

Hybrid Homeschooling

By Michael Q. McShane

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Key Points

- Hybrid homeschooling creates an avenue for conservatives to build the types of schools that appeal to their values and desires at a price they can afford.
- Hybrid homeschools should be part of a conservative agenda because they recognize the primacy of the family and work in civic society to create formative institutions built on local values.
- For conservative families that feel isolated and besieged by an educational culture at odds with their values, hybrid homeschools offer an opportunity for renewal and flourishing.

“Our school is for families that feel sad at back-to-school time.”¹

So says Thomas Ragsdell, the head of school at Heritage Academy of Columbia, Missouri. Heritage Academy is a hybrid homeschool. Its 84 students attend formal classes on campus on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and are homeschooled on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Doing so gives families “the gift of time” in a world where children are frequently overscheduled but under-nurtured.

Homeschooling is an increasingly popular school choice. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of homeschooled children doubled from 1999 to 2016, and now almost two million students are homeschooled, more than 3 percent of America’s student population.²

Homeschooling can be challenging. Particularly as children age, parents can find themselves out of their depth trying to teach more advanced coursework. Many families also want their children to be part of a community while still maintaining primary control of their child’s education. For them, traditional schools (whether public or private, religious

or nonreligious) give too much away. Full-time homeschooling keeps too much in-house.

Enter hybrid homeschooling. Parents still occupy the central role in their child’s education, but their efforts are supported and structured by a school. The format varies, with some schools operating as “4/1”—meaning four days at school and one day at home—and others as “3/2,” “2/3,” or “1/4.”

Why is hybrid homeschooling a promising conservative education reform? Not all hybrid homeschoolers are conservative. Quite the contrary, in fact. But hybrid homeschooling creates an avenue for conservatives to build the types of schools that appeal to their values and desires at a price they can afford.

Any conservative education policy or practice should have three main attributes.

1. Recognize the Primacy of the Family

Free societies are founded on strong families. Education policy should use the family as the starting point of education and should integrate the family

into the educational process. It was no less a conservative intellectual giant than Russell Kirk who argued in a 1977 lecture at Hillsdale College:

For the family always has been the source and the center of community. In the phrase of Edmund Burke, the family is the origin of “the little platoon we belong to in society,” and it is “the germ of public affections.” . . . Its essential function is the rearing of children. Those societies of the past and the present which we call good societies have been strongly marked by powerful family ties. These have been societies possessed of a high degree of both order and freedom. Societies in which the family has been enfeebled have been disorderly and servile societies—lacking love, lacking security.³

Hybrid homeschools recognize that parents are their children’s primary educators. Chris Harper, the head of school at Grace Prep in Arlington, Texas, the first University-Model school (a kind of hybrid homeschool) in America, put it to me this way:

We’re not going to usurp the role of the parent, we’re actually going to come alongside the parent, and maybe where the parent doesn’t know how to do calculus, we’re going to provide that. We really believe that the parent is the first government, the first shepherd, the first educator in a child’s life.⁴

2. Work with Civil Society Instead of Supplanting It

Cultivating and conserving the organizations that exist between the individual and the state has been recognized as a conservative principle since at least the time of Edmund Burke. It has started to take on more importance as both individuals have become more atomized and the state has grown in power. As Robert Nisbet wrote:

There must be in any stable culture, in any civilization that prizes its integrity, functionally significant and psychologically meaningful groups and associations lying intermediate to the individual and the larger values and

purposes of his society. For these are the small areas of association within which alone such values and purposes can take on clear meaning in personal life and become the vital roots of the large culture.⁵

Atomized families are not the answer. Yoking them together with other families in a shared enterprise can strengthen and form them into stronger units.

Hybrid homeschools are little communities of like-minded parents working together to meet their children’s academic, social, and spiritual needs. They often start in someone’s living room, the excess space in the basement of a church, or, in the case of the Boone Prairie School in Whitestown, Indiana, a renovated tobacco barn. They work with institutions such as Hillsdale College to find curriculum and network through organizations such as University-Model Schools International and the Association of Classical Christian Schools. They create new institutions to help form their children into the types of people they want them to be.

3. Endeavor to Pass on the Store of Accumulated Knowledge

What do conservatives in education want to conserve? In addition to the family and civil society, conservatives want to conserve knowledge itself. Conservatives believe that mankind has accumulated knowledge over the years, often tucking it away in traditions, habits, and customs. They resist the call to destroy the old to make way for the new.

They also resist the postmodern tendency that has crept into the education system to reject objective truth, morality, reason, language, and seemingly everything else of value. The ever-thoughtful Sir Roger Scruton wrote: “Once we see that the primary purpose of education is to safeguard knowledge, all the fairy castles of the educationists tumble in ruins. Hence they are up in arms, and, as so often, in arms against the truth.”⁶

Many hybrid homeschool use a classical curriculum and pedagogy focused on preserving and transmitting the Western canon.

The Legacy Classical Christian Academy in Fort Worth, Texas, is one such school. The curriculum is divided into a grammar stage, a logic stage, and a rhetoric stage. Students progress through the

great books and the major ideas of the Western canon, starting with songs, chants, and play as young children; working their way through logical fallacies and critical contemplation in Socratic seminars as they get older; and eventually progressing to essay writing and an oral defense their senior year. By way of example, their ninth graders read the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Belinda Henson, the head of school, puts the goal plainly: "Ultimately, a classical education teaches students

to learn to defend the heritage of Western civilization."⁷

Hybrid homeschooling is an opportunity for conservative families to work together in a shared enterprise to create coherent formative institutions for their children. To be clear, it is an opportunity for families of other ideological persuasions to work together as well. But particularly for conservative families that feel isolated and besieged by an educational culture at odds with their values, hybrid homeschools can offer a refuge and opportunity for renewal and flourishing.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Thomas Ragsdell (head of school, Heritage Academy), in discussion with the author, September 10, 2019.
2. US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "School Choice in the United States: 2019," September 2019, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/schoolchoice/>.
3. Russell Kirk, "The Little Platoon We Belong to in Society," *Imprimis* 6, no. 11 (November 1977), <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/the-little-platoon-we-belong-to-in-society-november-1977/>.
4. Chris Harper (head of school, Grace Prep), in discussion with the author, September 18, 2019.
5. Robert Nisbet, "The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom," in *The Essential Civil Society Reader: The Classic Essays*, ed. Don E. Eberly (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 46.
6. Roger Scruton, "What's the Point of Education?," *Spectator Life*, November 2016, <https://www.roger-scruton.com/articles/384-what-s-the-point-of-education-spectator-life-nov-16>.
7. Belinda Henson (head of school, Legacy Classical Christian Academy), in discussion with the author, April 28, 2020.

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