

## INTRODUCTION

In fall 2016, I was a stay-at-home mom to two preschool children and had a baby on the way. A year later, a friend and I opened a little experimental program with two teachers and 20 kids. The parents of these kids were legally homeschooling, but the kids attended our “school” two days a week for six hours each. We had an emphasis on outdoor play, core academics, and excellent books.

Six years later, our little experiment had become a full-blown business and was serving 145 kids with dozens on the waitlist, as well as employing 18 people in part-time positions, including both of us.

We run a school that isn’t actually a school, and it does things private, public, and homeschooled don’t manage on their own. We call it a “hybrid school.”

We had never heard of one in 2016. In fact, for a minute we thought we had invented the idea. It turns out we didn’t since there were a few others in the country in 2017. But there were not that many and none in our area.

A hybrid school is a mix of private and homeschooling. It is quite literally a little of both, with two or three days spent at school and two or three spent at home. Children experience both the customized one-on-one of homeschool and the community and expertise of private school. Ours is a nonprofit, but programs can be private businesses or legally registered schools.

I was just a mom, but I was also someone who’d had a strong interest in educational systems and opinions on what education should be for most of my life. I had never started a business before; never hired anyone, never filed paperwork with the state, never managed a business bank account, never purchased business insurances. I could go on, but the point is, it was a grassroots initiative that ended up filling a need for scores of families.

If you are reading this, you are likely searching for a similar solution. You might be a parent just starting to think about schooling for your preschooler or toddler. Maybe you are a teacher with years of experience, discouraged with what schooling has become. Maybe you are a young teacher full of ideas and looking for somewhere to apply them. Maybe you are a homeschooler

but find it to be a poor fit for you or your kids (I hear you!). Maybe you have kids in a private or public school but are unhappy with some aspect of it.

My story is just one story, but I tell it in hopes you see yourself in some part of it and are perhaps inspired to build or collaborate or support a hybrid school in your area.

My hope is that my little history of one everyday parent and one grassroots program will help inspire others to follow the road less traveled and bring their own stories to a new kind of schooling in their communities.

## EDUCATED

I was a child with varied educational experiences. Tiny Christian schools (three of them in two states by sixth grade), a brief stint in public school, and a correspondence homeschool in high school were all in my repertoire by the time I was 16. I was a natural lover of learning, so I had no trouble learning and loving it despite the varied delivery methods I had experienced.

The same could not be said for my social life, but that is a story I will revisit later.

Homeschooling used to get a bad rap for the “what about socialization?” question, and sometimes it still does. The answer isn’t always as easy for every kid or family as either critics or supporters of homeschooling want it to be. My experience as a shy and anxious kid who was homeschooled for a while had a major impact on how I viewed schooling and development when I became a mom.

I was always interested in educational systems, maybe because of my school history. As a teen, I recall writing an essay for a scholarship about a school I wanted to start one day where the love of learning would be nurtured. I don’t recall the details, but I’m pretty sure it looked a lot like Plumfield in Louisa May Alcott’s classic *Little Men*. Even at 17, I remember wishing others loved history, math, and literature as much as I did.

### *Community College*

I didn’t get that scholarship, but I did get the one and only presidential scholarship to my local community college. That might not sound impressive, but it was a big deal for a girl from a working-class family who knew next to nothing about college preparation academically or financially. To make it worse, I had done correspondence school in high school and thus had no support from a guidance counselor or actual teacher.

Nobody in my family had ever gone to college before, and my mom was determined my brothers and I would attend, one way or the other. Going away to college was never even on the radar, though, because I had no idea how I was going to pay tuition, much less room and board. I think I visited three or four local colleges, attended some scholarship talks, and that was about the

extent of the college search. We couldn't figure out how anyone managed tens of thousands of dollars in tuition plus room and board without either being rich or getting into major debt.

My community college was a 20-minute drive from my parents' house and in the middle of fields. I didn't know what I wanted to study because I liked everything and had no career aspirations exactly. I decided maybe Nutrition would be interesting, so I signed up for Biology and Chemistry. I already had 30 college credits thanks to pretty rigorous high school courses and CLEP testing, so I had space in my schedule to take the classes that I found out would transfer to a nearby Nutrition program at a four-year university in Rochester, NY.

One semester, I took an Economics class because it filled a requirement and fit in my schedule. I found myself enthralled with the connections shown by those supply and demand curves. Later, I took the only other Economics class offered there, and my professor was thrilled to have me back. Not everyone finds supply and demand curves fascinating, believe it or not. I'm just weird. I'm not joking that half the class in a community college Economics class doesn't make it through the semester, much less sit in the front row and actually look interested.

In that class, I wrote a paper on Thomas Jefferson's education model as proposed to the state of Virginia. It was fascinating. In case you are wondering, which I know you are, Jefferson thought that about three years of schooling should be publicly funded to ensure a citizenry that could read and write, do basic arithmetic, and knew some basic history and government. He proposed a system by which only the most gifted children were then educated on the public dollar through a progressively selective process. He did not believe in mandatory education because he thought parents would nearly always choose to send their children to school if they could, and it wasn't the government's job to decide when and how often. He never presented this to Congress though, only to the state of Virginia, because he did not believe education should be federal. (Now you know something I'll bet you didn't before. You're welcome).

With the help of grants, scholarships, and a minor amount of debt - and while feeling my way through the process one step at a time - I transferred to the Nutrition program.

But I didn't like it. I was cutting onions in the kitchen. I did that in my weekend job for \$5.15 an hour. So, I switched to Economics.

### *Economics*

In a university known for its massive Engineering program, the Liberal Arts Department was happy to have a new recruit. I took Political Science classes whenever I could. Always a lover of liberty and American history, I thoroughly enjoyed my classes on Constitutional Law and especially the one on Alexis De Tocqueville's book *Democracy in America*. Political liberty and economic systems of free market competition go hand in hand. I got my Economics BS with High Honors.

But what does one do with an Economics degree? Most people go into an entry-level job running numbers for statistical models. I like numbers, but statistical software was my least favorite thing to wrestle with in my classes. Nothing has changed, by the way.

I was still feeling my way along the pathway of higher education. I actually didn't know what graduate school was until sometime around my Junior year. I don't think I knew that the title "Doctor" could mean anything other than a medical doctor until I realized professors were usually called Doctor and figured out there were PhDs and Master's degrees.

Most of my college professors had encouraged me to keep going to school.

I protested that I couldn't afford it. I was living at home, working weekends and summers to pay for gas and insurance for my car, and I was going to have a little bit of debt already.

I was told to apply for PhD programs and I would get assistantships. Then I wouldn't have to pay. This was news to me, and being a professional student sounded appealing, so I started sending out applications to graduate Political Science and Economics programs. Against my professors' advice, I actually only applied to Masters programs instead of Doctorate programs, mostly because those sounded like too much of a commitment.

Sure enough (possibly thanks to a good word from my department head to his old friend, the Lehigh department head), I landed a full assistantship at Lehigh University, 300 miles away. I had never been to Lehigh or to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in my life, but how does one turn down a paid degree and job? I had applied because they had a three-semester Economics Master's and it looked like they had assistantships.

### *Graduate School*

I loaded up my little red car with the gas gauge that didn't work and drove myself to a new life. I didn't know a soul. I got paid to work for the department grading papers and teaching recitation classes, while earning my Master's in Economics in the College of Business. I made about \$12,000 a year and lived happily off of half of that in a rented room, with my car, rent, and groceries as my only expenses. Life was pretty simple then.

Still interested in educational systems, and still not wanting to work an entry-level job in Economics, I applied to the College of Education's Educational Leadership program as I finished my last semester.

