

EDITORIAL:

Precious Cargo, Part Five

by [Bill Hudson](#) · April 8, 2015

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Mayors around the country, no matter how centrist or progressive, get that charter schools have become one of several good options for parents to choose from, if they are performing well...

At the end of our first day on the road, following our initial visit to Vision Charter Academy in Delta, we checked into our motel in Glenwood Springs and ordered take-out from a local Chinese restaurant. The food was quite decent, and naturally included the requisite fortune cookies. The first cookie we opened, gave us this message:



By the end of the five-school trip, two days later, we knew a couple of things for certain. Every charter school has its own unique personality. And all charter schools face some of the very same challenges.

The same can be said for families.

“Families” were the essential core of our conversations during our visit to Mesa Valley Community School (MVCS) in Grand Junction. Our hosts were Laurajean Downs, executive director of the school, and Gail Giandonato, one of the charter school’s founding parents.

The three little girls we’d brought along — Liberty, Amelie and Simone — amused themselves with crayons and other distractions.



A conversation about charter schools, with Gail Giandonato and Laurajean Downs, at Mesa Valley Community School in Grand Junction.

MVCS is perhaps the only charter school of its kind in Colorado, even though it was originally a copy of the Vision Charter Academy school in Delta. MVCS serves only homeschooling families. The bulk of the instruction happens at home, within the family unit, but the work is tracked by MVCS “highly qualified” advisors, and the families agree to allow their children take the same standardized tests as the conventional students in the Grand Junction school district. In exchange for those concessions, the homeschooling families get access to some “highly qualified” instruction and counseling, and to certain kinds of educational materials.

Megan Riddle, one of our committee members, asked why parents were choosing this kind of model.

Gail Giandonato:

“It’s kind of changing. Originally, our families were the traditional homeschoolers, who homeschooled for religious reasons. But now, we’re getting more families who are choosing to remove their kids from public school because they’re not fitting in, for whatever reason, in the traditional classroom setting. So we’re seeing little different population. I think our mix is leaning more in that directions, as far as our new enrollment.”

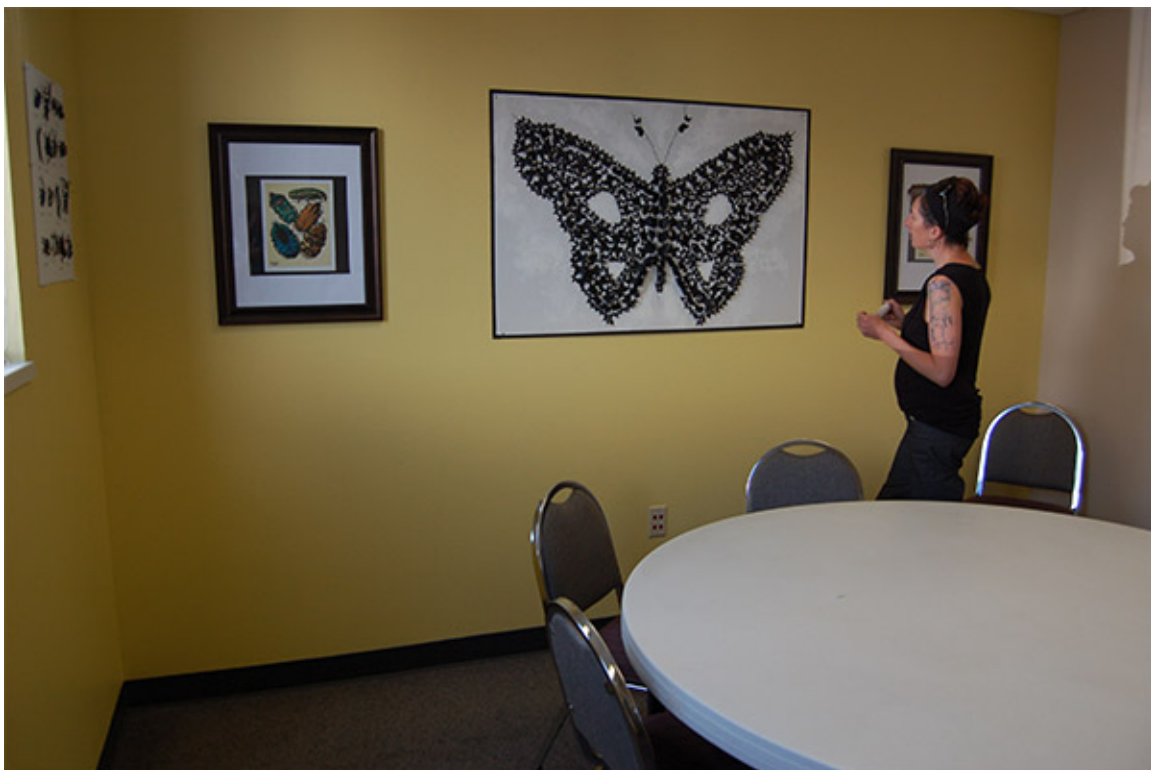
Laurajean Downs:

“If you’re a real traditional homeschooling family, and you’ve homeschooled forever, you’re probably not going to want our oversight. People who want to

homeschool totally on their own do not appreciate us... and it's just a battle the whole time. We want families who are looking for the kind of support we can offer. So we don't try to tap into that traditional homeschooling market as much as maybe we could. The most appreciative ones, we find, are the families that have come out of the public schools and didn't realize they had a choice. And they don't know what to do, and love the guidance.

