



Home Schools and Christian Schools Working Together: Why and How?

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Competition and Ministry

It's a great temptation in ministry to see other ministries as competitors. Churches compete for the potential church-goers in their town; mission boards compete for the most-well-qualified candidates; colleges compete for students, who pay the bills, and for faculty members, who attract the students.

In a limited sense, competition is healthy and good for everyone. As the free-enterprise system has demonstrated for centuries, businesses with competitors work harder to please their customers than monopolies do. As just one example, the break-up of "Ma Bell" in the 1980s led to an explosion of services and products that revolutionized the communications industry and lowered prices to consumers in the process. Customers who had been forced to purchase—or lease—from a selection of 2 or 3 aging models of telephones at inflated prices suddenly had scores of models to choose from, many of them given away in return for a use contract of a few months. When providers of products and services are motivated to work harder to attract, satisfy, and keep their customers, they become better companies—much more enjoyable to work for—and the customers benefit from improved choices.

But competition has a dark side. When companies begin to see competitors as enemies, they convince themselves that the world would be better off without the evil influence of The Enemy. They seek not just to outperform the competitor but, ironically, to eradicate it. They face the temptation to win "by any means necessary"—deception, fraud, espionage. If they succeed, the competitive situation disappears and with it goes all the benefits that it brings to the marketplace. No one, either the business or the customers, benefits from such an environment.

In the context of Christian ministry, the Dark Side of competition has a theological problem as well. God identifies all believers as His children (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14, 9:8; Gal. 3:25–26; Phil. 2:14–15; 1 John 3:1), siblings in a large and growing family who are assigned for a time to carry out the Father's wise and unified plan of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth (Mk. 16:15; Acts 1:8) and discipling those who respond (Matt. 28:19–20), thereby amassing the multitude from every tribe, tongue,

and nation that will unite in a glorious song of praise to the Lamb (Rev. 5:9, 7:9–10). In ministry, we seek to build, assist, and empower our fellow workers, not to destroy them. Love, Paul says, rejoices not in iniquity (1 Cor. 13:6).

So we find ourselves in a bit of an odd situation. We are one family of servants, working together in a single unified cause to the glory of God. That simple fact is our primary motivation; there is no higher good than the glory of God, and there is no more privileged task than being called to promote it.

But we do better when we compete.

Can we reap the benefits of free-market competition, for ourselves and for the larger body of Christ (our "customers," so to speak), while maintaining the unity of the body that is at the core of God's glorification (Eph. 3:1–11)?

This is not just an "ivory-tower" theoretical question. In the last few years, for economic, social, academic, and political reasons, the Christian-school movement has fallen on hard times.¹ Those who have been in that ministry for decades find themselves reminiscing fondly of the now-gone "glory days." The future of the traditional Christian-school movement is not guaranteed, and those ministering there need to work smarter, increasing the value of their product, while recognizing the overruling power and goodness of the will of God. In short, they need to steward their commission.

One way that many Christian schools have found to both improve their own service and demonstrate the unity of the body of Christ is to assist home educators by providing services at which the schools excel but which are difficult for home educators to provide or organize for themselves. What they are doing, in essence, is both stewarding their commission and assisting their brothers in the family of God. They are seeking to improve their

¹ See one teacher's observations at <http://biblemathpoliticsandmore.blogspot.com/2010/09/decline-of-christian-school-movement.html>; for a broader discussion of the phenomenon, see <http://sharperiron.org/forum/thread-christian-school-movement-trouble>. For a more academic discussion, see <http://centralseminary.edu/resources/nick-of-time/343-the-christian-school>.

“competition” for the benefit of everyone and the ultimate glory of God.

Benefits of Cooperation

Really? Everyone? Does this cooperation benefit the Christian school? and the home school? and the students in both schools? and the community at large?

Absolutely.

Benefits to the Christian School

The most obvious benefit to the Christian school is that it increases its enrollment, which in turn increases its cash flow. Ministry is not primarily about cash flow, of course, but it is about stewardship; and without cash flow, there is no ministry—or at least none of the kind we’re discussing here. Dead teachers are generally ineffective; they have to eat, and they can’t work for free.

Home educators have demonstrated their deep commitment to the education of their children. That commitment drives them to make sacrifices to give their children the education that they view as in their best interest. They come from all economic strata, but they will pay for services that they believe to be important and that they cannot reasonably provide for themselves. They will retain authority over their child’s education, and they do not wish for them to be full-time students in traditional schools; but they will choose from an offered buffet of services, those that they value. Is it better for the Christian school financially to have 200 full-time students or 200 full-time students plus 30 part-time? The question answers itself.

Individual teachers in the Christian school may benefit financially as well, by teaching modular courses specifically designed for home-school students and thereby earning some supplementary income.

The Christian school benefits more than financially. Any increase in the diversity of its student body works to the benefit of the educational service provided. Many home-schooled students are not in Christian schools because they have chosen not to be for philosophical rather than financial reasons. By definition, then, those families exhibit a different way of thinking, from which the school faculty and students can benefit.