In Bethlehem, I had found a community and friends through a local church and a campus fellowship group. My undergraduate four years of college experience had involved attending classes, studying, working, driving to and from campus, and hiking the rural back 80 acres with my two Golden Retrievers at home most afternoons (we lived on 100 acres of grown-over farmland). Undergraduate school had been a slight improvement over my high school social life, believe it or not, but now my life in graduate school was much more normal and healthy and the thought of leaving just when I was settling in nicely was not appealing.

Over Christmas break, and just when I thought I was going to have to take an entry-level economics job back at home for \$10 an hour, I was offered a full research assistantship in the College of Education. My job was to work for the Center for Developing Urban Educational Leaders doing research on urban school leaders.

### *Educational Leadership*

In Education classes, I found myself a bit of a misfit. It wasn't that unusual of a feeling for me, so I didn't really mind. Besides, being a misfit meant I had a perspective most other students did not have. I had been granted a research assistantship because of my economics training being useful for research, but every other student was a teacher, and I was not. I hadn't even attended a public school as a kid beyond a brief stint in fourth grade. I did enjoy the class on School Law, though. Studying Supreme Court cases on educational and parental freedom was right up my

alley. Almost every other class was about the public school system, not private schools, charter schools, educational systems, or even education itself.

### *American Dream*

At one point I took a Sociology class. It had something to do with urban schools, and the professor mostly spoke about her book. It was called something like *The Myth of the American Dream*. It was a collection of interviews with rich people and the point was that the American Dream doesn't exist. All the rich people were only rich because their parents had given them money, she said. They hadn't worked for it or started at the bottom and worked their way up. Therefore, the American Dream was a myth.

My family was far from rich (by American definitions... a caveat that should be its own argument for the American dream!), and both my parents had come directly out of "uneducated" families - tradespeople and factory workers at best, and welfare recipients at worst. Due to some other family baggage of origins still unknown to me, there was also a heaping helping of dysfunctional behaviors ranging from abandonment to substance abuse.

Thanks to major lifestyle changes after coming to a Christian faith, frugality, hard work and a little entrepreneurship, my own parents had ended up with a nice house (built with a lot of sweat equity) on 100 acres (land was dirt cheap in western NY in the 1990s) by the time I was 16.

We moved a lot before that and usually drove older cars. Our couple of vacations were fishing trips in small cabins, and getting pizza now and then was about as much as we went out to eat. This was progress, though, and here I was with not only a college degree but going on to my second graduate degree. My younger brothers were also getting degrees and working hard while doing so.

We were on paths to improve the next generation as knowledge and opportunities built upon what had been laid down before. We were also on paths to earn higher incomes.

My definition of the American Dream included improvement and growth in knowledge and economic status, but the crucial distinction was freedom to pursue opportunities and legal protections that allow for reward from risk and work. My studies of economics had taught me

that in developing or socialist nations, the absence of legal and political infrastructure and protections made it very difficult for hard working and entrepreneurial people to be rewarded for their work. In America, even if a person didn't climb any societal ladders, "the pursuit of happiness" was enshrined in the highest law of the land, and legal frameworks were in place for property protection. A little house and old car, a high school education, and a regular paycheck are still a dream for an awful lot of the world. In America, just about anyone could have this and nobody could take it away. I didn't quite buy the perspective in *The Myth of the American Dream*.

Working class was the label for my socioeconomic background, which was closely related to my family's educational background. This history, in addition to my odd schooling background, was largely why I wasn't the typical Lehigh student. I distinctly remember sitting in the required Diversity class, where the professor had everyone go around and introduce themselves. We were all white, except the professor. Everyone was self-declared upper class and almost everyone Jewish, except me and one other student. The two of us came from a working-class background.

That was as diverse as it got in that Diversity class, and Lehigh in general was not much different. It is an expensive private school, so many of my undergraduate friends had also come from white-collar homes with well-educated parents. They had visited colleges all over before making their decisions, and I only met one who commuted from home. They were not necessarily wealthy, but they mostly came from families of professionals. My people were house cleaners, daycare workers, factory workers, and tradespeople (with some entrepreneurship thrown in by a plumber-turned-business-owner grandfather). Lehigh's people were lawyers, doctors, and executives. As I said earlier, however, being a misfit gave me a different perspective. Most of these students had walked into a four-year private university as a matter of course. That was education. That was just what you did.

I was in college because I liked working with my mind and was fairly good at it and because the economy had changed since my grandparents' day and college opened up a host of good-paying jobs in a country that was moving rapidly away from manufacturing jobs. Nevertheless, there is a subtle but profound difference between being "educated" as a part of human development; and having skill training for a job that pays well. College attendance is a variable in the equation

and the classroom can be an excellent space for intellectual stimulation and the exchange of ideas; it has served as such for me many times, but it is not the only place this happens, and it does not happen there as a matter of course.

I knew tradespeople who were well-read and could weigh an idea with an informed mind. And I knew college students who could not. I often felt more respect for the people who worked and sweated and saved and then read books and talked about ideas over the dinner table than I did for the PhD's with their expenses-paid conferences, air-conditioned offices, and four weeks of paid vacations.

Education wasn't always college. College wasn't always education.

### *Urban Poverty*

Every single person in my classes worked in schools except me, so to get more experience, I volunteered in an urban middle school that I walked by every day on my way to campus. They put me in a sixth-grade class for “struggling learners” with a teacher who was about my age, maybe younger. I remember the teacher bringing in coffee for one of her kids who couldn’t focus. I remember her telling me another kid really needed life skills support but they had nowhere to put him. His brothers would walk him to class and he’d just sit there. I used to try to get him to do basic addition with me with upheld fingers.

A few other kids were as bright as could be, as far as I could see. They mostly needed to get outside and play, I thought.

I remember the stress the teacher was under during state testing week, and I recall her telling me once that the principal didn’t care about her class. They weren’t going to get to “proficient” on standardized tests, and he was focused on the kids he could get to test from average to proficient, or from below-average to average. Those stats meant money. If too many kids failed, they would lose their funding and get taken over by the state. The teacher felt unsupported by her principal and was worn out already at the tender age of about 25.

The school was in a high-turnover, high-poverty area. The kids were largely Hispanic or African American. It was a middle school and considered “failing.” It was a good glimpse into a smaller urban school for this country girl.

## SEEING A NEED

Parental choice and free market competition were (and are) foundational principles of mine. Freedom to choose your kids' schools, preferably while also not paying thousands to the local school district if the school of choice was not taxpayer funded, was a core principle of mine.

At one point in one of my Education classes, I did a whole presentation on school choice in front of a room full of public school teachers and a former superintendent - the professor. I was told by this kind professor right afterward, while I was still standing in front of the room, that I was brave to give this presentation in front of a room full of teachers.

I wasn't actually brave because I didn't know what I was doing. If I had, I may have done it anyway out of youthful zeal, but, yes, I was naive as to just how controversial this topic was. Fortunately, my classmates let me off without too much trouble that time.

With my school experience falling outside of the majority and my passion for free markets and independence, I already had my own way of thinking about schooling. Sitting in my graduate education classes with teachers, and spending a couple hours a week in the sixth-grade urban school classroom, only solidified my beliefs that something wasn't right with the public system.

You know how they say when all you have is a hammer, everything is a nail? It seemed to me that whole hours of class time would be taken up discussing how to get the hammer stroke just right. Problem was, it wasn't a nail they were pounding. It was a screw. I kept thinking they needed to stop pounding. More money, more programs, more initiatives, more training; they didn't seem to be doing much in the urban schools. Or the suburban schools for that matter. Maybe they needed to get creative and invent a screwdriver.

