

The Most Dangerous Question: What Makes for a Great Education?

CHAPTER ONE

“To think critically, people must be motivated and free to voice their own ideas and to raise their own questions but in school students learn that their own ideas and questions don’t count. What counts are their abilities to provide the correct answers to questions that they did not ask and that do not interest them.”

—Peter Gray, from his book *Free to Learn*¹

“Dad, puh-leeze!”

My 16-year-old self was screaming inside. I was struggling in physics, had a test tomorrow, and my grade was currently a *B*. Yes, the scarlet letter in my book: a *B*.

I had reached the limit of my own capacities and needed help. Kinematics was hard and I hate to admit this, but I hadn’t even earned that *B*. I cheated my way there and finally reached the point where I could no longer fake it. I was in dire straits. After all, my GPA was at stake (a.k.a my whole future), and I needed help.

In comes Dad. Now, let me provide some context first. My dad isn’t “normal.” He’s an actual genius, an engineer (more accurately, an inventor) who’s won many awards for

what comes out of his mind. He's the curious type when it comes to learning.

When I asked for help, I knew I needed to contain the situation because (cue the eye roll that didn't appreciate it at the time) he was going to become enthused about how cool kinematics is, start explaining superfluous abstractions and applications, and add on a side of tangents that would confuse even the kids I was cheating off of. We had to stay on track if I wanted ACTUAL help.

"The test, Dad . . . the test is TOMORROW! I don't need to know all this! Just tell me what I need to know to score well."

In that moment, the last thing I truly cared about was why this material matters, why it's interesting, and how it applies to our world. It was crunch time. To be completely honest, even if my transcripts weren't on the verge of becoming a complete dumpster fire (I did tend to catastrophize back then), I found myself utterly indifferent toward the subject matter. I knew I was never going to use this stuff again in my life. I was only taking the class to fulfill college prerequisites.

Understanding physics was my lowest priority; getting the grade in physics was the highest. That's the whole point anyway, isn't it? To play the game, get the grades, so you can get where you want to go? Of course, it is.

Chasing Grades

Through the years, I've seen this letter grade-chase play out over and over again. As the founder of one of L.A.'s most prominent learning centers, I remember having that

conversation hundreds of times. A parent would hire our team to tutor their child. We would have only 50 minutes to work together, so the questions quickly became, “What do you need to know? What does the teacher want? How are we going to give them what they want to nail the right grade?”

Any excitement, interest, or even discussion about the material was nonexistent. Out the window. There was no time for anything but delivering what the teacher wanted.

It’s the nonstop treadmill of grades and academic achievement (honor roll, anyone?) with the exhausting chase of looking *perfect* on your transcript for your dream colleges. The undercurrent of this letter grade-driven madness is anxiety, peer pressure, bullying, wearing the right clothes, the social environment, gobs of insecurities, and real dangers kids face in the traditional schooling system *every single day*.

How would I know? This was my story. Grades were everything to me growing up. I should clarify, though. Grades were everything for me starting in the *fourth grade*. Before that, I was a completely different girl.

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The Dawn of Grade Perfectionism (and Performance Anxiety)

It wasn’t until fourth grade that I even knew grades were a thing. I was given tests and didn’t know it. I thought

school was where you go to learn if you wanted to but no big deal either way. My older sister had profound learning challenges and my parents never spoke of grades in the house.

Educating my sister and navigating the school system during a time (the 1980s) when most administrators and teachers did not believe learning disabilities were real was an uphill battle. Getting my sister to learn was a constant trial, and the last thing my parents wanted to do was talk about grades around my sister. She was in and out of therapies for most of her childhood.

But one day, things changed.

My fourth-grade teacher told my mom in a parent-teacher conference that I was very smart but not living up to my potential. Apparently, I was getting Cs (I had no idea). Nor did I even know I was graded at this thing called school. But apparently, I was a smart girl who could be doing better. Or so my parents were told.

My parents did what most parents would do when confronted with this situation. They sat me down and told me I needed to get better grades. They showed me my report card (the first time I'd ever seen one) and told me Cs meant "average" and that I was capable of a lot better. That I could be getting As if I tried, and that A is the best grade.

They then laid out a plan to motivate me to get better grades. Money. That was it.

Apparently, they were right, I wasn't working to my potential because from that day forward, I got those As. Heck, yeah, I did. We didn't have a lot of money back then so to have cash was amazing. Here's how our deal went: if I went up a grade (so if I took a C to a B), I got \$20, and once

I got that to an A, I would get \$20 for keeping every A. My parents were not wealthy by any means, so I know that cash (\$100 bucks give or take) every quarter was a lot for them. Overnight I became the student every teacher and parent wants. A straight-A poster child.

From. That. Day. Forward.

