independently with government funding and regulation.”[[26]](#endnote-26)[26] Due to funding restrictions, private schools tend to answer to their constituency, accrediting agencies, faith-based organizations (if applicable), and state regulations. Private schools are exempt from federal guidelines, [[27]](#endnote-27)[27] but their survival depends upon adherence to an ideology or educational excellence.

In colonial America, schools were primarily available in larger towns or cities. Schools in rural communities were neither free nor public, and some towns did not have schools at all.

Other towns might collaborate, pool their resources, and hire a teacher. Only the privileged went on to study beyond elementary grades. Colonial America depended on private schools that were community-based, while homeschooling and private tutors provided needed instructional resources.

In the nineteenth century, Catholic parochial schools emerged to provide quality education to rapidly growing Catholic populations throughout the United States. The schools were necessary to preserve their Catholic heritage and to provide students with quality education. Colonial America was predominantly Protestant. Hence, Catholics felt proselytized and marginalized in existing common schools because of biases against their traditions and their translation of the Bible.

In 1875, the Blaine Amendment recommended separation of church and state and forbade tax money from being used to fund parochial schools, stating, “no money raised by taxation in any State for the support of public schools, or derived from any public fund therefor, nor any public lands devoted thereto, shall ever be under the control of any religious sect; nor shall any money so raised or lands so devoted be divided between religious sects or denominations.”[[28]](#endnote-28)[28] While this proposed amendment failed to achieve the two-thirds vote to become law, it was more successful at the state government level. All but ten states have amendments that enforce the fundamental concepts of this document.

When, in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* struck down “separate but equal,” legally ending segregation,[[29]](#endnote-29)[29] many private schools served as a legal escape for families who resisted this decision. However, as the twentieth century progressed, most private schools eventually integrated, [[30]](#endnote-30)[30] bringing an end to widespread segregation.

In 1968, *Epperson v. Arkansas* struck down laws that forbade the teaching of evolution in the public school system. This decision led to increased enrollment in private schools from families who felt this decision violated their worldview.

**Private School Trends**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “private school enrollment fell from a high of 6.3 million students in the 2001–2002 school year to 5.5 million in 2009–10.” Though some private schools have already priced themselves out of the reach of many middle-class families, they now also face competition from the homeschooling community.[[31]](#endnote-31)[31] In spite of these circumstances, they remain an attractive option in American education and culture. The private school student body ranges from five to six million students nationally.[[32]](#endnote-32)[32] For Protestant families, the figure is even lower because, on average, Catholic schools dominate the private Christian school statistics nationally. Independent fundamentalism is another influential player in private Christian education. These students demonstrate a unique culture and worldview that can prove elusive. Youth pastors would be wise to verse themselves in some Catholic or independent- fundamentalist Baptist doctrine because they will interface with these concepts on a daily basis when reaching into these contexts.

**Subgroups**

*College Preparatory Schools*

Elite private school institutions throughout the United States provide academic rigor suited for college admittance and scholarship. These schools can be secular or parochial in nature, and they usually have a competitive admissions process. They also can be expensive, with tuition rivaling that of the collegiate institutions the students aspire to attend. A college preparatory school’s unique culture and demanding schedule create an environment that challenges students and expects excellence.

Some private schools adhere to a specific curriculum or pedagogy that provides a unique educational experience for students. These institutions can range in price as well as in delivery method and represent a variety of learning environments and styles from which parents may choose. For instance, Montessori schools, developed by Italian physician and educator Dr. Maria Montessori, provide students a quality education in a self-directed, autonomous delivery method,[[33]](#endnote-33)[33] while classical academies focus on the great works of Western civilization with emphasis on language, literature, art, and philosophy.[[34]](#endnote-34)[34] Language immersion schools produce students who are bilingual or speak multiple languages. Teachers instruct class members in languages other than English. In spite of learning in a foreign language, studies show that students still keep pace in other subjects while they achieve fluency in another language. [[35]](#endnote-35)[35] University schools blend elements of traditional school and home school instruction to provide a cost-effective and convenient private school experience. Some private boarding schools focus on removing at-risk students from dysfunctional environments so they can achieve their potential.