I knew from my personal experience (and that of my brothers and several acquaintances) that educating a kid didn't always take a ton of money, a degree, or a fancy sports complex. Those things are nice, but a populace of literate people who also know some history and math, and who can think creatively, are not actually that complicated to produce. My little Christian schools, those three I went to in first to sixth grades, were usually struggling. (In fact, two of the three

closed last-minute because they couldn't afford to open. Enrollment was low in our rural area, and the tuition had to be low for anyone to afford it. That meant teachers made very little money.) But the curriculum was solid and the teachers cared. The parents cared, too. That seemed to be the winning combination, and it is almost impossible to make substitutes for any of these three.

Public schools in very urban areas were failing. Most large cities had graduation rates around 50%. Something was wrong that money and programming just wasn't fixing. Kids weren't learning. I will add that good people do good in these situations. There are many good teachers and principals in public schools who care very much for the kids, do their best, and make an impact in those kids' lives. The system as a whole, however, was not doing its job at even the most basic level.

### *Seven Years*

I had been in higher education for seven years now, and it looked like my luck was running out. I got turned down for the Doctoral program because of lack of teaching experience.

I graduated with both my Master's degrees in Economics and in Educational Leadership. I was 26 and had worked as a teaching assistant, research assistant, office assistant, food service hamburger flipper, and (this one wins for most fun 20+ years later) costumed interpreter at a living history museum.

Sometimes I want to quit everything, put on a hoop skirt, and go back to the museum again!

### *Rural Poverty*

After graduation, I still wasn't entirely sure what I was going to do and wanted to do a little traveling or something before I settled down. I bought some time by volunteering for six weeks at a Catholic camp for rural Appalachian kids.

There I saw a different kind of poverty than the kind in the urban school classroom. A different manifestation, but in many ways, it was the same.

Drug and alcohol abuse were rampant, education levels were abysmal, and the kids at the camp were there on charitable donations. Most of them were obese, and the line at the nurses' office for the daily medications was long. The older kids' camp was full of kids who had been adopted from foster care after being abused.

I remember one sweet girl of about 14 who was very slow physically and mentally, possibly from alcohol exposure in the womb. She told me about how her new mom was always telling her she had pretty eyes like her real mom, but how her real mom threw her bike in the creek and would pull her hair.

Another little fellow was known to the staff because another arm of that ministry (which repaired the houses of the people they would find up in the hollers, often without running water or electricity) had taken him in when they found him and his family living in a house with holes in the floor, no electricity or running water, and I don't remember what else. They had helped repair the house and gotten the little boy into the summer camp. He said he was wild before he found Jesus. He was about eight.

The kids in the urban school had sometimes shown up in crumpled, too-big clothes, and I would see them running around the neighborhood streets during the week. These kids were country kids who ran barefoot through the copperhead-infested woods (there were seriously so many copperheads on that mountain!) instead of through city streets, but the problems were the same. Abuse, poverty, ignorance, broken families, alcohol and drug abuse.

I learned a little about myself while I was there—or I should have anyway. I would rather get up early for breakfast alone than eat with the whole crew (I am not a morning person or a crew person). I once volunteered to clean the laundry room instead of going to swim time, and it was delightful. Large groups of kids aren't really my gifting. I panic a little. That probably doesn't sound like it makes me a good candidate for working with kids, does it? I still didn't quite make the connection. I was several years into mothering when I finally realized and accepted that I needed space and quiet. This fact played largely into finding a school and work balance that worked for me and my family.

I did enjoy connecting one-on-one with the kids. I liked to hang back with the girl who was always slower than everyone, and with the little six-year-old who told me her mom was happy to be rid of her for the week. She would cry at night sometimes and would only let me comfort her. I used to carry her around the woods on my back, and when the nurse couldn't get her to sleep one night, they called me and I sang her to sleep. I'm not bad with *a* kid, just with kids plural.

I didn't mind being the one to answer hard questions that nobody else wanted to field during Teen Week, and I earned the "Einstein Award" at the end of the summer. It might have meant I was no fun and nobody knew what I was talking about when I opened my mouth, but I prefer to think they liked that I answered the hard questions.

I didn't mind running in the woods playing hide and seek with the kids either, but I remember the relief I felt when nobody could find me for a few minutes.

I learned that feeling well later on when I had kids of my own and learned to lock the bathroom door or walk slowly from the kid's car door to the driver door. If you are an introverted parent, you know what I'm talking about.

I got engaged the week after I got home (with an abandoned puppy I adopted). My boyfriend of six months (acquaintance of longer) had been in Ireland for the summer, and we wrote old-fashioned letters that sometimes arrived out of order all summer long. I didn't have cell service except in one spot on that mountain, and there was only one shared computer with questionable internet connectivity. Not too many people this century have that sort of dating relationship. Add it to my short list of odd accomplishments.

I got married four months after that, in December, after finding two part-time jobs in SAT tutoring and, ironically, teaching preschool computer classes in daycares (I needed money). I had decided I was going to get a teacher certification through an alternative accelerated teacher certification program so I could pursue education in some form. I had gotten turned down from the PhD Education program because I didn't have any actual teaching experience, so it made sense to remedy that gap if I wanted to pursue an educational field.

But, I got pregnant two months after my wedding, and decided I didn't want to follow the teaching path with an infant. I was never actually career minded, largely because of my

economic and religious background, and (because of the latter), I thoroughly believed a mom should be home with her little kids if at all possible. I think we made \$25,000 that year together because my husband was also in a graduate program, but he quit it and found a job that paid enough to live on. We would survive in our little apartment with his income and my tutoring. I got a refund just in time before the refund window closed on my certification program enrollment.

I kept tutoring and focused my research instincts into how to birth a human person.

### *Motherhood*

With my love of classrooms and learning, caring for a little one full-time did not come easily to me. I had had an unwanted and traumatic C-section and was unaware that I was also suffering from an emotionally numbing postpartum depression, which didn't help the situation at all. I felt completely out of my league. Getting a baby to sleep and then waiting for her to wake up was making me the most bored-busy I had ever been in my life. Busy because my freedom was now tethered to this little person who wouldn't take a bottle, and bored because my busy mind felt like it was starved. This whole motherhood thing was not quite as glamorous as I had thought it would be. It was the hardest thing I had ever done.

Books and learning I could do, though, and I bought *The Well-Trained Mind* when my daughter was six months old. We moved to a little house when the baby was about one, and when she was almost three, I had another baby. This experience was a little better, but still tough. When that child was a baby, I took a part-time job as an "academic adviser" for a foreign exchange student program. I was only out of the house one day a month, but I would always feel so much more myself when I had a little distance.

I still thought I was going to homeschool, despite all these warnings that I would probably not thrive doing full-time childcare at any point, since I was barely making it then, but I had my (sometimes misplaced) principles, and I'm a creature of principles if nothing else. I was convinced small kids needed their mothers, so I was determined to stick with it if it killed me.

### *Anxiety*

It didn't quite kill me, but I did have a nervous breakdown when my second child was two. I had been shoving aside, ignoring, and rationalizing my difficulties in motherhood for years now, and my mind had been treading some old, well-worn pathways of worry and doubt. I had gone to counseling a couple of years before and was told I was "cannibalizing myself". What he meant was that I was trying to force myself to be some image of what I thought I had to be and was letting my true self starve. But I wasn't ready to hear it. Remember my principles? I had these kids and I'd be darned if I just took the "easy" way out because it was hard.

