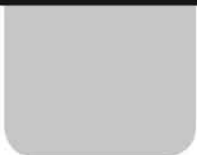


HANDBOOK on

CHOOSING your



FOCUS ON THE FAMILY[®]



child's EDUCATION

A Personalized Plan for Every Age and Stage



General Editor

Maria Hernandez Ferrier, Ed.D.



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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Handbook on Choosing Your Child's Education

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Foreword

A new day is dawning on education in America. With the stroke of a pen our 43rd President established the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the federal education law of the land, and gave you, your child's first teacher, viable options when answering the important question: *Where will my child go to school?* While our public schools still have a long way to go before fulfilling the promise of NCLB, children no longer need be trapped in failing schools and parents have rights as never before. This is a revolutionary time in education. States, school districts, and individual schools are accountable to parents and communities for the academic success of the students they serve. Parents are being educated and empowered to ask the important questions, and schools must give prompt and honest answers.

The *Handbook on Choosing Your Child's Education* will help you find what you need to make informed decisions about schooling for your child, the force that will be shaping your child's life today and in the future. You will learn about public schools, charter schools, private schools, and homeschools. This education handbook was written by seasoned teachers and authors; their experiences and advice will

excite you and give a sense that you are not alone in your quest to provide your child with the best possible education.

Today many parents are not only concerned with the academic success of their children but with their spiritual development and well-being as well. And for good reason. There is a loud and visible attack on anything regarding education that includes the Christian faith and its role in education and in the establishing of our nation. Parents who do not know the U.S. constitution, the law, or their rights believe that they are helpless. But they are not!

It was our 26th president, Theodore Roosevelt, who said, “To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” President Roosevelt died in 1919 but those words resonate with us even more loudly today. The erosion of the philosophy of education, as envisioned by our founding fathers, is evident when comparing Webster’s 1828 definition of education to today’s definition in *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*. The 1828 definition states, “to give children a good education in manners, arts, and science is important; to give them a religious education is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect these duties.” The *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines education as “the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life.” The latter ignores the foundation upon which sound reasoning and judgment must be made if we are to remain a strong democracy.

If schools can’t do it right, you, your child’s most important and

influential teacher, can. You can ensure that your faith and values are fostered and imprinted indelibly on your child's character. Those values will guide and direct your child from childhood through adulthood. No one is better equipped to do this than you. This book will help you in this quest.

In October 2006, President Bush said that we must improve options for parents. Yes, we must, because every morning in all 50 states, hundreds of thousands of parents unaware of their rights or without financial resources to send their children elsewhere, drop off their children at the schoolhouse door simply hoping and praying for the best.

The goal of this book is that you do not find yourself in the same dilemma as those parents. Whatever your life circumstances, you can powerfully and positively impact your child's academic, emotional, and spiritual growth.

Take the information within this book and put it to work for you. Share it with other parents. Our children need parents as advocates, and you are the most important advocate your child has.

Your child will not be left behind. Your child has you!

—Maria Hernandez Ferrier, Ed.D.

PART

1

It's a New Day in Education

CHAPTER

1

A New Day

by Marc Fey

*Parents have become so convinced that educators
know what is best for their children that they forget
that they themselves are really the experts.*

—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

*Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*

—PSALM 34:11

Every school day some 56 million U.S. children attend school—one their parents chose for them.¹ The educational choices facing parents today are numerous, including private Christian schools, public schools, charter schools, homeschools, and magnet schools. And that initial school choice doesn't reflect the options buried within each system, such as whether your child should participate in sports programs, after-school enrichment programs, or honors courses.

Additionally, the educational controversies facing parents today are staggering. Each day the media present news stories about the debate between evolution and intelligent design, disagreement over the “best” school models, or conflicting solutions for declining reading and math scores. Class size, funding, and English language development are additional sources of controversy.