The school also benefits from the improvement of any programs in which the home-schooled students are participating. If they’re playing in the band, for example, then the band has a larger population, which in turn means that more instruments are included or perhaps that the band director can be more selective in choosing who will play in a given position. The caliber of the soloists will rise as there are more to choose from. And the sound of the band will typically improve as its numbers increase. Similarly, increasing the quality of competition in athletic programs benefits the participants both athletically and in character as well as improves the testimony of the programs in the community.

Benefits to the Home School

The greatest benefit to the home school is the diversity of the programs it can offer. It’s true that many home educators form local cooperatives to diversify their offerings; the co-op may field an athletic team to compete with local schools, or a parent with expertise in physics may teach children from several families for a few hours a week. But it’s common for even large co-ops to find that they cannot offer some option that they would like to. The Christian school’s greatest asset, humanly speaking, is its faculty; ideally, it has experienced teachers in every academic field. When the co-op identifies a need, the school can meet it by incorporating home-schooled students into classes in that field.

If the programs the school offers to the home-schooled students are certified or accredited in some way, that recognition can be communicated to the home-schooled student under certain circumstances.

The home school also benefits from the contact the students have with a broader group.² They can get practice working as a member of a team, interacting with a wider variety of students, and strengthening their ability to discuss issues confidently and graciously with those with whom they disagree.

One word to the Christian school administrator. One very common reason that home educators choose not to place their children in an available

² It should be noted that the most common objection to home schooling, lack of socialization, has been thoroughly debunked; it’s most often an objection raised by the uninformed. But while the movement is not particularly lacking in that area, all students can benefit from interaction with a wide variety of people.

Christian school is that they sense that the students in the Christian school, who are allegedly regenerate, are as worldly as the unregenerate students in the public schools. If the perception is true, then there is a problem with the spiritual formation program in the school, and a great many home educators are not going to be attracted by any programs it offers. They will consistently view the potential for spiritual damage as outweighing any potential benefit from a more diverse set of offerings.

Benefits to the Community

There are also benefits to the larger community, including those not involved with either the Christian school or the home schools. To the extent that the Christian school and the home schools thrive, they raise the educational and economic vitality of the community. That in turn makes the community more attractive to move-ins, thereby raising the tax base and the overall prosperity of the community.

As musical programs in the Christian school thrive, the community benefits from a wider diversity of cultural events; and as the students graduate, many of them taking their place in the community as adult citizens, the cultural excellence of the community's cultural offerings is improved. Similarly, as the quality of athletic competition at the Christian school rises, all the community schools with which it competes benefit.

And of course, the result of all this is a better overall educational program in the community, which is a key element in the community's larger life and vitality. If the school's academic program progresses to the point that it far outshines the local competition, the other schools—or at least the private ones—will be forced to improve their programs to remain financially viable.

Examples of Cooperation

So what are some services that the Christian school can offer to local home schools? Many schools have found good success with the following types of programs:

- Academic supplementation
 - Specific courses for which the parents or co-op lack the expertise. Most often these will be in secondary-level science, math, or foreign language, or AP offerings. But many other possibilities will present themselves, depending on the expertise of the Christian school faculty;

for example, a science teacher could lead elementary students on nature walks, or an art teacher could present a modular course (perhaps meeting on Saturdays) on a specific artistic technique or concept. Some classes could be specifically designed for homeschooled students.

- Parts of courses for which the homeschool lacks the facilities or equipment. Science labs are the most common example.
- Tutoring to meet specific academic needs
- Physical education
- Field trips
- Library access
- Standardized testing³
- Guidance counseling
- Extracurriculars
 - Musical groups, such as band or orchestra
 - Athletic teams engaged in competition or even simple access to the gym, fields, or pool
 - Other interscholastic competitions (forensics, spelling bees, Bible quiz, etc.)
 - Dramatic productions or access to the stage facility
 - Yearbook staff
 - Clubs
 - Community service activities
 - Mission trips/retreats
- Services to the Parent/Teacher
 - Consultation on educational issues, including special needs
 - Academic record keeping
 - Access to the school's teacher in-service
 - Textbook review, rental, or purchase. Since most Christian textbook publishers offer competitive rates to home educators,⁴ the school will find its best opportunity in the sale of used texts.

In order to simplify organization and pricing, some schools offer an “umbrella” package for a set annual

³ BJUPress offers this service as well: <http://www.bjupress.com/testing/>.

⁴ See, for example, <http://www.bjupresshomeschool.com/>.

fee that includes metered access to various combinations of these services.⁵

Such cooperative efforts, well planned, well communicated, and well executed, can unify the body of Christ and improve the efforts of Christian servants to carry out the Great Commission in both evangelism and discipleship. Those who do it well will find that the greatest benefits, in the end, are spiritual.

⁵BJUPress offers such a program in its Academy of Home Education: <http://www.bjupresshomeschool.com/content/ahe-academy-home-education>.

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