Then came the week before my second child's birthday in mid-July. I had started having panic attacks for the first time in my life that spring and then one day it felt like one just wouldn't end. I couldn't eat or sleep for days. My husband had to take the kids to his parents for a week, and my mom came and stayed for another week. It took me a month to be able to care for the kids myself. It was hard physically, but even harder mentally.

This was the worst foray into mental turmoil and anxiety of my life, but it was not the first. It seemed to be a weakness I was wired toward. Amid my own varied schooling experiences as a child in four schools (and houses) by the age of 11, I had developed at-the-time-unnamed anxiety. By the time I had spent a couple of crucial developmental years doing correspondence video classes in my room in high school, it was often crippling.

Anxiety can hide in the crevices, ready to blossom and grow as soon as it gets a friendly environment. Incubating it in isolation, or busyness, or whatever it likes best, is not the wisest course of action. It can sometimes be starved out or kept under control with the help of the right conditions, I learned later. I would have possibly struggled even without multiple moves and new schools, but looking back on my teen years, I could see that rather than disciplining anxiety with the structure and rhythm of school days and the friendships and benign interactions of the everyday, my isolated environment in high school had only coddled it. By the time I was 16, when most teens are learning to drive and maybe going on dates and waiting for Prom, I was struggling to leave my house without anxiety making me sick.

By college, I had learned to muscle through it by sheer determination, and mental busyness helped keep it at bay. Once I moved away, I had it under control and the new community and freedom of my graduate school years put it into dormancy. I was well into my mid- 20's and dating my husband before he helped me name my previous experiences as "anxiety". Until then, I did not know that word applied. I don't think anyone ever used the words "introvert" or "anxiety" in my house when I was a kid because they just did not know them in that context. One of my schools was fundamentally religious and told us that being shy was a sin because it was selfish. That might warrant its own book at some point, but the point is, not only was my emotional vocabulary lacking, but my awareness of myself as a personality, what personality actually is, and knowledge of the basic rules of development, was basically nonexistent.

I mention my anxiety struggles because of how it impacted my perspective on how lifestyle can help incubate or repress certain strengths and weaknesses for children and adults. Looking back at my school years, I saw how some lifestyle choices had been good for me and some had not. As an adult, this was still true. A balance of consistent community interactions and time alone to study and think were things I needed as a mother as much as I had needed them as a student.

If you are wondering how my nervous breakdown turned out, it had a happy ending. After some short-term medication and counseling and much prayer, I actually came out stronger in my faith and mental health than I had ever been. I uprooted some toxic thinking patterns, and a year later I was tackling the project this book is about and was also expecting my third child. Anxiety has never revisited in an abnormal way since.

#### *Mother's Perspective*

I was seeing some of myself in my oldest child's love of books and extreme shyness of people. I felt I was going to have to keep an eye on her environment to make sure the right things grew and the wrong things starved. She was already on the right track in that she had a sister, a consistent community, and had only one move across town in her short life. Of course, she was also only five.

So, here I was wanting my kids to have a community that was active and consistent, and slowly grasping that I would never be a happy stay-at-home homeschooling mother, but I had a problem. Remember those darned principles?

I cared very much about what academic education looked like for my kids, so public school, and even private school if I could manage to afford the \$6–7,000 per year...which I couldn't...were not satisfying choices to me.

What is education anyway? To me the *method* of education includes the instruction of basic literacy skills taught using proven methods; the exposure to a wide variety of interesting topics like art, science, history, music; and a cultivated love of learning for its own sake, all delivered with respect to a child's healthy physical, social, and emotional development. The end goal was a person who could read and write and do math at a functional level, who knew their history and identity, who could at least appreciate all the various fields of study and possessed a basic knowledge of them, and, most importantly, who could weigh ideas in a mind disciplined and practiced in logical thinking and through a lens of Truth.

Therefore, I had opinions on what books my kids should read, when they learned to write, and what values they were taught. But must I homeschool all by my lonesome to give them those things? That would run me right back into the two things I knew from my past would be problematic: managing children all day by myself and a lack of consistent community interactions for me and them.

I was also filling my knowledge gaps at this time through reading about healthy developmental processes of children, and they made a lot of sense based on my own experience. I read several books by child development professionals and learned that kids under three need to attach. It almost did me in, but I had managed that part. Going forward, they were going to need to learn, somehow, at appropriate ages, to advocate for themselves, build friendships, and find their own identities. My eldest was an introvert. My second was an extrovert. This was likely to look different for each of them, but I wanted both of them to have the right environment to learn these things well.

What's a mom to do?

### *Preschool*

About a week before the school year started, a friend convinced me to enroll my two girls in a Reggio Emilia preschool. They were just opening a new afternoon class, and both my kids could attend the same class. Ever independent, at first I resisted, but I signed them up last-minute. I quickly learned that I personally benefited tremendously from the structure in our days and my time away all by myself. I learn some things fast, but how I needed to function to be healthy as a mother wasn't one of them. I was finally getting it after five years of mothering.

My kids were having a great time playing with friends, doing craft projects and learning that there were other safe and fun people in the world. I remember when I was feeling guilty about my younger one crying at drop off the first week, and the director, a gem of a teacher, said something about them learning there were other people who were safe and who cared for them besides Mom.

I still don't believe a baby needs that lesson, and child development research backs me up, but a three- to five-year-old can usually learn it. She did. In about five minutes, too. Other adults can be safe. And fun. More fun than Mom actually because I'm not that fun.

I was also teaching Economics as a part-time adjunct at a local university by this time (the academic adviser job didn't last), and I found this balance of work and home to work well for us all.

### *Post Preschool*

I know. Post preschool is school. That was the problem. This part-time school thing was working and it was about to end just when it started. We'd gotten one year. I would be back to being stuck with my choices, and given the burden of my scruples, they didn't feel like choices.

The wonderful preschool director let me send my eldest back to the multi-age class an extra year while I taught her at home. She was turning six, but the director understood I wanted her to play and have the time with other kids.

I saw that academics, solid community, and development did not have to be completely tied together every hour of the day. But all were important.

### *What? You, Too?*

I had a great group of fellow moms navigating the waters of early parenting with me at my local Moms of Preschoolers (MOPS) group right around this time. Through many conversations, I found many friends did not like their schooling options either. What do you know? I wasn't alone.

One of these friends, also a neighbor who had been a public high school English teacher for several years, and I, had several conversations. She was the one who convinced me to send the kids to the play-based preschool. Her educational experiences had been the opposite of mine: public school all the way through, an English degree, and back to public as a teacher.

Our district was going to full-day kindergarten that year. Seeing how her daughter flourished in the play-based preschool, she was starting to question if jumping from that to full days of kindergarten and testing and homework right around the corner was really what she wanted.

She had also taught seniors English and knew that the kids coming out the other side of public schooling in our district weren't exactly stellar examples of well-educated kids. An awful lot of them couldn't write well at 18, and a painful number didn't care a bit about any of it. What on earth had they even been doing in school their whole lives?

Excuse me while I digress, but... I recall when I was about 15, we lived in one of the best districts around but we had just switched to home and correspondence schooling after our little Christian school closed following 20+ years in business. One of our neighbors, who used to come to play, was the age of one of my brothers, and we were all surprised when we saw her trying to read one day. She would look at the word and then look up and try to remember if she had ever learned it. I was 15 and helping my high-school-educated mom teach my six- and seven-year-old youngest brothers (I have three younger brothers, if you are wondering) to read. My mom had taught me to read. My brothers were reading better than this kid, but more than that, they knew to sound out words phonetically. This neighbor child was being taught whole-language reading, and it wasn't working.

Twenty-something years later, I was living in the district where many of my fellow Lehigh students had taught, and now it was in the news. Guess why? Bethlehem students couldn't read.