But none of these challenges are as formidable as the one simple question facing every parent: *What is the right education choice for my child?* This book is about giving you the keys to solve the educational challenges that come your way—for the sake of your child and for your family.

My Family's Education Journey

Right now, my wife and I are satisfied with our family's education. Our three children (two sons and a daughter) attend The Classical Academy, a public charter school. Founded about 10 years ago by a group of visionary parents, the school emphasizes character development and classical education. Our sons have completed five years in

the school, and generally speaking, we're happy with our children's education.

But it has certainly been an arduous journey up to this point. The road led through three years of private Christian schooling, a year of homeschooling, and a year at a neighborhood public school. Over the past nine years, my wife and I have made decisions based on finances (we couldn't afford private school tuition), options (charter versus neighborhood school), time (homeschooling versus traditional schooling), and values (spiritual training at home versus spiritual training at school).

Scriptures on Teaching Your Children

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children." (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 11:18-20)

Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

Perhaps you have had the same experience that my wife and I have had in making decisions about our children's education. Almost every year we find ourselves reevaluating where they are, what the kids are learning, and the options available to us. This year is especially transitional—our oldest is a high school freshman, our second child is entering middle school as a seventh grader, and our youngest is a kindergartener. So, you could say we have all the transitions covered!

In addition to my perspective on education choices, I bring 10 years of teaching high school English in California public schools, a year of teaching numerous subjects at a Christian school, and about 10 years of teaching college essay writing part-time in various settings. As a high school teacher, I coached football, baseball, and basketball, advised the yearbook staff, served as a California district mentor teacher, and worked as an English department chairperson for four years. After seven years as a pastor, I served as an education policy analyst at Focus on the Family, researching, commenting, and writing on the topic of education as it affects families around America.

So, my viewpoint is informed by beliefs developed through exposure to a variety of family and education settings and experiences. In addition, my wife and I have a tutoring business to help young people develop stronger cognitive skills. Providing families with coaching resources to help parents make decisions about their children's education, we have come to appreciate this fact: There is no single solution that applies to all families. In fact, you can say that there is a specific and unique solution for every child.

Even with my experience in the education field, I find that I still have, at times, an uncertain feeling deep down that makes me think

my wife and I might not be doing all we could, or should, for our kids' education. That, of course, is the flip side to having options—*with more choices, we face more complexity.*

Each Family Has a Choice

Perhaps one of these scenarios illustrates your family's path:

Jeana, a single mother, knew her son Jared, a sophomore, was not keeping up in high school. Ever since kindergarten he'd struggled with reading. But she didn't see many options for change. The public school was the only financially viable choice for him, but the remedial help Jared had received for years through the district wasn't solving his reading problem. She tried private tutors, but they were too expensive to use on a daily basis. Jeana finally found a tutoring service that would train her to work with Jared. After several months of working with him daily, Jeana finally began to see dramatic improvement in Jared's reading comprehension. She now has hope that he will be able to succeed in college.



The Knudsons were having a hard time communicating with their son's first-grade teacher, who was suggesting that squirrely Mitchell should repeat first grade. After Mitchell was tested and observed by an objective education consultant, the Knudsons decided that the last thing Mitchell needed was to repeat a grade that he was already bored with.



Jack and Kathryn Salas took the plunge to homeschool their four kids, ages 5 to 14. The decision was difficult since no one in their extended family had ever homeschooled their children, so they did their best to overcome many of the misconceptions that came up in conversations with their extended family. A year later, they were exhausted but very satisfied with their renewed relationships with their four children and the academic progress they'd seen in their children's lives. This coming fall they are planning an educational vacation to Washington, D.C.

As the scenarios above illustrate, the education dilemmas and options facing families are numerous, and no one solution will fit every family. Parents have to evaluate their child's educational needs, evaluate their long-term goals, determine which sacrifices they can make, and take the best option available in their community.