The Problem with the Plan

As I got older, though, what started as a rather innocent motivation for money turned into unhealthy perfectionism. I started to get praised for being smart by my parents and teachers, I started comparing my grades with my friends, and I started to tie my self-worth to my marks. Get the A? That means you're smart.

That means your teachers will like you. That means your parents will praise you to their friends. That means you are worthy.

I learned how to perform and deliver. I was doing this childhood thing correctly. My parents loved seeing my accomplishments, but I took this expectation to an unhealthy place. Why not? My school and teachers raved about my academic success. Applause is addicting, especially when you're great at playing to the judges.

This concept held tight as I entered the realms of college and graduate school. The objective was clear-cut: emerge from academia with an unblemished 4.0. It wasn't merely about showcasing intelligence; it was about securing the elusive key to unlocking my aspirations. Yet, beneath the surface of high grades, a more profound truth was taking shape. Behind the veil of flawlessness, there resided a girl

carrying hidden scars, driven by an unspoken belief that perfect grades could mend the internal wounds.

In the midst of this narrative unfolding, my experience is far from isolated. What transpired in my journey resonates broadly among children who grapple not only with the pursuit of acceptance, but also with the subtle messages our education system imparts. This yearning runs deep, interwoven into the very fabric of our schools. It's nurtured by the notion that tangible achievements hold the key to future success. Within this intricate choreography, classrooms transform into stages, with assignments and tests as avenues to stand out, to matter. Beneath the pursuit of grades lies a delicate reality: the longing for self-worth entwined with external success. It's a narrative extending beyond my own, painting a poignant image of countless children seeking validation through academic accomplishments.

Back in fourth grade, I couldn't foresee this trajectory unfolding. At that moment, I was simply thrilled about the monetary reward. Little did I know, there was a lot more tied to those good grades. But in retrospect, something shifted within me during that fourth-grade encounter. Learning, with which admittedly I had only maintained a casual relationship until then, suddenly lost its significance.

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Following that meeting with my parents, I found myself spending the subsequent years of my academic journey being more interested in the act of securing good grades than in the actual material I was learning. The only "connections and deep thoughts" that mattered were

the ones that impressed teachers, professors, and graduate advisors—all in the pursuit of securing that coveted grade. It wasn't about genuine engagement; it was about achieving the paper that validated an A, honors, or a Master's degree. I held the conviction that having those grades or that degree was a testament to my accomplishments, my knowledge, or more precisely, my identity.

Sad. Oh, how misinformed I was.

Perpetuating the Cycle

I carried this mentality into my adult years. I got a teaching job at a school in a wealthy area where the parents, too, cared about achievement. It was a match made in heaven. A driven type-A academic teacher pursuing her Master's teaching the kids of other "high achievers" how to go places.

Don't get me wrong, while growing up, I did have those occasional moments of true enthusiasm for learning that everyone desires. This is precisely why I chose a history degree over a possibly more lucrative career path. The idea that actual stories can be even more astonishing than fiction, along with the boundless wisdom we can gather by exploring the past, struck a chord with me.

Nonetheless, catching a glimpse of that "love of learning" within my studies was a rarity, as bunny trails were infrequent, and time was often limited. Such moments were only permitted (both by my choice and the unyielding demands of the system) if they aligned with my overarching goals—achieving top grades in pursuit of success.

As Denise Pope would say, throughout my years of studies I was “doing school,”² not really engaging or enjoying learning.

Fast-forward a decade.

I became so skilled at achieving, and I married a similarly driven achiever, Scott, which led us to build a flourishing business centered on children’s accomplishments.

We helped kids who struggled to “achieve” when the schools failed them. We were hired to solve problems the public and private schools could not.

We did whatever it took to deliver. To get kids on track. To get them to learn. And we were good at it too. Our center was also different from many other learning centers in that we truly cared about each and every one of those kids who walked through our doors. Make no mistake, we were hired to get results, but at the same time, I was still the little sister to a girl who struggled tremendously to be able to learn. I wanted to help. Kids who came to us knew they were in a safe place, and we genuinely cared about helping them.

What if there is a better, healthier way to get this education thing done?

We worked with thousands of kids ranging from kindergarten through college from over 20 public and 30 private schools in our area. I spent my days training and managing my staff of specialists and tutors, pouring over Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and discussing student needs with principals, admissions counselors, therapists, psychologists, and parents. We delivered highly individualized educational plans and impressive academic outcomes.

But . . . this wasn't my calling. There was more in store for me. After having my first child, I had an awakening. Through a series of conversations, tough introspection, and placing on the altar of uncertainty everything I *thought* I knew about education, it all came down to one key question: "What if there is a better, healthier way to get this education thing done?"