Parochial schools range from Catholic schools to strict, Protestant fundamental institutions. Many of these schools provide a cultural or spiritual environment designed to support ideologies consistent with family religious traditions. Open-admission private schools do not require students to adhere to doctrinal agreements nor belong to an ecclesiastical body.[[36]](#endnote-36)[36] These schools teach the students and desire to have an impact and influence on students seeking a good education. Covenant private Christian schools require a statement of faith, church attendance, or other prerequisites for enrollment.[[37]](#endnote-37)[37] They highly value the school’s ideological foundations and traditions. This group takes the approach of preserving their worldview and protecting it from external influences.

**Motivations**

Like homeschooling, private schools are the result of several different motivating factors. For instance, as noted above, parents want their children to be challenged and they are drawn to the prestige associated with private educational institutions. Competitive private schools boast of acceptance rates into Ivy League schools, percentages of students receiving college scholarships, elite scores on standardized tests, and athletes who are playing at the collegiate level. Schools of this nature are usually competitive, requiring testing, portfolios, and interviews to gain admittance.

Religious heritage also plays a role in private school education, especially if the school is a ministry of an existing church. Often churches that have private Christian schools draw heavily upon the congregation for their student body. Private Christian schools can also be a haven for families who feel that the subject matter students learn in the private school setting will not make them uncomfortable. Christian denominations start schools to preserve their particular doctrinal stance and worldview, ensuring that students retain what they learn throughout a given week.

Tradition is also important in many private Christian institutions and secular organizations. Generations of family members attend the same private school and pass that tradition on to their children. Much like colleges, these schools preach loyalty and tradition to encourage parents to continue to take part in the school. These families sometimes prop up the institution through endowments and paying tuition.

Athletics can serve as an attractive recruiting tool for private schools. Playing time can be a motivating factor for students desiring more opportunities to compete and be noticed by college scouts. Some private schools recruit public school athletes and offer them scholarships to bolster their winning tradition. Private schools offer players a quality education and a platform to showcase their talents. In exchange, the school gains athletic accolades that raise the school’s visibility in the community.

**Complications with Integrating Private School Students into Youth Ministries**

Some of the complications of integrating private Christian school students into community church youth ministries are the feelings of abandonment carried by public and homeschool students. In many cases, private Christian school students have formerly attended public educational institutions or were valued members of the local homeschool community. When these families opt to transition students into a private school setting, their former classmates might feel abandoned, left behind, or judged. When these same families integrate into the church setting, these circumstances are still present, and they can make for awkward interactions and hurt feelings.

Relationships are particularly awkward if school rezoning is the catalyst for neighborhood transitions. When rezoning, redistricting, or economic changes occur, each school is affected. Community responses might result in negativity because people feel deserted in the face of a crisis. Pastors must speak into the lives of their communities and help make peace in these tense situations. The families must realize that they are all made in the image of God. While institutional choices are difficult and changes in schooling can produce hurt feelings, they can still worship together.

Socializing private Christian school teens is often challenging, especially if they are less available due to academic rigor and a myriad of school-based activities. Youth pastors need to take into consideration their schedules so they can create plans that will integrate them properly. Students become leaders and valued members of the group if “employed” and assimilated properly. Youth pastors can build bridges with the schools and anticipate their scheduling issues so that students can take advantage of church biblical community.

Private schools must avoid isolating from the community. Private Christian schools tend to absorb the student body into a one-size-fits-all separate society. These institutions wrap everything from activities to athletics to religious education into one facility, assimilating students and families alike. In these instances, private school students might experience awkwardness with students who attend rival public schools. This subculture can be as impenetrable as homeschool families who value family culture above all else. Youth ministries might also experience tension if members of their church school see the program as a recruiting opportunity. Parents might feel pressured to enroll students in the Christian school, particularly if enrollment numbers are lower than the administration feels they should be.

To keep school matters from interfering with church ministries, youth pastors must have a working relationship with school staff. If the headmaster of the Christian school does not view the school as a vital part of the local community, it can become tough to integrate those

students into the community around them. Worse yet, those schools might become a bubble, artificially separating students from the realities of everyday life. While a nurturing and safe environment might seem an ideal place to teach students and allow them to develop, undeterred by distractions and drama, those conditions could become an artificial environment that stunts their emotional growth and sets unrealistic expectations for the future.

