



Three Kinds of Education: A Buyer's Guide

By Adam Andrews

When you decided to homeschool your children, you made a shrewd move: you chose to treat education as a commodity. Not content meekly to accept the government's general issue brand, you declared yourself a consumer in the education market, with the same rights and privileges of all consumers everywhere – namely, the right to choose between options; the right to decide whether, and what, to buy.

Boy, the decisions came thick and fast after that, didn't they?

What books to read? What tests to take? Which math curriculum is best? Which book prepares Johnny for the college boards? What about phonics? Latin, French, both or neither? Science now or science later?

Every homeschooler is of necessity a curriculum designer, and these are all important decisions. It may be helpful to consider that although the number of curriculum choices on the market increases daily, there are really only *three types of education* to choose from.

Practical

First, there is "practical" education. This kind of education is designed to give students a basic set of skills that will enable them to function in society and will help them avoid becoming a burden on the public weal: skills like reading a newspaper, driving a car, balancing a checkbook, operating a computer, playing on a basketball team or filling out a job application.

The ultimate goal of "practical" education is the creation of good citizens. Students who are the products of such education learn how to *behave*, and their parents and teachers are primarily concerned with having them turn out

to be well adjusted citizens of their neighborhoods and communities.

Professional

The second type is "professional" education. This kind of education is designed to produce experts in a particular discipline. The fields of engineering, higher math and science, advanced computer programming, architecture, medicine, law, business and information technology teem with students who have this sort of training.

"Professional" education produces students who know lots and lots of information about a relatively narrow field of inquiry. These students are experts - specialists. They have been taught more than simply how to behave; they've also been taught how to *perform* – that is, to apply their specific knowledge, when asked or hired to do so, to a specific type of situation. Parents who desire this kind of education for their kids are often primarily concerned with having them get good, high paying jobs.

Philosophical

The third type of education available to the choosy consumer is "philosophical" education. This kind of education is concerned primarily with reading great books, studying world languages, and writing about ideas. It's designed to give students the ability to tell the difference between truth and falsehood; to recognize the timeless principles that make successful societies possible and to communicate these ideas to their neighbors.

A "philosophical" education produces students who are not only capable of choosing good over evil but also capable of leading their fellow men in the pursuit of good. In short, while the

practical student knows how to *behave* like a good citizen, and the professional student knows how to *perform* like a specialist, the philosophical student knows how to *think* - like a statesman.

Education Shopping

Of the three types of education mentioned here, the first is the easiest to get. It is available in every public school in America, though you really don't need to go to school in order to get it. Indeed, most parents who have decided on homeschooling have probably also decided that they can provide a sound "practical" education on their own – perhaps without any curriculum at all.

The second kind of education, however – the "professional" kind – requires intensive study and training, and is usually undertaken at the college level or above. If you're after this kind of education for your student, the most productive thing you can do is to help him develop good study habits, so that when he goes to college he'll be able to handle the mental workload.

To do this, you should choose curriculum materials whose reading assignments are challenging, plentiful and continuous. The ability to concentrate for extended periods of time on what one reads is absolutely essential for success in a professional field, and practice is the only way to get there.

In the final analysis, parents who choose a "philosophical" education get the most bang for their curriculum buck. This is because a philosophical education does not neglect the kinds of skills that make a good citizen and it also provides necessary training in the habits of mind that make good specialists. In other words, the goals of both the practical and professional education are almost automatically met by the student who pursues a philosophical education.

But a philosophical education provides much more. The term *philosophical* means

"pertaining to the love of wisdom." A philosophical education is therefore an education in *ideas* rather than skills or habits only – ideas like Liberty, Virtue, Sacrifice, Love, Beauty and Truth.

While these may seem like greeting card clichés, the truth is that such ideas have ruled human society since the dawn of time. The history of their rule is preserved for us in the literature of the civilized world, and it's here – in literature – that a philosophical education begins.

Here are three questions you can use to determine whether the curriculum choices you're considering will contribute to your student's philosophical education:

1. Will these materials require my students to read extensively? Will my students encounter classics of the English language such as the works of Milton, Shakespeare, Dickens, Wordsworth or the King James Bible? Will they encounter classics of ancient literature, such as the works of Homer, Sophocles and Virgil? If not, why not?
2. Will these materials require or facilitate the discussion of ideas? What kind of writing will they demand? Will my students be taught to respond to their reading out loud and on paper on a regular basis in order to develop skills of analysis and self-expression? If not, why not?
3. Will these materials teach ME to lead my students in these areas?

Keeping these questions in mind can help you choose wisely and become an effective consumer in the education marketplace.

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