The academic adviser attended a reading training in one of the poorest schools to figure out why so few kids were proficient and found the teachers were being taught to have kids guess the word based on the pictures. “Close enough from context” was apparently supposed to be reading. It was completely unscientific, wrong, and failing, but somehow, 20 years after my lowly working-class family had observed that we were indeed correct to teach phonics and decoding, thousands of kids, hundreds of thousands across the country, were being experimented on by supposed professionals in schools whose only job was to make them literate.<sup>1</sup>

Bethlehem is a small city with many schools. My country town in the 1990s was very rural with one elementary and one high school. Why was it that the same mistake was still being made in both places 20 years apart?

### *An Idea*

We started to wonder. I think most entrepreneurs start with wondering. Or at least it is Step Two after noticing something you want doesn’t exist, and then finding out there are a bunch of other people like you.

We wondered if part-time school was a thing.

Preschool was a nice schedule: three hours a day, three days a week. The kids learned a bit, belonged to the group, and we moms got a break; but there was little stress and the kids couldn’t fail. They were still with us more than they were with their teachers, which seemed appropriate for their tender ages, but they also learned to function away from us and benefit from the care and expertise of loving teachers.

This all incubated in our minds and conversations. One day, I don’t recall exactly how, my friend texted me: “Do you want to start a school?” I am pretty sure I said, “I have ALWAYS wanted to start a school!”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wamu.org/story/19/01/02/why-millions-of-kids-cant-read-and-what-better-teaching-can-do-about-it/>

## FILLING A NEED

Remember that despite my interest in educational systems from a theoretical standpoint—i.e., the class papers and scholarship applications I wrote and my Educational Leadership degree that was mostly about public schools—I had little experience actually teaching anybody but my little brothers, my own kid, and college students. When it came to running an entire school or even a classroom of kids, I was a classic armchair, ivory tower theorist.

I hadn't been a teacher in the usual sense of the word. I had only been a student. But I had opinions based on my experiences and my friend could bring in the perspective of a classroom teacher.

A grassroots entrepreneur doesn't need a perfect résumé, just vision and the willingness to work her tail off. *Oh, and to know when to find people to fill her gaps.* That is key. Write that down if you ever want to try this.

After much googling and research, we found that part-time schooling was indeed a thing. Here, we thought we had invented the idea. We stalked the handful of websites we found on what seemed to be called “hybrid” or “university-model” schools. We discovered some that were two days of school and some that were three. Some were legal schools with home as a satellite campus, and some were serving homeschoolers as supplements. Some were classical, some were Catholic, and a few were Charlotte Mason (I’ll tell you more about her in a minute). Most seemed to be religious.

What was common to all was an educational philosophy informing their pedagogy and a hybrid model that combined days at home and days at school. Unlike homeschool cooperatives, these programs charged tuition, hired teachers, and otherwise functioned just like a school. Only part-time.

Tuition seemed to run to about one-third to one-half of private (but not elite) schools, falling at around \$2–4,000 per year. This was certainly more attainable than \$8–10,000, and by my preliminary calculations, we could charge about \$2,000. (Turns out I missed a few things, but, to

this day, our tuition is under \$3,000. With sibling discounts, a family with four kids can send all four for about the tuition of one kid at the cheapest Christian school nearby.)

This was encouraging. Educational philosophy was our driving motivator, and part-time attendance in combination with home learning was our (we thought, original) idea.

### *Pedagogy*

We wanted our kids to have a less stressful but still rigorous education. The idea was to give them a few more years of time to play and experience real things, and to feed their eager minds with good literature and language.

They could still learn to read and write, add and subtract, and listen to good books, and homeschooled had already proven these academics can be learned well in a half to two hours a day. Excellent stories read at levels usually far above early reading ability feed a child's imagination, vocabulary, and comprehension with living ideas; even while they are acquiring a solid foundation of skills to decode and read words themselves through a solid phonics curriculum.

We wanted academics that were developmentally appropriate for our kids, but we also wanted to give them a solid community, friendships (maybe even complete with the usual childhood experiences of recess and lunchtime shenanigans), and the gift of teachers who were good at their work.

As a parent, I was cool with needing help with my kids by this time. No matter how you slice it, school provides childcare, and childcare means time to clean the house, grocery shop, work, or do the myriad of other things that can be challenging when you have to bring the kids along. I had come to terms with the fact that I was not one of those moms who could be with her kids 24/7/365 and have it be healthy. Part-time school sounded perfect.

We threw around the idea of Waldorf and Montessori as gentler methods, but we settled on the works of the writer and educator Charlotte Mason.

### *Charlotte Mason*

Mason's work, ironically, since she never had children of her own but was a teacher and trainer of teachers, had been rediscovered by the American homeschooling movement about 60 years after Mason's death in the 1920s. One can certainly give an excellent Mason education at home, but I still find it ironic that homeschoolers resurrected her work when Mason herself taught teachers.

She also taught parents but nearly always spoke to parents in the context of, well, help. This was reassuring to me. Nineteenth-century English middle- and upper-class parents had cooks and nurses and sent their children to boarding school quite young. Mason wrote of the importance of parents, started a whole society for parents, and one of her six education books is literally called *Parents and Children*, but she also emphasized the importance of Mom's time away, and the context of teaching was usually a school.

Mason used many of the same pedagogical elements that Waldorf and our Reggio Emilia preschool used; elements that were abysmally lacking in public schools. These included abundant play, outdoor time, and a delayed emphasis on formal lessons or early emphasis on time-consuming academic skills, which could be acquired quickly a year or two later. Her entire approach was also unapologetically rooted in a Christian worldview of Truth, something public schools prided themselves in refuting, and Montessori and Waldorf schools avoided.

Mason wanted children to experience the real, created world and then experience living ideas through excellent books. Children were to narrate back their books for several years before lengthy writing assignments were required, thus giving them time to develop language, vocabulary, and orderly thinking much faster than they could while being limited by motor skills. A toddler talks long before they can write, and this method made a lot of sense.

What is fascinating is that modern pedagogical research, when it is unencumbered by political correctness, backs this up. In a *Forbes* article, Natalie Wexler, author of *The Knowledge Gap* and *The Writing Revolution*, says:

“... cognitive scientists have long known that knowledge of the topic—or academic knowledge and vocabulary in general—are far more important to comprehension than supposedly abstract

*skills. And yet subjects that could build that knowledge, like social studies and science, have been marginalized or eliminated from the curriculum to make more time for comprehension skills practice. That leaves many students ill-equipped to understand the texts they're expected to read at higher grade levels—even if they get good phonics instruction, which is also crucial.”<sup>2</sup>*

Public and even private schools are often so bogged down on the kids performing measurable skills on tests such as looking for clue words in an out-of-context “comprehension” paragraph so they can answer a multiple-choice question, that they ignore that truly knowing a subject involves connecting with the ideas in it.

Children naturally listen to stories and tell about them. When this skill is nurtured, both the power of not just comprehending, but knowing, are developed and fine-tuned.

Mason knew this. Her students had short lessons but from rigorous and well-written books by authors who knew and loved their subject. They told back orally or even in pictures or play, and then, as they got older, they could tell back in written words.

A first-grader need not know what a noun is. Why waste his time? If he can tell a story back well at seven and write it well a few years later, the definition of noun or pronoun or verb is a fairly simple piece of knowledge to give him at ten or 12.

As kids got older, they would read original sources and rigorous classics. They would write with the skill acquired from copious reading of well-written literature and practice putting ideas together orally. History and science were to be presented in language that enabled the child to connect with the ideas and not just memorize the facts.