Civic-minded, private Christian schools do an exceptional job of grounding the students in the faith, teaching them academic disciplines, and producing excellent students who are successful in the future. These schools also teach students to take pride in their community and to utilize their gifts and education to give back and build bridges with their neighborhood. This results in students serving in a community that takes pride in their local Christian school. When certain schools fail to accomplish this, they risk becoming elite structures that the surrounding neighborhood resents and have a hard time gaining community support.

Problems can arise when students mistake Christian academic study for personal devotion and spiritual growth. Schools cannot replace the church. Churches provide private Christian school students with needed application to what they are learning in school. Ministers must tap into the students’ sense of yearning and help them find their calling in life. The church helps define the call that is then refined and supported by Christian education.

The private school worldview can be either vast through academic rigor or limited due to isolation and coddling. This worldview sometimes clashes with public school students, in particular because of the public school students perceived worldliness or their lack of academic pedigree. In the case of religious school private students, their theistic worldview takes issue with the naturalistic curriculum taught in public schools. Students may have legitimate disagreements about evolution, sexual ethics, and popular culture.

**Methods of Integration**

One key approach to reaching private school students is Fernando Arzola’s Ecclesial View. He encourages churches to rediscover the four creedal characteristics of the church.[[38]](#endnote-38)[38] The church is *One*, i.e., Christian schools are not meant to serve as a faction within a church. They are called to edify the body with their gifts and experiences; The church is *Holy*, i.e., The church should seek holiness together as a body of believers, not simply as individuals. Private school students should be reminded that passing the mandated biblical academic curriculum, while foundational, does not equate to personal piety and holiness; The church is *Universal*. Students need to understand that they are part of something much bigger than their congregation or school. They are part of a worldwide movement that wants to see the nations come to worship God; The church is *Apostolic*. Students must understand apostolic succession, and that their generation must commit to training so that one day they can take the mantle of leadership and lead the church into the future.

Reinforcing the four characteristics of the church, re-appropriating the incarnational visible understanding of the body of Christ, and developing a more formal teaching of ecclesiology are particularly important when teaching private Christian school students.

These students are likely to be confused about the role of the church because they live every day surrounded by Christian teaching and other Christians, and they might mistake that for the church. Churches must teach private Christian school students their important place in their local congregation so that they do not graduate from the Christian school and then have a difficult time finding their place in the church.

**Challenges of Using This Method**

The Ecclesial model is an effective way to teach students about their rightful place in the universal church. Church history, church traditions, and church polity serve as ways of inspiring students to embrace their religious heritage and not take their faith for granted. Congregationalist churches, in particular, might find this model new and exciting because many of them do not emphasize church history or centralized forms of church governance. Knowing the church’s lineage gives a greater sense of identity to the students but in itself does not produce disciples.

This method shores up the disengagement from the church that could happen with private school students. The church should challenge them in their evangelism, in their growth, and in their mentoring relationships so that they can become fully formed disciples of Christ who will, in turn, lead future generations toward Christ.

**HOMESCHOOL MINISTRY**

Homeschooling has made great strides in America in the past thirty years. In particular, due to issues in public school education, homeschooling vaulted from 850,000 students in the late 1990s to nearly 2 million students in 2009.[[39]](#endnote-39)[39] Homeschool students tend to academically outpace their public school counterparts by 34 to 39 percent and are beginning to draw the attention of collegiate academic institutions that would have been skeptical a decade before.[[40]](#endnote-40)[40] With the advancement of umbrella accrediting organizations, homeschool students now have the opportunity to experience expanded extracurricular activities, such as athletics, music, art, and other mediums. Tutorials and co-ops offer students a classroom experience and relief for parents unfamiliar with certain subjects within the curriculum. Unschooling (teaching children based on their interests rather than following a set curriculum) provides academic freedom, independent of traditional instruction.[[41]](#endnote-41)[41] With these advancements, along with flexible scheduling, homeschooling is surging as an option to failing local public schools and as an affordable alternative to expensive private schools. Homeschool families can range from affluent evangelical Christian families with deep convictions to noncommittal community members who elect to homeschool their children as a matter of convenience.

**Characteristics**

*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines homeschooling as “to teach your children at home instead of sending them to a school.”[[42]](#endnote-42)[42] As concise as this definition sounds, homeschooling is an umbrella term with a wide array of subgroups, motivations, and challenges.[[43]](#endnote-43)[43]

*Types of Homeschooling*

There are six broad types of homeschooling: traditional, classical, technological, unit studies, *Charlotte Mason*, and *Unschooling*. The traditional homeschooling approach bases a child’s education around a particular publisher or boxed curriculum.[[44]](#endnote-44)[44] Parents follow a specified scope and sequence of material that is convenient and economical and matches their particular set of values.