"We have lots of them come to the enrollment meeting and say, 'We don't care about the money. We just want the advisor.' It's all about the advisor — which is fun for us, to get to walk them through that. The family is pretty motivated at that point, because they've had a bad experience [in a conventional school], and they're pretty dedicated to making it work. And they tend to do really well."

Inside its walls, Mesa Valley Community School looks nothing like a conventional school. The space reminded me instead of a corporate office, where professionals meet with, and advise, clients. Lots of small meeting rooms, and defined, adult workspaces, where intimate activities can take place.





The main office space for Mesa Valley Community School, a unique charter school that serves exclusively homeschooling families in Grand Junction.

And indeed, that is the main activity at MVCS: professionals, meeting with and advising clients. The professionals are “highly qualified” — but not necessarily “certified” — teachers. The clients are families — parents and school-age children.

Here in America, our children are educated, simultaneously, through two rather different systems.

The first is the Family System. The second is the School System.

The Family System is, generally speaking, intimate; multi-age; and driven by biological and emotional commitments. It’s been around for... what, a million years?

The School System — a very modern invention — is generally more institutional; same-age; and driven mainly by professional and financial commitments.

The Family System of education has always depended heavily upon a child’s innate curiosity, and on his or her desire to imitate and emulate the older individuals in the family. During the first five years of life, an American child educated strictly within the Family System typically learns: the basic grammatical structure of the English language; basic counting, drawing, and reading skills, climbing, running, jumping, dancing, singing, debating, the basics of negotiating, the basics of nutrition, and various forms of psychological manipulation. (Not an exclusive list.) Typically, a home-educated five-year-old has a vocabulary of about 2,000 words, without suffering through a single “vocabulary lesson.”

Nowadays, however, many American children under the age of five spend most of their waking hours in daycare situations. That is to say, in a School System. These children, generally speaking, learn all of the same skills as a child raised at home. An ambitious (and controversial) study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, released in 2001, calculated that, by the age of five, children raised mainly in daycare situations will be slightly more advanced in math and reading skills than a child raised at home, but might exhibit more behavioral and social problems.

In other words: a five-year-old raised mainly in either System will, with luck, turn out basically “okay.”

Since the 1980s, however, the growing homeschooling movement in America has led to a situation where older, school age children — age 5 through 18 — are being educated for their entire childhood within the Family System. Homeschooling has been recognized as a legal educational option in all 50 states — thanks in part to a 1923 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, that parents have a fundamental right to “establish a home and bring up children” ... along with the right to “worship God according to the dictates of [their] own conscience.”

My research suggests that somewhere between 2 million and 3 million children are currently homeschooling in the U.S. What do we know about this situation? How do children turn out, when they are raised for their entire life outside the School System? Do they become “better people” than students educated in schools?

From what I can tell, we don’t know much about that, and we’re not likely to learn much more in the near future. Children raised in the School System are tested and tested and tested — but only on a very limited number of academic skills. Homeschooled children, meanwhile, are rarely tested in the same manner, and even if they are, the test results are usually private.

I’ve come across claims that homeschooled students, on average, perform above the 70th percentile for most academic subjects, while the average for a public school child is the 50th percentile. But typically, the homeschoolers who participated in these studies were not randomly sampled; they were from families who *chose* to participate in the studies.

In 2009, testing company ACT released the results of a recent college entrance test. It appeared that homeschooled children had achieved an average score of 22.5 — out of a possible score of 36. Public school students scored an average 21.5.

Other research suggests that homeschooled kids are somewhat more likely than their public school peers, to participate in community service organizations.

Still other research suggests that homeschooled children generally perform better in college, and are more likely to stay and complete their degree. But again, the differences are not dramatic. Statistically significant, perhaps, but not breathtaking.

Kids will be kids, no matter how they are educated.

I'm guessing that one of the key discussions our board will be having over the next year — the volunteer board of the Pagosa Charter School Initiative — will be: can a charter school combine the best of the Family System, with the best of the School System?

Is that precisely what's happening at Mesa Valley Community School?



Bill Hudson founded the Pagosa Daily Post in 2004 in hopes of making a decent living writing about local politics. The hope remains.

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