Mason did not believe in child environments or talking down to children, however. This was not a mollycoddling or a dumbing down, but instead a drawing up of the children to a high level of thinking and comprehension.

Mason also believed in the power of beauty for the soul. Art and music were presented to the child as things to be enjoyed. Getting to know a classic artist’s life and works was to be a delightful undertaking. The same was true of gifted composers.

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliewexler/2023/10/10/the-science-of-reading-isnt-just-phonics-but-what-else-is-it/?sh=3c303ea1763a>

We were hooked on this method the more we learned about it. This was what we wanted for our kids.

So, there we were. We had an idea, and now our pedagogy had found a label that fit it. We even had a building, thanks to finding out that our kids' preschool was going to be moving. It was a perfect spot, with large windows in the classrooms and a creek, some woods, and a small playground outside.

It was actually looking like we might be able to get something going.

### *Experimentation*

That year, we gathered just a handful of friends, I think six or seven including us, and did a little cooperative model program one afternoon a week. The kids were about three to six years old. The moms stayed. There was a tiny fee and no tuition.

We wanted to try out some of the books and schedule, so this was a good way to do it. We called it a "cottage school." While we practiced our new-found pedagogy on this little group, we continued to research and plan.

At one point, I had a call with an accountant who had worked with many homeschool groups. I remember I'd forgotten about the call and was at the park. My phone was dying and I had to take the kids back to the car so I could plug in the phone and finish the call while they played on the playground. That was just a prelude to things to come. Working with a kid or two or three underfoot became the modus operandi for the next few years.

Anyway, on her advice and after hours of research, I filed paperwork with the state as a nonprofit corporation. I had never done that before, but I'd better get used to doing things I'd never done before.

We decided to call it a "hybrid academy," and it was now an official entity. We had 27 months to file with the IRS as a "nonprofit educational and religious organization" offering supplemental education to homeschooled students. We'd worry about that when the time came.

We had researched becoming a legal school, but the regulations seemed overwhelming. We also knew several families who wanted to choose their own curriculum for home days, and as a school, we would have had to tell them exactly what to do at home. We didn't want to alienate the homeschool community (although we were pretty sure we would also be attracting people from schools, which we did and do), so we settled on a plan to offer robust recommendations so parents could have a full program if they wanted, but not require the home days of work. The school days would be self-contained. Parents would be legally homeschooling, which meant that they were responsible to report to the state on their own.

There was no guidebook and no hybrid program to visit since the only ones we found were far away. I don't think we even called any of them to ask questions. We just stalked their websites for tips. We were making this up as we went, but we were passionate, and if it could be done, we would do it.

### *Making Progress*

I plugged numbers into Excel based on best guesses, and we chose what we hoped was a reasonable tuition amount. We based it on the tuition of local Christian schools (we would be offering about one-third of the days and hoped for about one-third of the tuition) and what it seemed like we'd need to cover our projected expenses. I didn't know what a program like this was going to cost exactly. I just had to make my best estimates.

Rent, books, teacher salaries, payroll taxes... I read up on payroll companies and insurances. I was pretty sure I had most things. Nonprofits also needed Boards apparently, whatever those were, so we asked the preschool director, a friend from church who worked in financial services, and another supportive friend to be on our Board.

We weren't sure what they were supposed to do, but they came in handy for bouncing ideas off of and contributing some tips from their varied experience. We later found out that's not quite what a Board is supposed to do, but like everything else, you live and learn.

We would need some students but didn't know where to get them, so we printed out a few brochures with our rather woeful technical skills and figured out how to make some web pages look okay in user-friendly Squarespace.

My artistic brother drew us a logo, and then a photographer friend/mom who attended our experimental cottage school saved the day and made our webpage pretty and professional instead of just okay.

We researched curriculum, bought a few books, stuck brochures in libraries and sent them to Vacation Bible Schools and preschools.

We were finally ready to have an information night. It was April and about three weeks before my due date with my third child. My cofounder had just found out she was expecting her third also.

### *Launching*

We didn't know if any more than our half-dozen friends would show up, but somehow, I still don't know how... strangers started walking in. I think we ended up with about a dozen families. We forgot to put out a sign-up list to collect their information, and we didn't know the answers to some of their questions. I remember driving home worried we had sounded clueless.

A few people signed up anyway, possibly lured by our brilliant idea to let them register that night for the low, low price of \$25. We had paper registration forms and collected checks, even though we hadn't opened the bank account yet. Most of those first families are still with us, by the way.

It was looking like we might be able to open a small kindergarten class. Maybe even a first grade. We ran various scenarios of how we would manage if we had ten kids only, or 14 or 16, and at what point we could afford a second teacher. We planned on using required rotation of parent volunteers as extra sets of hands. We had no budget for administration. That was a big mistake but I didn't know it yet.

We ran some Craigslist ads for teachers, posted in church bulletins, and on our Facebook page, the only social media either of us knew how to do (apparently that makes us old). I stopped for a hot minute to have my third C-section (best postpartum experience of the three and my little redemption baby and only boy), and we set up a couple evening interviews at the library a few weeks later.

We had never interviewed anyone before, but we sort of knew what we wanted in a teacher so we just... did it. We asked questions about their experience with kids and with classrooms, if they'd ever heard of Charlotte Mason, and some other things. We settled on two good people out of the five or six who applied, and off we went into a busy summer.

We had no furniture. The rooms were empty. We finally opened a bank account and deposited the enrollment fee checks, and so we actually had about \$500.

Things were looking up.

We started figuring out how we wanted to train teachers by just feeling out what they would need to know to implement the philosophy. We had meetings in the evenings when we could leave the kids with our husbands. We used some podcasts and book resources. We found some used furniture with the help of some of those trusting and helpful information night attendees and purchased some more books.

Tuition payments needed to start in August (I learned that from the preschool), so we got a little more money just in time to purchase insurances, get a payroll system set up, and pay the building rent for the first time.

### *The First Year*

It was July before we realized we did indeed have enough kids to open two classes: a kindergarten and a combined first and second. We had 20 kids in total. Classes would run from 9:30–3:30 on Thursdays and Fridays. We would cover reading, math, and Mason's "feast" of good books. We would also prioritize outdoor time and play. The kids would go out twice a day and bring gear for the weather.

On the Open House day, in the first week of September, we had one of the two teachers quit. It was my fault too. Remember how I'm better at books than people? I accidentally offended her in an email.

I have learned over the years that perhaps my early social troubles were exacerbated by my literal and practical way of communicating. Apparently, it's a curse of the INTP personality type who sees things practically and logically. I never mean to do it.

Poor lady. I had to call her and explain. I have an aversion to phone calls, but I did what I had to do. It's all been a growing experience. She was as gracious as could be, but still didn't want to teach for us. If that teacher were to come today, she would be excellent. We just weren't ready back then to train someone with a lot of traditional experience to a new kind of pedagogy.

Anyway, we had our Open House and now no teacher lined up for kindergarten. I think it was one week before school started. The next day we reached out to one of the other interviewees we had really liked. That brave soul met us on a Saturday morning for several hours for a crash training course with a stack of books, and she started teaching the next Thursday.

My co-founder and I worked together on almost every detail but were each finding our niches a bit. I could tackle paperwork and money, and my co-founder could tackle curriculum, teachers (not literally), and things like safety plans.

I also stepped further out of teacher training and let my co-founder, who is the complete opposite of me, in personality and giftings, handle more of it. I realized not far in that the teachers needed to know who to go to if they had questions, and I am a "do your job and I'll leave you alone" type who doesn't always follow all the procedures properly, which was only going to be confusing for them.