The classical method is rooted in the liberal arts and dates back to the Middle Ages. This approach features trivium, which examines grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and quadrivium, which features arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. After mastery of these disciplines, students pursue advanced study in the areas of philosophy and theology.[[45]](#endnote-45)[45]

The technological approach uses online resources to advance children’s education.

Recent advances in video-based and Internet-based learning allow students to receive excellent instruction delivered to their computers.[[46]](#endnote-46)[46] Parents can use virtual tutors, classrooms, and other resources. This approach trains students in self-paced online education that is commonplace at the university level. Experience in this method helps the student master the subject matter and easily transition into dual-enrollment classes or college and university studies.

The unit studies approach involves taking a theme or topic in which a child has a great interest and exploring it over an extended period.[[47]](#endnote-47)[47] This method exposes the student to a variety of subjects and then encourages further study based on the student’s interests. This method argues that students excel in subjects of interest.

The Charlotte Mason method takes a participatory and active role in learning. Teaching through play, creativity, and experiences is a hallmark (for example, activities, field trips, and nature walks). The student’s ability to explain and interact with the subject matter is preferred over conventional testing in this model.[[48]](#endnote-48)[48]

The Unschooling method taps into children’s natural curiosity and focuses on child- initiated learning.[[49]](#endnote-49)[49] Unschoolers resist structure and primarily teach their children through life experience. The children usually set the tone for the subject matter and pace of study.

Parents often utilize a combination of these methods to teach their children, as the teaching possibilities are endless.

**Problems Within the Homeschooling Community**

There are two common problems within the homeschooling community.

The first is unschoolversus homeschool. The second is first-generation homeschool parents versus second-generation homeschool parents. Special care should be taken in identifying the differences between homeschool families and unschool families. Much like their traditional school counterparts, the type and style of homeschooling family is going to vary in communities.

Homeschool families teach their children in the home. At times, they are more rigorous than their community school counterparts.[[50]](#endnote-50)[50] Unschooling families can have an adversarial relationship with traditional institutions of higher learning.[[51]](#endnote-51)[51] Where homeschool families often use curriculum and college preparatory methodologies to teach their children in a classical manner, unschoolers prefer to teach by experience. They favor field trips, artistic expression, and service projects over classroom study.

While these two styles of home education are technically the same, they differ greatly in philosophies and social implementation.[[52]](#endnote-52)[52] Traditional homeschool families and unschool families may find themselves at odds in educational, political, and lifestyle decisions for their children. These differences can cause resentment within their greater community, and pastors might unintentionally insult or frustrate these groups by lumping them together. Avoiding assumptions and stereotypes is essential in reaching the homeschool community and assimilating its members into church. Each family should be treated as individuals, and effort should be made to find common ground.

Pastors must be careful in discerning between first- and second-generation homeschool parents. Some parents were homeschooled themselves and elect to pass that traditional rite of passage on to their children. Others are first-generation homeschooling parents who are seeking a better way of life for their children, whether for the convenience that homeschooling brings or as a means of breaking the cycle of generational dysfunction from their own childhood. These parents can also be referred to as “transitional homeschool parents” as they are migrating from their upbringing to a new style of parenting.[[53]](#endnote-53)[53] Some parents who lived difficult lives often decide to make their children their life’s work and their first priority. They utilize homeschooling as a vehicle to right the wrongs of the past. Second-generation homeschool families might either find this process comfortable or resent the process as they feel obligated to carry out this lifestyle for their families.

First-generation homeschool families often find great comfort in this process but carry the pressures of venturing into new experiences. Parents must make things up as they go and turn to mentors in this journey to help their children achieve beyond the parents’ capacity to teach in some areas. These parents sometimes feel inadequate or pressured because they are attempting a sense of normalcy and nurturing that they never experienced. This type of parent can be high- strung and unsure of themselves. They require mentors for reassurance and need support from other homeschool families.

Second-generation homeschool families may struggle with arrogance or overconfidence.

