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CHRISTIANS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION: A MATTER OF BIBLICAL JUSTICE

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The personal decision not to send your children to public school should not prevent you from advocating for the millions of children in the public school system. Unfortunately, too many Christians have abandoned public schools altogether.

The first time I heard the term “government schools” in a derisive way is when I came to seminary. Surrounded by theologically conservative and evangelical Christians, the assumption seemed to be that true believers would never trust their children to “Caesar.”

Fresh from seven years of teaching and being a principal in a public charter school in the Mississippi Delta, I wasn’t prepared for the opposition to public schooling that I heard from my classmates. Some contended that it was, at best, neglectful and, at worst, sinful for Christians to surrender their children to the secular humanism oozing from the pages of science textbooks and dripping from the lips of liberal educators.

But I never thought inculcating one’s children with a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ and concern for public schools were mutually exclusive. More significantly, when I thought about public education, I thought about the children.

Facing Facts. For the first time in fifty years, a majority (51 percent) of children in public schools are considered low income. In my own state of Mississippi, that percentage is far higher, at 71 percent.¹

Since poverty is such a striking factor for kids in public schools, what are their likely outcomes? A study by the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that low-income

students are five times more likely to drop out of high school than their middle school peers, and six times more likely than upper-income students.²

A recent report finds just 9 percent of students from the lowest-income quartile earn a bachelor's degree by age twenty-four.³ This is only an increase of 3 percent since 1970. Meanwhile, 70 percent of students from the highest-income quartile earn a degree, up from 40 percent in 1970.

The Impact on Image-Bearers. Anyone can trot out droves of statistics, but public education is about warm-blooded human beings, not just cold, hard facts.

As a sixth grade teacher, I couldn't figure out why one of my students kept falling asleep in class. She typically earned high grades, and inattentiveness wasn't the norm for her. Another teacher had to tell me that the student's mother had died, and her single father worked long hours. My young scholar was tired in class because she had to get up in the middle of the night to take care of her baby sister while her dad was out working.

Another student persistently disregarded the school uniform policy. While he stayed roughly in the confines of the polo shirt and khakis required of all students, everything else — shoes, socks, belt, undershirt — consistently were missing or out of code. The problem, I finally discovered, was a type of homelessness I hadn't known existed. This student had a roof over his head, or rather many roofs. He stayed with two or three different people within the span of a week, and he never knew if the house he stayed at one night would have all the correct elements of his uniform when he woke up there in the morning.

Yet another student faced a heartrending string of tragedies with the poise of a seasoned saint. This fifth grader lost her mother to an unexpected complication after an outpatient surgical procedure. Then the aunt who had taken the child in after her mother's death also unexpectedly died. Through it all, this child still came to school and managed to find the strength to continue.

Teachers and administrators are not, and cannot be, the Messiah. God already sent Him. But the Lord sends His followers as well. He sends them to the places with the most severe want and where people are the most marginalized. Children, including those in public schools, are some of society's most vulnerable constituents. There is a need for believers there.

Concern and Caution. Many Christians, though, have concerns that public education derails Christian teaching. In May of 2016, with President Obama's approval, the Department of Justice and the Department of Education issued a joint "letter of guidance" on transgender students and restrooms in public schools. The letter indicates that schools should let students use the restroom of their chosen gender identity, even if it differs from their biological sex. Violation of this norm, the message implied, might affect federal funding to the school.⁴ In light of stances that constrict religious freedom or contradict biblical morality, Christian parents may legitimately choose nonpublic school options for their own children. But this is not an argument

to persuade Christian parents to send their children to public schools. It is a caution not to let your personal choice about education prevent you from doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Christians have freedom to educate their children in whatever system they wish, so long as they diligently teach them the commands of the Lord (Deut. 6:6–7). If you don't send your own child to public school, however, does that mean you don't have to care about the children who are there?

Education Is Justice. Improving education is about biblical justice. Scripture compels believers to intervene on behalf of society's most vulnerable, and this certainly includes children. The same Spirit who animates activism on behalf of unborn children fuels action for children in the public school system. All human beings, from conception throughout life, are made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect (Gen. 1:26–28). Children are a blessing from the Lord (Ps. 127:3–5; 139:13). And Jesus broadcasts His love for children in the Gospels (Matt. 19:14; Luke 18:29). Protecting life isn't just for children in the womb; it must extend to every aspect of a person's well-being. A biblically pro-life stance should also improve the quality of life. Public education isn't just about individuals; it's about community. Public schools form the cornerstone of any community. They are centers where family, economics, civics, and numerous other social factors intersect. Improved public education is a positive good not only for kids but also the common good. For all those churches and Christians who tout their desire to "seek the welfare of the city" (Jer. 29:7 ESV), their claims are clanging cymbals if they exclude public schools. As stated earlier, just over half the students in the public education system qualify as low income. The Bible commands Christians to care for the poor. Deuteronomy 15:11 says, "Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land'" (ESV). So if we care about the poor, then we must care about public education.

How to Serve Public Schools. Christians don't need to send their own children to public schools, or even have children of their own, to help schools flourish. For believers who want to serve public education, here are a few methods. One of the most obvious, but difficult, ways to serve public schools is by becoming a teacher. While a bachelor's degree is required, you need not have a degree specifically in education to enter the classroom these days. After college, I joined the Teach For America program, which requires participants to teach in a low-income urban or rural school for two years. Many teachers, as I did, stay beyond their initial commitment. Such nontraditional teaching programs can help those who want to teach but have expertise in other areas or can be a way for adults to get into the profession as a second career. Churches may also assist in public education. Many churches "adopt" a school. They make a multiyear commitment to serving the school in any way they can. Prominent pastor Tony Evans started the Adopt-a-School Initiative. In this program, public schools serve as the delivery mechanism for a variety of services, from mentoring to summer camps to adult literacy. Churches should investigate their local community to find the nearest public school and ask school leaders how they can help. Additionally, churches can assist public schools by

equipping their members for engagement. Leaders should consider forming an affinity group specifically for educators. Faculty, staff, and administrators in all kinds of school settings — public, private, Christian, home school — can come together as Christian educators and spur one another on to love and good works (Heb. 10:24). This group doesn't even have to be a formal gathering organized by church officers. It can arise organically from congregation members themselves, but leaders should craft a culture that encourages such initiatives.

There Are Children Here. Serving in public schools can be a singularly effective way to demonstrate God's grace and mercy. Kids, and not just poor ones, need so much. Whether it's volunteering to read to a third grader, hiring a high school student as an intern at your company, or running for the local school board, every believer can contribute to the health of public schools. I have had the honor of working with countless Christians in public education, from teachers to bus drivers to accountants to custodians to coaches. Christians have been involved in all areas of public education, but there is room for more involvement. I hope believers will ask themselves whether their personal opposition to public education has caused them to ignore or reject opportunities to minister to children in that setting. It is a privilege to serve God's people in public education. After all, there are children here. — *Jemar Tisby*

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NOTES

- 1 "Majority of U.S. Public School Students Are in Poverty," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2015.
- 2 Chris Chapman et al., "Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972–2009," National Center for Education Statistics, October 2011.
- 3 Melissa Korn, "Big Gap in College Graduation Rates for Rich and Poor, Study Finds," *Wall Street Journal*, n.p., February 3, 2015.
- 4 Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students,
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201605-title-ix-transgender.pdf>.