

LECTURE

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The Uncommon Benefits of Hybrid Schooling

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Abstract

Most parents want two things: (1) to protect their children from being immersed in a school culture that is at odds with their family culture or philosophical world view and (2) for their children to be sufficiently exposed to people who are different from them that they will be well prepared for success and influence in the real world. Regrettably, one-size-fits-all schools have a very difficult time facilitating this very delicate balancing act. But hybrid schooling can offer a way out of these counterproductive cul-de-sacs, allowing us to customize the learning opportunities for all children so that they can get a well-balanced social and academic upbringing tailored to their unique needs, interests, talents, learning styles, stages of development, and personalities.

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Several years ago, my son Richard came to me and made a remarkable pronouncement. “Dad,” he said, “I want to try out for the Leon High School baseball team.”

At first blush, Richard’s statement may not seem all that strange. Kids try out for high school sports teams all the time, and Richard had played baseball all his life. But the thing that made Richard’s pronouncement so remarkable was that he didn’t attend Leon High School. In fact, he wasn’t officially enrolled at *any* high school at the time.

His freshman year, Richard took one course online, three more at home under my wife’s supervision, and several others at a small classical Christian school across town. Once a week, he also took some music and drama classes at Tallahassee’s Young Actors Theatre.

Officially, our school district considered Richard a homeschooler; but if I had to give him a name, I’d call him a “hybrid student”—not that this was, or is, an official category ... yet.

Whatever else one might call him, Richard clearly wasn’t a student at Leon High School. Nevertheless, Florida law allows homeschoolers to try out for athletic teams at the public school in their district. Football great Tim Tebow had once done this.

TALKING POINTS

- Hybrid schooling customizes learning for children by empowering parents to draw on a variety of educational options.
- Florida, a leader in hybrid schooling, allows students to take all or part of their classes at public, private, or charter schools while taking other courses online. Homeschooling students can enroll in online courses, and can even participate on public school sports teams.
- Hybrid education represents a shift from one-size-fits-all schooling to customized educational options, tailored to students’ individual learning needs.
- With hybrid schooling, we can customize learning opportunities for all children so they can get a well-balanced social and academic upbringing tailored to their unique needs, interests, talents, learning styles, stages of development, and personalities.

So even though we had just moved to Tallahassee, I knew there was a way Richard could try out for the Leon High baseball team. I just wasn't convinced that this was a good idea. Richard was, after all, a shrimpy freshman, a new kid in town, and a student whose typical school day many would consider peculiar.

So when he told me he wanted to try out, I asked Richard to spend 24 hours thinking this over very carefully. He needed to think through whether he was fully prepared for the awkwardness of being dropped off on the first day of tryouts at a ball field where he had never played, at a school he didn't attend, knowing that when perfect strangers asked him why they'd never seen him around school, Richard would get to tell them all that he was a home-schooler who also took classes at a tiny Christian school when he wasn't doing musical theater.

That night, I went to bed confident that I had heard the last of Richard's desire to play baseball at Leon High for awhile. But my son went to bed and apparently dreamt that he was a direct descendent of Hank Greenberg, the greatest Jewish baseball player of all time, because the next evening, Richard came to me brimming with chutzpah and said, "Dad, I've thought everything over just like you asked, and I want to try out for the Leon team."

So we went and met with the Leon coach and arranged for Richard to try out. When Richard got home after the first day, he was grinning from ear to ear. He had ripped the ball in batting practice, the coaches had complimented his fielding skills, and none of the players had treated him as weird. Three days later, Richard was named to the freshman team, and by mid-season, he had a number of new Leon baseball

buddies hanging out at our house after practice and on weekends.

My wife and I marveled at Richard's smooth transition onto the baseball team of a big public high school he didn't even attend. It seemed so unlikely to us. But after a short while, we began to realize that we weren't in Kansas anymore: Our household had just landed in a full-color educational wonderland where every child seemingly followed his own yellow brick road to academic success.

As we got to know some of Richard's teammates and their families, we discovered that Richard wasn't the only "hybrid student" playing for Leon that year.