Those decisions aren't easy to make, and often the process produces a fair amount of emotional unrest. I know from my conversations with parents, children, and educators around the country that a lot of moms and dads share this uncertainty and indecisiveness. It isn't that the parents are struggling with vague emotional unrest; there are some valid reasons for these feelings of anxiety.

Real Concerns

Marilyn, whose son attends a Catholic high school in Northern California, described her challenge this way: "I send him to school, but I

feel like I am sending him into a whole other world where I don't know what is happening. If I thought it was just about what his teachers were giving him, I could handle it. But it seems his life with his friends takes up as much or more of his day than schoolwork. I sure miss the simple days of elementary school." Marilyn's experience describes many parents' experience—they feel as though they are on the outside of the education experience.

Education research today tells us that there is cause for concern. In *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, researcher Laurence Steinberg summarizes the problems in our schools by noting that a large percentage of both students and parents is disengaged from the educational process. We will look at this more closely in the following chapters, but for now, this key idea of *engagement* will serve as a foundation for our approach.²

In March 2002, Dr. James Dobson, founder and chairman of the board of Focus on the Family, uttered words he thought he would never say. Addressing some disturbing developments in public schools on a national radio broadcast, Dr. Dobson said, "In the state of California, if I had a child there, I wouldn't put that youngster into public schools."

The comments certainly riled the education "powers that be" and created discussion from different perspectives in the debate over education.

What was lost on most of the people weighing in on the debate was this simple fact: We all agree that something drastic needs to be done to overhaul our education system. In fact, there are few things

that Republicans and Democrats agree on; one of them is the need to address the frighteningly low achievement scores of American students. Everyone is reaching for answers.

It's not that we haven't spent the money. Spending since 1920 has gone from \$440 per student on average (in constant 2001 school dollars) to \$8,194.³ That's over \$500 billion, and 46 percent of the total federal spending budget. For this increasing investment of dollars, only 31 percent of 4th graders score "proficient" in reading. Though Americans spend more than any nation on education, our 12th graders rank 18th out of 21 countries (in the most recent comparisons) in combined math and science literacy scores.

For many parents, however, the most important factor in American public schools is the issue of safety. The availability of drugs and alcohol and the intense culture of peer pressure present far more threatening challenges than poor academics. This crisis of safety is described in surveys that show almost half of American high school students (47 percent) felt their schools were becoming more violent, and one in five were afraid to go to the bathroom.⁴ As parents, we want to know our kids are safe—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And in the education setting, a child cannot learn until he or she feels safe and secure.

These challenges in our education system are a reflection of our culture, and we find them at every turn. So, our task here is to evaluate the critical information we need to make the best decisions for our children and family, with our eyes wide open about the challenges around us, while also not fearing or dreading the decision-making process.

So, this education guide is about the following practical actions:

- Collecting the information you need to make an informed and wise choice
- Making decisions based on the circumstances and seasons of your family life—whether you have just moved to a new neighborhood, for example, or you’ve learned your child has special learning needs or challenges
- Evaluating the education your child is receiving and helping you to decide if it is working or not, based on the criteria that you choose

Your Journey on the Road to Education Decisions

All of this brings to mind one backpacking trip I went on with a friend in college. We were in a wilderness area of the Sierra Nevada mountains, trying to find the trailhead at the beginning of a five-day trip. For some reason, we couldn’t find it. Sure, we had our topographical map, but truth be told, we had never had to actually use a topo map in all the trips we had taken before.

But this trip was an exception. After the first half day of walking in what felt like a huge circle, we finally admitted that we were completely off trail. By midday, we were exhausted, disheartened, and most importantly, still not sure where we were.

So, what did my friend and I do? As we sat down to regather ourselves, we pulled out the crisp, unused topographical map, and laid the compass over the map. Next, trying to recall the lessons I had been taught about how to use a topo map, I looked for and found a

peak that I recognized. With the map, the compass, and the recognition of a couple of key landmarks, we finally started to understand where we were. And at that, we could get on with the journey.