The other teacher we had hired in the summer loved kids, had taught in small Christian schools, and homeschooled her own kids for a few years. She was flexible and fun and the kids loved her.

Both teachers were just what we needed that year! They jumped right in and did what needed to be done in a fledgling program of a strange new hybrid breed none of us had ever seen before, being run by two hard-working, but still-learning, moms with a baby on one arm and two other little kids in tow.

That first day of school, we left the two teachers with a parent helper and wished them luck. We didn't have babysitting organized and weren't getting paid. I had a nursing infant and my co-founder was about eight months' pregnant. Those two teachers were troopers, and we couldn't have done it without them. If you two ever read this, thanks.

### *Lessons*

We learned a few things that year. Maybe more than a few. We learned that school rules are a good thing. At least a couple basic ones like “don’t run in the halls” or “don’t go in the church shed.”

We learned to have staff meetings after school once a month at least. We learned that short lessons are great but build in at least five minutes for transition time because kids take a long time to do stuff.

We learned that math and reading can be tricky in a hybrid model. We learned that it takes a long time to get through the stack of books, so maybe make it smaller next time.

We learned that outdoor play time is wonderful but having one of the sessions be guided and focused would cut down on chaos. We learned that kids bring a lot of mud in when they go outside two or three times a day and we needed to buy a rug and vacuum and ask for volunteers to help clean up.

We learned that we had set tuition a tad too low at just over \$2,000.

### *Year Two*

The next year, every kid but one came back. We filled a whole new kindergarten class. We had a wonderful community and 36 kids in kindergarten, first, and a combined second and third.

We learned more stuff, such as that we were going to crash and burn if we kept treating this as a hobby. We needed to think like businesspeople. We needed to pay the administration. Namely, us. The required volunteer rotation for the helper, although only three or four days a year each, was tough on moms with little ones, and we needed to hire an aide. We raised tuition a bit, got rid of the requirement to volunteer, hired an aide, and put ourselves on a payroll for a tiny amount.

### *Year Three*

The year after that, we had to move buildings. Moving is not fun. Finding premises involved cold calls, visits with our kids in tow, waiting for meetings and decisions... then actually moving. God bless our husbands who moved furniture in trucks to help us set up classrooms in the new space and the volunteers who showed up in a row of minivans.

We learned how to better relate to these buildings (always churches); the building space itself and our host congregational leaders. We learned our rent was going to go up.

*We learned that proactive and not reactive meetings are a good idea when you are sharing space.* Write that down too.

Nearly every kid came back again, and a whole new kindergarten filled up. We had over 60 kids and hired two more teachers. Our aide from year two was gifted with kids and the outdoors, so we managed to give her what we called “nature study” classes, which she would offer for all the grades. She still does it, bless her. We hired another aide.

We learned that every 20–30 kids need an aide, if possible, because any administration on campus was going to get interrupted every half hour by some emergency or another, so we had to start budgeting for that. Tuition was still a bit too low, but fixed costs were more manageable the bigger our student population got, so that helped.

That third year we had a K, 1, 2, 3, and combined 4–6. We had five teachers, an aide, and a nature study teacher, and were finally making a little (a very little) bit of a paycheck ourselves in administration.

I took care of compliance, budgets, and business, while my co-founder took the lead in teacher training, evaluations, and curriculum. But we still talked about just about everything. We were still crafting the program as it grew, and it took both of us with our opposite sets of talents to do it well.

After our first-year attempt at spreading the word through pamphlets left at libraries and parks, church bulletin postings, a local newspaper article, and our website, we did not advertise at all. People just came. “Build it and they will come” works when there is a need. We weren’t sure if there was a need that first summer, but since then, we have never had to wonder.

### *2020—The Blip Year*

Then came Covid. We had to navigate March of 2020 like everyone else. Also, like everyone else, there were differences of opinion and strong opinions on everything. In the fall, we planned to open but had to close due to restrictions that would make functioning untenable.

### *Fifth Year*

When we came back in summer 2021, our market was not just still there, it had grown in leaps and bounds! We wondered if we'd hit 80 kids that year and we passed 100. Did I mention we had to move again? Our favorite summer pastime.

We opened two kindergartens and a middle school class that year. We had just over 100 kids. We had full classes up through fifth grade and a combined sixth/seventh.

### *Sixth Year*

The next year we asked another church down the street for a couple classrooms and moved our sixth to eighth graders over. Now we had about 100 kids in one building and about 25 in the other. We had 15 employees. We put 45, mostly young, kids on the waitlist that year and turned away many more inquiries. We just didn't have space. Our rent also doubled right after we had already announced tuition for the next year. Ouch!

### *Seventh Year*

In 2023 we had 145 kids in two locations and launched a pilot ninth grade class. We had opened a second kindergarten in a small classroom, but we still waitlisted dozens of kids.

Our program was not something we ever could have envisioned that first year. People were loving it. They were driving from every direction and up to an hour away to come.

Who would have thought?

## THE NICHE

It is abundantly clear that we weren't the only parents looking for alternative schooling options. We could now easily open a duplicate program and are in the process of planning for a more permanent building home. Our original kindergarten class is now in sixth grade and many of them have been with us from the first year or two.

We still meet Thursdays and Fridays. Parents still homeschool legally. We still keep our school days as self-contained as we can.

Over the years, we have learned and tweaked and made mistakes. We have learned more about how to do math and reading in a hybrid model. We have learned about building safety plans, what to look for in teacher interviews, and that cleaning should be a budget item. A big one actually!

We have learned how to better relate to our host buildings, how to work with our Board, and we eventually learned what a Board is actually supposed to do. We have learned what administrative tasks are necessary and when to hire help, as well as what to do if kids have learning needs or families who are maybe not doing their part at home.

Some of these lessons were hard, and we had more than one panicked moment and maybe a few tears. I think we both wanted to quit more than once.

We still have more lessons to learn. But for building the plane while flying it, it hasn't been too bad. We are still flying and flying high. We named it *Providence* because what we needed when we were at the end of our means always came through providentially; sometimes at the last minute.

Over these years, I have served on the Board and on staff at different times. I never had enough babysitting for my little boy who was born the year we opened, so I often had to work with him in tow. I often didn't get paid at all or very little, and I sometimes paid a babysitter every cent I made just for three or four hours a week of help (while working many more than that). When my

son was two, I put him in a two-hour preschool class twice a week, and would drop the older kids at hybrid school, drop him down the road, go back and work for one and a half hours, then pick him up. Don't forget the homeschooling part the other three days a week.

In the third year I was getting burned out, despite my love of the work. After the next pandemic year of homeschooling full-time, with a preschooler underfoot, literally, I was fully burned out. I had known years before that I needed help with my kids and this proved it.

I had to step back to "just" be on the Board. I still went to all the interviews and oversaw all the compliance, accounting and budgets, especially since we still hadn't figured out what a Board was supposed to do. (Hint: all of that!)

I even sent my middle child to a different school for a year because I was so overwhelmed with the homeschooling from the pandemic year. She was my more flexible and extroverted kid so she adjusted fine, but she prefers hybrid schooling and came back the next year when I had caught my breath a little.

I was reminded that it was true: those full days at school (and it was a private school) five days a week did not equate to a better education. My customized few hours a week with her were just as effective, if not more so, than school had been. Her relationships with friends at hybrid school were more special to her because she "didn't see them as much." And she had missed the creek and nature study class when all she had was a parking lot to play in.

### *Hybrid School for the Win*

Hybrid has been a win for both my introvert, who needs security and little change, and my extrovert, who is more flexible and makes friends quickly.