My Deconstruction Begins

I observed and participated in this grind that most kids in our country are forced to experience for decades. Go to school for seven hours a day just to come home and do several hours of homework in the evenings. When they're not doing homework, kids are shuttled around to adult-led extracurricular activities (organized sports are not play, by the way). Often, these kids leave their house at 7 a.m. and don't return until 7 p.m. or even later. Kids would show up at our center, dinners in hand, with their parents telling us, "Call us when they're done!" Looking around at our center with all these kids, while holding my own infant, I wondered, "Is this the future I want for my kid? This grind?"

In this pivotal moment of deconstruction, a torrent of questions flooded my thoughts: "What kind of childhood is being shaped here? What exactly propels our actions? Do our efforts genuinely make a difference, and if so, do they address what truly matters? Amid these pursuits, do these students experience moments of genuine joy? Can they carve out time for cherished family bonds? Are their

passions acknowledged and embraced, or does the ceaseless pace of their lives obstruct such pursuits?”

The scales started lifting from my eyes. I was heartbroken that kids in my center with real learning challenges were at school all day just to be at tutoring and/or receiving remediations all night. Not to mention weekends. Throughout the day, at school, many of our students received signals that something was wrong with them or they were not smart enough or “needing extra help.” Just to succeed they would come to our center after school and spend hours working with us to ensure they made decent grades. We also had the overachievers who needed As and came to us for AP Bio, Honors English (or whatever) so they could maintain their GPA to get that golden ticket of an acceptance letter from the school they “needed” to get into.

That awakening would forever change the trajectory of my life. Like, FOREVER. It led us to move states away and sell the business Scott and I built for over 17 years.

Finding Hope in Unexpected Places

As I mentioned before, we worked with a lot of kids at our center. Most students, if not all, were “doing school” to get it over with.³ I can count on one hand the kids who actually loved learning. Most everyone else—and I would argue this is true all across our country—views school as a necessary inconvenience. So many of our clients, kids and adults included, knew that much of what is learned in school has no relevance to real life.

Public school, private school, it doesn't matter; education in this country has largely been reduced to "going through the motions."

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What if we could do better?

What if our kids could truly love learning AND be prepared for a successful life? What if we didn't have to choose one or the other? What if there is a better way than conforming to a system that many would agree is "smoke and mirrors"? What if we did something instead of watching as critical thinking and autonomy are further devalued?

That's where we brought in the two questions that inspired us to sell our business, relocate, and pursue homeschooling.

1. What makes for a great education?
2. Are schools achieving this?

Yikes.

The implications of pondering these questions are weighty. Just how big of a problem do we have on our hands?

And what does this have to do with homeschooling? Everything. Just sit tight.

And I know what you're thinking . . .

"Sure, Christy, you may be able to convince me that homeschooling is a great option for families, but not everyone can homeschool."

Yes. I know.

And I will add to that . . .

Not everyone *should* homeschool.

That doesn't mean it's not a worthy topic to ponder, and possibly one of the most important matters to think about.

After all, we are talking about childhoods here. Where the majority of our kids spend seven-plus hours a day for 13 years straight. Ask any therapist and they will tell you that the childhood years, interactions with caregivers, parents, and their environments have a lasting impact on a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development. To raise children into healthy adults, it's crucial that they are provided with a safe, nurturing environment as they are growing up.

It's having the courage to truly ask ourselves, "This may be normal, but is this 'normal' good?"

Frederick Douglass spoke to the heart of the matter, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."⁴

That's what this book is about: rethinking childhood. Rather than

accepting common practices as the right way to do things, instead, we're taking an inventory of our kids' growing up and being educated experiences. It's having the courage to truly ask ourselves, "This may be normal, but is this 'normal' good?"

The normal childhood in our culture is to send our kids away from their homes and into classrooms for seven-plus hours a day, five days a week until they are 18. To a place most kids hate.⁵ To a place that often kills a love of learning (more on this later) and is unhealthy at best and toxic at worst socially (more on that later, too). We hand our kids over to people we don't know that well for a large majority of their growing-up years, for hours on end, and aren't allowed to see our children without permission. Yet, we don't think twice.

The irony is, most of our culture has zero hesitation when passively sending their children into this system

every single day. After all, our kids need an education. And our government knows what they're doing so we can trust them to do it, right? A considerable number of people wish to believe that our government possesses the insight to champion our welfare and make prudent decisions for us, particularly in matters concerning our children's education. Nevertheless, the reality that many of us acknowledge is that this hope rests on an inherently unrealistic premise.

These are our kids. Our *precious children*.

You wouldn't let just anyone access your bank account without your approval, and yet, you're supposed to just give your kids over to complete strangers for 13 years!