- There was a big first baseman that didn't show up at Leon until after lunch because he spent his mornings at home taking online courses through the Florida Virtual School.
- There was a knuckleball pitcher who was taking a "dual enrollment" English class being taught at Leon by a community college professor.
- There was a highly motivated scholar-athlete who was teaching himself chemistry at home (using a borrowed textbook) so that he could go straight into AP chemistry the next year.
- And there was a left-handed pro prospect who was taking a financial management class at the local community college (in case he got a big signing bonus straight out of high school).

The kid who became Richard's best friend had the best story of all. This kid had figured out an ingenious

way to get a music education that few families would be able to afford out-of-pocket. He took four or five music classes at Leon by day and then took one or two required classes online "after school" when many "privileged" kids were taking music lessons from private tutors. He ended up being an all-state musician four years straight—and received college scholarship offers from Julliard, the New England Conservatory of Music, and several other renowned conservatories.

When I first encountered all of these hybrid students on Richard's baseball team, I figured there must be something in the water at Leon High. But the more I talked to others, the more I realized that what I was witnessing wasn't really that unique to Leon High or even to Tallahassee. It was part of a much larger—and much more important—statewide educational phenomenon.

A Monumental Revolution

As many people know, soon after Jeb Bush became Florida's governor in 1999, he began instituting a number of sweeping educational reforms. Florida started measuring student progress on standardized tests annually, giving public schools annual grades based on objective criteria, offering students greater choices about the schools they attended, and providing online classes through the Florida Virtual School.

Each of these reforms was very important in its own right; but all of them, in combination, made "hybrid schooling" an almost inevitable outgrowth. In fact, hybrid schooling has become so common among my son's peers in Florida that no one considers it odd or strange for students to divide their instructional day between courses offered by their base school and courses offered by

some other provider. This model has profound implications for education reformers going forward.

THE MORE WE MOVE AWAY FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SCHOOLING, THE EASIER IT WILL BE TO BUILD A CRITICAL MASS OF PARENTS INTERESTED IN MAJOR EDUCATION REFORM.

I am convinced that we are on the cusp of a monumental revolution in American education—a revolution in which many of our most important allies will be middle-class public school parents like my new friends and neighbors in Florida. These people are not renegades. They are not revolutionaries. They are just ordinary parents who want the best for their children, and the more they move away from one-size-fits-all schooling, the easier it will be to build a critical mass of parents interested in major education reform.

Interestingly, even though you or I might consider the rise of hybrid schooling an important alternative to the public school monopoly, most hybrid students and their parents perceive that they are being true to their local public school, and for good reason. You see, one of the most fascinating—and most heartening—things that we’ve found in Florida is that many of the most vocal advocates for hybrid schooling are people within the public school system.

- They include coaches who encourage their players to take online classes during the off-season so that they won’t be overloaded during the sports season.
- They include fine arts teachers who encourage their students to

take an online class or two so that they’ll have room in their daily schedule for an art class or music elective.

- And they include principals and other administrators who, in the face of budget cuts, often funnel students to online classes and other alternatives to meet the demand for courses that their schools can no longer afford to offer in the traditional classroom.

The Promise of Online Learning

Even a non-techie like me can find merit in online learning’s promise to help transform education. That’s because digital education is what Michael Horn of the Innosight Institute has called a “disruptive innovation.” Online learning challenges almost all of the prevailing assumptions about how schooling should be structured.

- It permits students to learn any time of day, during any time of year, from any location that has Internet access.
- It allows students to work at their own pace, advancing from one level to the next when they have achieved mastery of a subject matter rather than after completing 180 days of seat time in the classroom.
- It permits students to learn from teachers who may live across town or in a remote part of the state or halfway around the globe.
- And it permits learners to benefit from market competition, since all that is required for one to “switch schools” or to “change classes” is a click of the mouse.

As online learning becomes more and more commonplace, the quality and creativity of online classes is bound to rise. Indeed, we are already seeing evidence of this in our state: The Florida Virtual School recently introduced a U.S. history course that is taught in a video game format. The course reminds me of a geography game my kids used to play all the time on our home computer called “Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?” and its promise for capturing the imagination of many disaffected students—particularly boys—is, I think, extraordinary.