My youngest is in first grade at the time of writing and had a hard time separating from me for both preschool and kindergarten (probably thanks to being a pandemic three-year-old), but finally enjoys hybrid as well. He gets his work done in less than an hour a day at home, and his creative mind and active body have lots of time to play.

I admit I still struggle with the home part of the hybrid model because I still am not great at managing kids, but it is far easier with hybrid schooling than it would be alone.

It doesn't fit everyone, but it fits quite a few. Our hybrid school has met the need for over 80 families in our area, and many more will come when we have the capacity for them all.

We now employ 18 people in part-time positions. Many are moms who spent a few years at home raising their kids and now want part-time work. Many were schoolteachers before. Some are retirees, some are young and fresh out of college. We have become a place of satisfying work for people looking for part-time work, and we have built communities and friendships that hopefully last a lifetime.

I am now one of those moms who can homeschool part-time and work part-time and have it come out better than either full-time work or full-time homeschooling for my family. I still teach college Economics classes online part-time, and I have also worked in business and admissions on staff. Hybrid school has served not just my kids as a school, but also me as a job.

### *Demographics*

My favorite part of the job now is meeting families who come to visit. I get to hear their stories, and it is always rewarding to hear what they are looking for and how we could be a fit. Many of them are me six years ago. They have a five- or six-year-old and a younger child or two. Many can't afford private school to access a Christian education, and/or they find homeschooling too overwhelming or lonely. Some have a child in public or private school but are unhappy with the long days, testing, subject matter, or another aspect. Some travel a lot and want a school experience with the flexibility of homeschooling.

All want their kids to participate in a classroom with a teacher and friends, but also want the customization and flexibility that comes with one-on-one schooling at home.

Most of our families are on one income or one plus a little. Dad working full-time and Mom part-time is a common demographic, and our part-time school lends itself well to that dynamic. Some moms are nurses or counselors or work from home, and, with our support, they can homeschool but also work. Many other moms are home full-time and have young babies and toddlers as well.

We have a few moms who work full-time, although two full-time working parents is not our primary market. These families usually choose full-time school, but we have had a few. We have had a couple dads who stay home while Mom works full-time, and a couple of single moms who homeschool with the help of extended family.

We have tradespeople and professionals. We have a decent representation of Catholic families and several Protestant denominations represented, as well as unchurched families.

### *Filling the Gap*

In 2022, I attended the First National Conference for Hybrid Schools in Kennesaw, GA. In one room were over 150 hybrid school founders from all over the nation. Talking to some of them, I heard all sorts of interesting ideas and stories. Some ran high schools, some ran elementary, some ran both. Some had tiny programs or hadn't opened yet, and some served hundreds. Some were brand new or a few years old but a couple had been around for over ten years.

Most of us seemed to be in the same boat. We had the same questions about how to handle home days, buildings, hiring, and finances. Most of us had programs that had grown quickly. Some of the speakers discussed how this type of schooling was currently flying under the radar of regulators, but this might not be the case forever. It was validating to meet so many people that were just like us. Entrepreneurs who saw a need, worked hard, and filled it.

Hybrid schooling meets a need for all sorts of families. One that can be provided by anyone willing to work, learn and experiment. It helps to have a couple people or a small team to spread the load and fill gaps.

It doesn't matter if you are a teacher or not, are good with people or not, studied Economics or English. An entrepreneur sees a need and fills it, wisely, and with a lot of hard work and preparation.

## CONCLUSION

According to Gallup, almost one in four parents are unsatisfied with their own school based on experience with their eldest child. The numbers plummet from there with two-thirds of all adults in America unsatisfied with schools, including 40% of those same parents when asked about all schooling and not just their own experience with their own child.<sup>3</sup>

That's a lot of dissatisfied parents. And parents are not just complaining. They are doing something about it. In the ten years between 2006 and 2016, homeschooling grew slightly from just under 2 million kids to 2.3 million. But in the seven years since then, homeschooling has increased by a whopping 50% with 3.2 million kids being homeschooled in 2022. A huge jump happened after the pandemic of 2020, and while some of those parents stopped homeschooling after the first year... a whole bunch stuck with it.<sup>4</sup>

Data shows that over 3.5 million children are now schooled at home in the US. This is over half the number enrolled in private schools (9%) and over 5% of all children in America. Another 7% attend charter schools.<sup>5</sup>

That means one out of five kids in the country have parents choosing something other than their local public school, which millions of them still have to pay for.

What is up with that?

Not to get political, if that is even possible when talking about taxpayer-funded services... but there is little question that public schools have become a catalyst for spreading certain belief systems.

Millions of parents who disagree with the agenda put forward in the books and resources of their public schools are looking for ways to have more say in their children's education. Getting involved in the school board, voting, and speaking up are all excellent and necessary methods. But for many, millions, this isn't enough.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/510401/education-satisfaction-ties-record-low.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/hhp/2023/wk57/educ4\\_week57.xlsx](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/hhp/2023/wk57/educ4_week57.xlsx)

Additionally, the health of young children and teens looks bleak as research shows that children are stressed, anxious, and often physically unhealthy. Over 8% of school-aged kids, nearly one in ten, is officially diagnosed with anxiety or depression.<sup>6</sup>

There are a myriad of variables that may contribute to this problem, but the strong push for academic performance at ever earlier ages, and highly scheduled and busy childhoods, just might be a couple of them. The brief few years of rapid physical and mental development and exploration are often spent sitting at desks and running to activities with barely time for play or a healthy meal.

Even if we set stress and political agendas aside, the one thing schools are supposed to do well—literacy—they seem to be failing at an alarming rate. U.S. students often do not read, write, do math, or know history well. They perform poorly. From what one can garner from testing, only about one in three perform at “Proficient” levels in Reading Assessment. That means two out of three are considered “Basic” or “Below”.<sup>7</sup> The numbers aren’t much different for math.

Data is clear that plenty of parents aren’t happy, they have good reasons, and they are looking for options. Most of them know about private schools, homeschools, and maybe charter schools. Some or all of those choices may be available to them, but some may not be. Geographic, practical, and financial reasons keep many students stuck where they do not thrive. Hybrid schools certainly are not the answer for every child, and the nation needs good people reforming every aspect of public and private schooling. However, hybrid schooling offers another choice that makes private education more accessible and homeschool more manageable.

Private educational models can be varied to meet the needs of different families. It is a competition in the best sense of the word. Even the same organization can offer two- and three-day programs, required home assignments or just recommendations, shorter or longer days, or can specialize in core skills or in humanities, STEM, or the arts. They can be legal schools or not. They can be nonprofits or LLCs. They can customize to the geographic or socioeconomic

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

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<https://wamu.org/story/19/01/02/why-millions-of-kids-cant-read-and-what-better-teaching-can-do-about-it/>

needs of their area with larger or smaller classes, higher or lower tuition fees, longer or shorter days, or many other innovative options.

As long as educational freedom is protected, passionate entrepreneurs in the private sector can meet educational needs with creative solutions. Hybrid schools can be an excellent catalyst for the reformed pedagogy and a customized and creative education that the nation is desperate for.

*Afterword*

I hope that my story has inspired you to think creatively about this model of schooling for your community. If you identified with any part of this story, I'd be happy to hear from you! Email me at [rebecca@startahybridschool.com](mailto:rebecca@startahybridschool.com).

If you think you might be able to find a friend and become an innovative educational entrepreneur (and I'll bet you can!), check out: [www.startahybridschool.com](http://www.startahybridschool.com) where I have a few resources to help you. Make sure you sign up for the email list since I am working on a Hybrid School Start-Up Handbook where I am compiling tips and information I wish I had known when I started out.

Blessings to you and thanks for reading!