They may end up being critical of other parents, the church, the pastor, and other church members. They may subscribe to a rigid family methodology that can isolate them and make them feel as though the church is capable of contaminating their children. With the right mentoring, these parents can be empowered to offer encouragement and resources to struggling families, taking their focus off of unconstructive pursuits and repurposing those energies into helping families in need.

**Motivations**

Motivation serves as the key identifier among the various homeschool subgroups.[[54]](#endnote-54)[54] [Ranging from positive to negative, there are dozens of reasons why families choose to homeschool their children. Parents sometimes homeschool their children for academic promise, athletic giftedness, musical expression, or other creative motivations. These families find institutionalized school either too strict or too inflexible to accomplish their educational goals. By the same token, they may be looking for programs their community school does not offer, and they use homeschooling to make those programs accessible to their family.

In the arena of academia, homeschool families often turn to outside means if advanced placement and dual enrollment are not part of their local school’s planned curriculum. For athletes, musicians, and other gifted students, traditional school involvement might prove to be too much of an obstacle to pursuing artistic or athletic success. Homeschooling includes flexible scheduling and can prove to be a powerful advantage by streamlining students’ schedules and allowing them more time to spend in their areas of giftedness and interest. When students spend only four to five hours per day completing their studies, time during the remainder of the day can provide opportunities to advance themselves through additional study, private lessons, gym time, or travel athletics.

Some families desire a private school education, but they either cannot afford it or do not want to pay the tuition.[[55]](#endnote-55)[55] These families often live in neighborhoods with failing schools, and they refuse to put their children into those institutions for academic, disciplinary, or cultural reasons. They see the home as a safe environment where their children can gain valuable schooling and life skills, without “mortgaging” their child’s future with private school tuition.

Other families desire the rigor of private school but would rather pay college tuition than private prep school tuition. They are able to pass the savings into a college plan and encourage their children to become participants in paying for their postsecondary education.

Homeschooling also provides the flexibility to pursue scientific, technological, literary, and other internships and interest groups. “Gifted and talented” might include artistic and musical students who spend time creating, displaying, and sharing their art. More free time allows access to additional instruction and practice time.[[56]](#endnote-56)[56]

Special education is often a key motivation for students to homeschool.[[57]](#endnote-57)[57] Students who have disabilities or behavioral issues can avoid bullying and social awkwardness.[[58]](#endnote-58)[58] If the child has attention deficit or dyslexia issues, the child might greatly benefit from private tutoring and improve at a faster pace on their own and with fewer distractions. Not all districts are equipped with adequate special education resources, and sometimes it is easier to tackle these challenges in the home than to have the child struggle in the school setting. When a child requires medications, homeschooling makes that regimen easier as well.

America’s obsession with athletics makes training and practice a large part of many students’ lives. The increased competition, elite travel leagues, and parental expectations can make balance between academics and athletics difficult. Homeschooling can provide flexibility to fit these commitments into family schedules.[[59]](#endnote-59)[59]

The most publicized reasons associated with homeschooling in the past have been religious or political convictions.[[60]](#endnote-60)[60] Many homeschool families have strong political, moral, and religious convictions that differ from mainstream views. Differences of opinion regarding sexual education, age of the earth, evolution, and political issues have caused many parents to withdraw from public schools in order to teach their children in the ways that they see fit. Results can range from political engagement, candidate endorsement, championing of parachurch organizations, eschatological zeal, and the role of women. Each issue can be divisive and can divert the focus away from worship and discipleship. Families often look for churches that share their point of view. Pastors must be wise when welcoming these families into their fellowship.

They must tread lightly, search Scriptures, agree to disagree when appropriate, and be prepared to lose these families at any time.

Many political and parachurch organizations depend heavily on the children of their members. In these cases, homeschooling allows freedom to volunteer long hours on campaigns, projects, and other endeavors. In many cases, this is not inherently bad. Students can nurture a strong sense of civic service and leadership development through these experiences. The only concern stems from the two polar experiences of their children. When students do not share their parents’ convictions or when their service in these organizations becomes their primary identity, it can lead to resentment or a distorted self-image. Pastors must be ready to help families keep a healthy dynamic where they can balance their convictions. They must be able to make sure those students’ identity comes from Christ and not from temporal organizations or personalities.