Knowing where we are and finding our way over today's education landscape is a lot like my backpacking experience. We start out with the best intentions, head in the right direction, but the trail gets confusing and complicated, and then we realize we're not where we thought we would be. During the course of the book, consider us your traveling partner over the often unfamiliar ground of your child's education.

We won't tell you the "right answer" because only you can determine what that is, but we will help you make decisions based on your God-given authority as a parent, your right to determine what is best for your child, and your vision of your child's growth and development—so that your child becomes all that God intends for him or her to be. So, I propose that over the next 11 chapters, you use this guide as a map to navigate through unfamiliar territory—right into the center of the best education choice for your child.

The Take-Charge Parent

Since the 1960s, parents have been taught a dangerous subliminal message: *Just put your kids on the big yellow school bus, and we'll take care of their education from there.* No one says this out loud, of course. But if you look closely, the message is there in most of the education groups, including the National Education Association (NEA), Ameri-

can Federation of Teachers (AFT), American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and education colleges across the country.

What does this mean practically for you and me? It is our job to take full control of our children's education by making decisions that are in the best interest of our children and family. To do that effectively, we must become parents who take charge of every aspect of our child's education, eventually becoming the expert in what is best for our children.

To become a *take-charge parent*, it is important to understand that the Bible presents at least five principles about our responsibility to shape and form our children's lives through biblical education. In fact, these five premises serve as an underpinning for a philosophy of education that has framed our work at Focus on the Family. Here are those foundational premises.

God, the Creator, is Lord over *all* of creation. God rejoices in what He has created. His desire is for the restoration of creation from the consequences of sin in the world.

God loves the brilliance of diversity and the blessing of unity. As a result, He is actively pursuing the reconciliation of all things to Himself.

God loves to see change and growth. In creation around us as well as in our lives, God has designed life for growth, through specific times and seasons.

God loves us and relates to us as a Father to His child. In that context, He desires for us to grow, to mature, and ultimately to take our place in His larger story of creation.

God seeks for us to grow in wisdom. Since it is His great desire to share His kingdom with us, God desires for us to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

Below you will find three pillars of the philosophy of education that drives Focus on the Family's activity in this area. I encourage you to read what is presented here and then tailor it to your own family and calling. Use this as a jumping-off point for your own beliefs and convictions.



EDUCATION PRINCIPLE 1:

Education of the individual is foundational for developing humanity toward its fullest potential.

How do I apply this education principle in a practical way? Let's take a look at the book of Genesis for some answers. In the Garden of Eden, God *instructed* Adam with specific directions about tending the garden, and later, in his relationship with Eve. Interestingly, God's initiative to teach Adam about his relationship to life shows His care and love for Adam. With those instructions come increased responsibility (naming the animals, living beside the temptation of the two trees) and blessing (the provision of the garden and the intimacy of relationship with God and Eve).

Parents who are serious about this first principle make great sacrifices in order to educate their children. A biblical education starts with a commitment on the part of the parents to answer the call of God to impart life principles to their children.

At Focus on the Family, we hold to a “high view of education,” which we share with moms and dads who have answered that call. Interestingly, research tells us that educational success occurs when all involved in the education process “value consistency, communities, and social capital.” These are researcher terms for *trust*. Effective families build trust between family members through meaningful, ongoing interaction. Thus, when we develop the individual to his or her potential, by extension we develop society.



EDUCATION PRINCIPLE 2:

At its foundation, education consists of equipping the child’s mind and shaping the child’s character, which together result in developing the architecture of the soul.

Let’s examine the Garden of Eden story again. Adam was held responsible for the instructions that God had given him. In other words, there was a clear, causal relationship between God’s words and Adam’s actions. Why? Because God knew that the very personhood of Adam was at stake—what Adam did came directly from what he believed about who God was and who he was.