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Online learning is not a panacea. It’s not a magic bullet. But the logic behind complementing courses taken at a base school with courses taught by an outside provider makes too much sense for too many students for the digital revolution in education to be reversed. And as more and more students start hybrid schooling, the underlying assumptions behind the way we structure education in our society will shift increasingly over time to reflect digital’s anytime, anywhere, any pace nature.

This obviously bodes well for students whose needs, gifts, interests, and learning styles do not line up well with the factory school model of education today. But customized education is good for *all* kids—and not just for academic reasons. In fact, I would argue that the social benefits of hybrid schooling are apt to be at least as great as the academic benefits.

Social Benefits of Hybrid Schooling

Nearly two years ago, Richard entered a local talent competition that was structured kind of like *American Idol*. Different singers would perform each week at these big community festivals, and then people would vote for the ones they considered best. Richard kept advancing week after week until finally, on the night of the finals, one of the organizers took me aside and said, “I don’t get it. You guys just moved here a year or so ago, and yet Richard seems to have a really broad base of support.”

While I knew that Richard had not assembled such a diverse network for the purposes of winning some silly talent competition, I also knew that his diverse network was a natural outgrowth of his hybrid-schooling life. For in the traditional one-size-fits-all public school, one narrow identity—one social clique—is sometimes all anyone ever gets, and oftentimes, this identity—this label—is thrust upon someone whether he likes it or not.

I am not so naïve as to think that hybrid schooling will completely eradicate the social-clique ranking system found at many high schools or that it will do away with all school bullying, but customized schooling can make it easier for kids to develop healthier identities. Hybrid learning has the potential to offer kids a far richer and more varied social upbringing than they might otherwise get. Customized schooling can help students gain a greater appreciation for people who are very different from themselves in a way that most all-day school cultures do not.

For example, when Richard was just a grade schooler, he and his older sister got involved in a theater troupe that was composed of a bunch

of families who homeschooled their kids in the mornings and then joined together in the afternoon to practice for plays that they put on at a local dinner theater. The business manager of this theater troupe was a regimented, churchgoing military wife who was so strict that she required her kids to wear school uniforms—at their home school! Meanwhile, the artistic director of this enterprise was an extremely creative, chain-smoking neo-hippie.

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You could not have asked for two people more different in the entire universe to lead such an enterprise. But these two women had a profound respect for each other’s gifts, and between the two of them, they somehow managed to put on some extraordinary children’s theater productions.

Being associated with that theater troupe helped me better understand the great promise of hybrid schooling. No one had to subject their kids to any one style of education for the entire day, and the fact that this was just a limited, part-day collaborative enterprise meant that the kids involved could benefit greatly from being a part of a terrific children’s theater company without suffering from overexposure to ideas, beliefs,

and lifestyles that their families considered alien.

Now, call me crazy, but I don’t think most of my “mainstream” friends are really that different from the quirky families that made up that children’s theater troupe—at least in this respect: Most parents, I believe, simultaneously want two things. They want to protect their kids from being immersed in a school culture that is at odds with their family culture or philosophical world view; yet, at the same time, most people want their kids to be sufficiently exposed to people who are different from them that their kids will be well prepared for success and influence in the real world. In Christian circles, we sometimes refer to this paradox as “being *in* the world but not *of* the world.”

Yet, regrettably, one-size-fits-all schools have a very, very difficult time facilitating this very delicate balancing act. This is why many families I know pull their kids out of public schools that have too much diversity, only to then lament the fact that their private schools have too much homogeneity.

Customized Learning for All Children

The good news is that hybrid schooling can offer us a way out of these counterproductive cul-de-sacs, allowing us to customize the learning opportunities for all children so that they can get a well-balanced social and academic upbringing tailored to their unique needs, interests, talents, learning styles, stages of development, and personalities.

Jeb Bush and other Florida reformers had the Hank Greenberg-like chutzpah to initiate the changes that they did 12 years ago, and these changes helped my son to have an unusually rich high school

experience. Hopefully, in the years to come, more and more students throughout the country will get to enjoy the academic benefits of taking all sorts of imaginative online courses, the social benefits of rubbing shoulders with everything from neo-hippies to uniform-wearing homeschoolers, and the physical benefits of playing on baseball teams for schools they don't even attend full time.

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