Vacations, family time, and work-life balance also serve as motivations for families to take advantage of homeschooling’s schedule flexibility.[[61]](#endnote-61)[61] These families see homeschooling as a tool to keep their family tight-knit as schedules become more complex and jobs become more demanding. They may vacation off-season or during the workweek to save money. If parents travel for work, the rest of the family often accompanies them. If a parent works odd hours, the family can accommodate to that schedule. When properly planned and implemented, homeschooling can help retain family closeness in an age when that is exceedingly rare.

On the negative side, some parents’ motivations for homeschooling children range from relaxed lifestyles to stemming deviant behavior. While many homeschool families cite the reasons of flexibility, family time, and personal convictions, some parents may turn to homeschooling because they are overwhelmed with life or because their children exhibit unhealthy behaviors. Parents who are overcome with mental illness, physical illness, or addictions sometimes abuse the flexibility of homeschooling to avoid truancy issues involving their children.[[62]](#endnote-62)[62] Homeschooling can offer an alibi and public explanation to hide parents’ personal demons, including abusive behavior, marital problems, and other issues that create a dysfunctional family environment.

Broken, dysfunctional families often homeschool their children as a means of covering their neglect.[[63]](#endnote-63)[63] Students are often left alone with a computer or textbook to perform their academic work unsupervised. Some parents lack the ability to properly educate their children and give up on nurturing their academic needs. These students might find themselves far behind their peers, and they might not realize their academic shortcomings until they venture into adulthood.

In certain instances, homeschooling is used to hide abusive or illegal behavior. For some families, it is an issue of control. While not illegal, the church can speak into the lives of these families and provide access to professional counseling and other resources. In extreme cases, where students are exposed to belligerent, illegal, or abusive situations, churches are often the only lifeline to emancipate them from harm.[[64]](#endnote-64)[64] In these cases, pastors may find themselves in the awkward situation of having to report these parents to child services. Pastors must work with community leadership and law enforcement to protect the children and help the family.[[65]](#endnote-65)[65]

**Church Challenges**

The traditional methods of evangelism and outreach most churches use are largely ineffective in reaching homeschool families because they assume that people will all gather in a specific location at a specific time. Schools, activities, and sporting events have been prime visitation venues for youth pastors for decades. Homeschool families function on a more independent basis, spurning the rigidity of community school schedules in favor of those that match their lifestyle. While groups within the homeschool community can be reached, and churches can design specific groups to target homeschool families, homeschool families are largely reached family by family, which can be time consuming and frustrating.

Where churches can more easily reach out to their community via school functions, block parties, and other events, being a presence in homeschool functions and making home visits may need to be part of the outreach philosophy and methods as well. Foresight is necessary to create a discipleship plan for homeschool students that will challenge and stimulate their faith. Whether the studies are through the church or whether the minister assists in building homeschool Bible curriculum for credit, the church needs to help foster the spiritual needs of its flock.

Homeschool worldview inherently originates from the home. Ideally, this view is one born of nurture, cultivated carefully with love and support, and commissioned into the world upon reaching adulthood. In less-than-ideal circumstances, this worldview can be narrow, wary of others, and overly dependent on family. Churches have an opportunity to build bridges between these groups while preserving their unique cultures.

Homeschool families who integrate into churches tend to be dependable workers with can-do attitudes whose work ethic and serving mentality are great assets to any church.[[66]](#endnote-66)[66] However, like every other subculture, families commonly have agendas. Some families may come to the church as active participants in organizations that target churches as prospective places of influence. Others subscribe to points of view that might conflict with the church’s stated purpose. These differences can lead to discord as the parents’ suggested programming begins to undermine, distract, or displace existing or planned ministry. Pastors must be shrewd as an inviting and positive force in the lives of these families. Pastors might feel pressured to endorse policies, activities, and organizations to keep the peace and, possibly, their jobs.[[67]](#endnote-67)[67] Straying from personal and political agendas that may rise up within the homeschooling community is difficult but necessary to maintain balance and objectivity.

The church is first and foremost a house of worship and a means of spreading the gospel, not a community center or school. As long as that community complements the stated purpose of the church, then it becomes a valued part of the church family. If it tries to overshadow or supersede the ministry of the local church, then it begins to have an adversarial relationship with the church and its membership.

**Social Challenges**

Homeschooled students inevitably have a different lifestyle than their institutional school counterparts. In some cases, they may have less social interaction, basing most of their lives in their homes. While homeschool families sometimes view community kids as unruly and a bad influence on their children, by the same token, public school kids often assume that homeschool kids are isolated, ignorant, or strange.