However, this current structure hasn't always been the norm. While it's only about 150 years old in the larger history of education, it's crucial to recognize that throughout history, remarkable thinkers have pondered and envisioned education

in vastly different ways. Despite this, due to the weight of tradition and the fact that we've been immersed in the mass schooling system for two generations, many parents accept this arrangement without a second thought. It's almost as if we haven't been given a genuine choice because we're predominantly familiar with only one approach. Nonetheless, I firmly believe it's time to step back and rigorously assess its effectiveness and outcomes. The moment has arrived to liberate ourselves from the confines of the past century and a half and from the prevailing belief that schools hold unquestionable authority over our children's education.

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Now, I need to say this before being misunderstood. I am pro-homeschooling. Yes, but I am pro-homeschooling because I believe children are persons who need to be honored and loved. Through my deconstruction journey into believing homeschooling is a legitimate and healthy way to educate kids, my heart aches because I know there are many kids in our country who would greatly benefit from being pulled from schools and educated in a loving and safe home who, sadly, never will. This is why I hold these truths together:

- **Truth No. 1:** Homeschooling goes beyond simply being a legitimate educational choice for families; it is also the best way to provide tailored academics, instill a love of learning, foster social/emotional health, and cultivate stronger family bonds.
- **Truth No. 2:** Not every child will get the educational experience that is available through home education (though I wish they could).

I have more than once been called out for not putting my efforts toward reforming the system. If homeschooling is as good as we say it is, it's not right that all kids won't get it.

The system is beyond reform. It is working exactly how it was intended.

I have concluded the system is beyond reform. It is working exactly how it was intended to work and because of circumstances beyond my control, I don't see this changing anytime soon.

And then, there is homeschooling.

From One Heart to Another

When it comes to discussing a child's education, we aren't talking about the pros and cons of something trivial like what jeans to wear or what to cook for dinner tonight—we are talking about entire childhoods. And childhoods matter. Kids matter . . . we are talking about entire childhoods. And childhoods matter. *Kids matter.*

If you are a current homeschooler who doesn't know what to do with the naysayers out in the world or the most powerful naysayer (the one in your mind), this book is for you. You may be asking, "Will I mess up my kids? How do I know if I'm doing enough?" My promise is you will finish this book with a renewed sense of purpose and unshakable confidence in your homeschooling choice.

. . . *we are talking about entire childhoods. And childhoods matter. Kids matter.*

If you are a professional who works with kids, whether that be as a pediatrician, therapist, teacher, ministry worker, and so on who has valid concerns about homeschooling, I trust you will have an open mind. As Mary Lathrap conveyed in "Walk a Mile in His Moccasins"⁶ (formerly, "Judge Softly") or as Brené Brown states in *Braving the Wilderness*, "People are hard to hate close up,"⁷ I ask a favor. Will you lean in? Will you hear me out? You owe it to yourself to educate yourself on educational alternatives so you can better advise families. You owe it to the families you work with to advise them based on current, accurate information.

If you are one of the 11 million parents in America who are dissatisfied with the school system⁸ but have yet to take the leap into this unknown world of home education, I can't wait to move you from "How do I even start?" to "I know I won't start perfectly, but it's better than what we're doing." No worries. I got you.

My promise is you will finish this book with a renewed sense of purpose and unshakable confidence in your homeschooling choice.

If you are a friend or family member who has some deep concerns about the well-being of your grandkids, nieces, nephews, god kids, or close friends, first, we need to acknowledge your care and love. I'm sure you have questions, "How will they be ready for college? How will they be socialized? Is it good to shelter kids like this?

What about diverse social interactions? They don't look like they're learning what they are supposed to be learning . . ." I could go on and on.

I know your questions because I had them myself. Come, sit, and have coffee with me. No judgment here. Your genuine concern is commendable. The first thing I want you to know—from an educator who, for over 20 years, got kids perfect SAT scores, guided nonreaders to become readers, and helped land other kids in Ivy League schools—is that a great education doesn't need to look like what the schools are doing. The statistics show we are doing a much better job educating at home anyways; it will be okay. But you need convincing, I know. I'm here to show you the truth and the data to support it.

I was each of you. I was the skeptic who thought homeschooling was for weirdos or for fringe religious families.

I was the professional who thought homeschooling was okay only as a temporary solution but not a viable long-term alternative. I was the fearful mom who decided to do this but had zero guidance. I also was (and am) the homeschool mom scared to death to mess this thing up.

In all my research and experience, I have concluded that your kids deserve better than what the schools can provide and that as a loving, motivated parent, you are the best person to give your kids the education they need to succeed. And that goes far beyond the letters on a report card.

This is the essence that underpins this book—an unwavering commitment to securing the best for our children’s future. With this understanding in mind, we can wholeheartedly embark on this journey together. So, let’s get after it.

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Remember This

- Students, as I did, learn to give up inquisitive learning for “doing school.”
- Because we’ve been immersed in the mass schooling system for two generations, many parents accept this arrangement without a second thought.
- The best way to provide tailored academics, instill a love of learning, and foster social/emotional health is to homeschool.