I am reminded that God’s trust in us comes from His desire to have men and women who worship Him freely. With that freedom comes the potential for relationship with God, illustrating the kind of interdependence we see among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Moms and dads who understand this principle link educational

outcomes to a realistic definition of progress and achievement. Achievement occurs in the meaningful context of relationship with others, especially with mom and dad. The watchword of the day in education is *accountability* (testing, school choice, standards, etc.). For effective parents, the formation of their child's mind and character is worked out every day, each lesson interwoven with the formation of what the child thinks and how the child acts—mind and character. Parents are singularly situated and called to provide this kind of accountability; *it is not just who the child is but also who the child is becoming.*

Developing Your List of Priorities and Non-negotiables

Since "education choice" is available today in most communities, it is important for you to be clear about your education priorities and steadfast non-negotiables—in other words, those values and education components that are necessary for you to make the right choices.

Also, it is important to remember that your non-negotiables may change over your child's school life, since the needs of a high school student are different from the needs of an elementary student. Finally, please keep in mind that rarely, if ever, will you be able to guarantee that all of your priorities are present in your education choice. All the more reason to remember that as the primary educator in your child's life, you will be providing in other ways what isn't available in the education setting you choose.

Examples of priorities and non-negotiables:

- My child needs a safe school where bullying is not tolerated.
- We want a school where drug and alcohol use is not a problem.

**EDUCATION PRINCIPLE 3:**

Finally, and most important, Focus on the Family believes that the most important educators in a child's life are his or her parents.

I notice in the chapters of Genesis following Adam and Eve's fall that they are absent in the lives of their children. The alienation that Adam experienced between himself and God is the heritage of all families today. The consummate challenge in educating our children is to break through the distance and isolation that can occur

- My child needs a character-based education.
- I am willing to do anything for my child to have a Christian education.
- I want control over the information my child receives about evolution.
- I want diverse student activities (band, sports) available to my child.
- My child needs academic rigor in high school (ranking, availability of advanced placement courses, etc.).
- My child needs remediation resources, tools that will help me shore up weaker areas in his education.
- Without top-notch special education resources, my child probably won't succeed.
- Since I work two jobs, the location of school and transportation concerns are key to me.
- We want a school where I can know the parents of my child's friends.
- I am most concerned about the cost of my child's education.

in human relationships, and in particular, families.

When the parents see themselves as the primary educators in their children's lives, a relationship is built that has to "work."

I know that in my own teaching experience in schools, I can tell when what I am doing day-to-day is working or is not working. Parents who see their daily role as educator spend the time working with their children to develop their minds and character.

In a large part, the rest of this education guide is all about helping you step into that role as the primary teacher in your child's life, whether you decide to homeschool or place your child in a traditional classroom setting, public or private, Christian or secular.

As we tackle this challenge to *engage* our children and their education, we will specifically discuss:

- How to communicate specific messages to your children—both intentionally and indirectly—about school and about learning, so that your children come to understand the importance and value of school
- How to look at and modify your own behavior as a parent in order to positively influence your child's view of education, thus serving as the most important role model in your child's life
- How to develop an atmosphere in the home environment through your parenting style that supports and enhances your child's success at school
- How to make sure your intentions truly match your actions over the long haul of your children's education

So let's get out the map and begin the journey. It's a long one, and we have no time to waste!

Notes

Chapter 1: A New Day

1. ED.Gov, U.S. Department of Education, *A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind*, http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/guide/guide_pg6.html#fnref11; National Center for Education Statistics, *1.1 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2003*, <http://nces.ed.gov/nhes/homeschool/>; CAPE, Council for American Private Education, *Private School Statistics at a Glance*, <http://www.capenet.org/facts.html>
2. Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 14.
3. *Digest of Education Statistics 2001*, February 2002, National Center for Education Statistics.
4. *Violence in American Schools*, 1998, reprint 2003. Cambridge University Press, Press Syndicate of University of Cambridge, Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, UK.

