

# Vague Answers to Pointed Questions

*A teacher-parent-wonk shops for a school*

by SHEILA BYRD CARMICHAEL

**BY THE TIME MY DAUGHTER WAS NEARING** kindergarten age, I had already spent nearly 50 years in schools: 20 as a student; 8 as a teacher; and 20 as an education policymaker and adviser to schools and school systems, especially in the area of standards and curriculum. So when it came to looking at schools for my baby, I surely knew my stuff. Now I wish I didn't.

The teachers and administrators at my daughter's schools probably do, too. Imagine a parent expecting answers to questions like, "What is your approach to teaching reading and math?" or "Which early-reading program do you use?" and "May I look at the curriculum?"

The following are actual statements made in response by admissions directors, administrators, and even those in charge of academics at the schools I visited during our search:

"We don't have a reading program per se. . . . It's hard to explain, but the kids just get it."

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"Of course your children are going to learn math and reading, but what we care most about is building their curiosity and their love of learning."

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"We don't really have a curriculum; we meet each child where he or she is."

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"We decided we don't need to teach grammar anymore because of spell check."

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"You can come in and look at the curriculum, but we don't let parents make copies or take it home."

All of these responses were uttered in private schools. I am an ardent proponent of public and private school choice, by the way; and, as Catholics, my husband and I wanted a Catholic education for our daughter if possible. But there was no Catholic school in our community, so we tried a year of Montessori and two years of Episcopalian schooling before finding a spot this year in a Catholic school about 45 minutes from home. Each school has had its own cultural and academic pluses and minuses, but they have all shared a devotion to warmed-over progressivism, a focus on process and skills over content knowledge, and a tendency to teach to the lowest common denominator. Nimble differentiation? Not so much. The most fascinating phenomenon? The omnipresence of former public-school teachers who say they

came to teach in a private school so they didn't have to "deal with" state standards and tests.

Whenever I have asked for a syllabus, a scope and sequence, or anything at all resembling a codification of what my daughter should know and be able to do by the end of the school year, I have gotten vague statements resembling the worst state standards I ever reviewed or rewrote. It is even less productive to ask about instructional philosophy or how we will all know whether the students have achieved these vague goals. That's when they start with the talk about conceptual understanding, problem solving, 21st-century learning, and "curiosity." It astounds me that teachers and administrators, especially in private schools, still think it is acceptable to offer such vague answers to parents, or worse, profess that they don't want to hamstring teachers' and students' "creativity."

Why do I still have to explain that we can focus on content, skills, and creativity simultaneously, and that doing so makes school a lot more fun for students and easier for teachers? Why can't they understand that analyzing texts distinguished for the truth of their content and the beauty of their craft—whether literary or informational—is a far better way to acquire and practice language and math skills than following a cacophonous basal or leveled reading program in which the texts are mediocre at best? It might actually mean that the wee ones will learn some history, science, and art, too!

As hard as I have worked to bring rigorous, content-rich standards, reasonable assessments, inspiring curricula, and accountability to public schools, I am dumbfounded to see how little of it has permeated the private schools I visited. I am grateful that my daughter is in a Catholic school that

nurtures her faith, her compassion, and her patriotism, but we chose the school despite, not because of, its academic approach. I still wish all parents could take their per-pupil allotments and send their children to the schools of their choice, but if they could, I'm far from convinced that private schools—simply by virtue of being private—would necessarily ensure a challenging, content-rich, fun-filled liberal arts curriculum with transparent accountability for delivering it.

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