Homeschool students may range from shy, isolated teens who tend toward social awkwardness to students who yearn for social interaction but whose parents might be put off by their children’s desire to participate in everything the church offers. These students might even pressure their parents into letting them go to school with their church friends. Finally, some homeschool students become the envy of public and private school students. Their flexible schedules, vacations, and other advantages might be seen as unfair by some, while others might desire to be homeschooled themselves. Tribal youth culture emphasizes sameness and community. Living in a different environment than that of peers can be an obstacle, but it is not an insurmountable problem.

**Family Ministry and D6**

Family ministry has come on the scene in recent years as an alternative to conventional age-appropriate ministry. This methodology encourages family worship and teaching times that the father leads. Homes become the primary location for Bible study, and facilities and worship times take on a much simpler structure and scope.

The D6 method features multigenerational programs emphasizing rites of passage and integrating families into the youth area. Where parental involvement is always encouraged and is always a plus within the homeschool community, it is an absolute necessity to involve, empower, and utilize parents in their children’s spiritual development. The more ministers champion parents, the better parents are able to become spiritual mentors for their children. The strategy asserts that parents have much more access to their teens; thus, they have a greater potential for influence than any teacher, pastor, or program.[[68]](#endnote-68)[68] This movement is a great resource because it addresses the parental void in the spiritual lives of children. Strong families help youth pastors in their calling to reach and equip the next generation for Christ. Integrating this method has initial challenges, but the benefits greatly outweigh the costs. Ministers must befriend these families and, through acts of service to their community, win them over to help the greater church body.

Family, faith, education, leadership, socialization, service, and worship are all values that homeschoolers hold dear. When reaching homeschool families, the minister must identify the values most important to them and build programs that can meet these needs and bring them into the greater church community. Assembling a team of influential homeschool leaders can provide valuable insight into specific ministries that will draw them into the fold while encouraging them to worship alongside other community members. Tutorials, service projects, mentoring programs, specific homeschool outings, and house church cell groups are methods that can work in concert with existing church ministries to provide family-based discipleship options while keeping the evangelistic and missional practices that also reach public and private school students.

**Conclusion**

The twenty-first century is trending in a more diverse and urban trajectory. This societal change will challenge narrowly focused churches to look at their neighborhood with a fresh perspective. Whether churches choose to start new churches to reach underserved communities or allow for stylistic fluidity in their existing church, they will realize that, aside from extremes, communities will need more than specialty churches focused on an exclusive platform. Building biblical communities with these subgroups will not be unlike ministering in a pluralistic context. Pastors and youth pastors can employ a similar methodology to missionaries and church planters who provide a gospel presence in hostile environments.

Public schools continue to serve as a focal point of each local community. These institutions reflect the local culture and allow pastors an opportunity to engage in the lives of people from all walks of life. Public school students represent a window to the local community. Pastors should engage their parishioners to become part of parent teacher organizations and other areas of influence to make the church’s presence felt. Integration issues include worldview, skepticism, and other possible behavioral problems. This group, however, represents the most fertile mission field and the most significant source of new believers and baptisms.

Private Christian schools range from modest church-based schools to lavish college preparatory institutions. These academies are unique in their community contribution. The students’ presence at the schools usually comes at a sacrifice to a parent or family member. Integration issues include economic disparity, mistaking Christian school for church involvement, and rigid scheduling. Churches should reach out, mobilize families who attend these schools and encourage the students in to connect their Christian education to the local church.

Homeschool students represent a growing subculture that is diverse in its scope and methodologies. Whether they homeschool due to religious and cultural convictions or educational advantages, the students represent a fertile mission field and the excellent resource for churches. Integration issues include isolation, individuality, and theological differences of opinion. Pastors should approach the students carefully. They need to understand their unique characteristics to minister to this group efficiently. If integrated, these students can be a powerful resource for the local church, and they can reach their communities for Christ.

Schools represent a fertile mission field with specific needs and challenges. Aside from their stylistic and cultural differences, schools resemble their local community or a particular sub-culture. As the world continues to urbanize, schools and churches may not have the luxury of maintaining a homogenous culture. Ministries should begin the painful process of defining their distinctive theology and practices while strategizing how to assimilate people according to their faith, rather than their preferences.

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