About the Authors

Maria Hernandez Ferrier, General Editor

For three decades Maria Hernandez Ferrier, Ed.D. has been an education leader at the community, state, and national levels. From 2002-2005 she worked for the U.S. Department of Education, being promoted to the position of Assistant Deputy Secretary.

In the fall of 2002, Dr. Ferrier began the now annual “Celebrating Our Rising Stars,” a national summit for educators, parents, and community leaders interested in English language learners and their families. Dr. Ferrier was appointed as the co-chair of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), National Leadership Team, a group of college and university presidents representing Hispanic-serving institutions and several senior level managers. Maria also initiated the formation of the department’s faith-based Hispanic task force. The mission of the task force was to reach and apprise parents of English language learners of their rights and opportunities under the new educational federal law.

Dr. Ferrier’s accomplishments include the creation, development, and/or implementation of highly successful programs, among them the first elementary chapter of Students Against Drunk Driving in

the U.S. Many of these programs have served as models and have been replicated in schools in Texas as well as in other states. She currently serves as an executive director for the Southwest (San Antonio) Independent School District.



Marc Fey is the director of Community Impact Outreach at Focus on the Family, overseeing the groundbreaking Christian worldview program, *Focus on the Family's The Truth Project*. He has also served as Focus's education analyst, where his 10 years of experience as a high school English teacher in California public schools informed his commentary on education issues and the family. Marc's experience as a pastor, teacher, and Focus on the Family director shapes his work with leaders, families, and young people. Most of all, he enjoys time with his wife; two sons, ages 13 and 15; and daughter, age 6.



Cheri Fuller is an international speaker and author of over 30 books, including *Raising Motivated Kids*, *The Mom You're Meant to Be*, and *School Starts at Home*. Cheri has taught at every level from elementary school to college. A former Oklahoma Mother of the Year, she has appeared on national TV and radio programs and is a popular conference speaker. She and her husband live in Oklahoma, and have three married children and six grandchildren. Her Web site, www.cherifuller.com, contains many resources for moms, dads, teachers, and churches.



Charles W. Johnson graduated from Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, with a B.A. in English and history. He also earned an M.A. in Pupil Personnel Services from Point Loma University. During an 18-year career in education, Chuck Johnson was a teacher, counselor, and assistant principal of curriculum at San Marino High School in the Los Angeles area and the principal of Huntington (Middle) School in the same district. In 1992, Chuck joined the staff of Focus on the Family and became the founding editor of *Teachers in Focus*. After five years in that position, he became the editorial director for the Focus periodicals department that created 13 distinct and segmented publications (both magazines and newsletters). In 2004, he joined the staff at Covenant Village of Turlock (California) as associate administrator for residential living. He is also the president of the Evangelical Press Association, a national organization of Christian periodicals publishers. He has been married to his wife, Gwen, for nearly 30 years, and they have two grown children. Following their graduations from college, their son, Todd, worked as a teacher and a behavioral therapist and their daughter, Jenny, is teaching fifth graders in Southern California.



Jim Mhoon has dedicated his adult life to serving families. For over 16 years, he worked in several roles at Focus on the Family including that of program director for parenting ministries. Currently, he serves as vice president of marketing and communication for CRISTA

Ministries, an organization that, among other activities, runs private Christian schools in the greater Seattle area. Jim holds an M.B.A. in Business Administration and a B.A. in psychology. He is married with two children, including a son with multiple special needs.



Susan Martins Miller is the author of more than 40 books for children and adults. Her works include both fiction and nonfiction. She contributes on a regular basis to publications that are used in teaching children to know Jesus and grow to be like Him. These include children's sermons, creative Sunday school lessons, and resources for family ministry. Susan is a graduate of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, and holds an M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. In addition to writing, she has conducted workshops for writers and editors in Nepal, India, Slovakia, Colombia, and Bolivia. She lives in Colorado with her husband and children.