

Government Funded Homeschools
To Hope or Not to Hope
By Kevin Swanson

I'm in a quandary. For 15 years, my wife and I have been homeschooling our children out on the eastern plains of Colorado, and then we get a call from the nice people down at the government schools. They said they were from the government and they were here to help me, or something to that effect. Apparently, there are various programs from assorted school districts around Colorado, with nice names like "Faith," "Hope" and "Vision," intended to provide government funding for homeschoolers. Some of the programs offer free computers, some offer free on-line classes, some offer free classes two days a week, and some offer free cash, cold and hard. Now, at first we were filled with hope about such programs, for we have been working hard to pay our taxes in order that other kids can get an education or something to that effect in places called "public schools." And, all the while we are saving the state \$35,000 per year by homeschooling our five children.

But before I stuck my hand deep into the trough for my fair share, I thought I would ask the folks from the Faith, Hope, and Vision programs a few questions.

Me: Let me get this straight. You are going to give me \$2,000 each for the children that I homeschool. And all I have to do is bring my kid down to your little get-acquainted seminar on September 4th. What does your school district get out of this?

Faith: You get \$2,000. And we get to keep \$5,000 for administration costs.

Me: What administration costs? Writing me the \$2,000 check?

Faith: Well, yeah. And, we want to be available, in case you need any assistance?

Me: Assistance?

Faith: Sure. We have an office of helpful and experienced teachers who are there to help you if you need them.

Me: What assurances do I have that you will never put any controls on our homeschool program? I'm sure you understand that homeschooling, if it is about anything, is about the freedom to tailor-make an education program to the needs of each individual family and child. We also like to use what we call "Christ-centered" materials for our homeschool program. Would that be alright?

Faith: Whatever you want to do. I can assure you that as long as I am running this program, we are only in it for the \$5,000. We could care less what you do with your \$2,000 cut of the pie.

Me: What about Biblically oriented materials?

Faith: Well. . . Sure. Until the ACLU finds out that you're using state monies to pay for religious education.

Me: Then what?

Faith: To be honest, we have had programs in the state allow for religious-oriented materials, but inevitably it seems they have had to restrict these uses of the funds by court mandate or, at least by mandate of the state department.

Well, that's how the conversation went. But as I said at the beginning, I am in a quandary. It gets more complicated the more I look into this money.

For one thing, this controversy is virtually splitting our support group in half. Some take the money and some don't. Those that take the money tell us it is their fair share, which is probably true. Those that don't

take the money are concerned that government money means government control, which is generally true.

But is it ethically wrong for me to take a little money from the government? We benefit from government subsidies at every level from libraries to agricultural subsidies and price fixing. Just because one homeschooler takes a little money, does not necessarily mean that everybody will take it, and the state isn't going to tighten controls on the entire homeschooling movement unless a preponderance of the movement is taking the money. Take for example, the act of walking across the lawn. While it isn't essentially wrong for one person to take a stroll across the lawn, if everybody in the world tromped over the grass, that would certainly kill it. Now if every homeschooler in Colorado took the government subsidy, this would surely result in a reinstatement of absolute government control over homeschools, not to mention an elimination of any semblance of a Biblical worldview in the education of our children.

Then again, maybe I should look out for myself, and \$2,000 per student would amount to \$10,000 for our five kids, and that's some serious cash. As one guy down at the co-op told me this afternoon, "The movement be damned. It's free cash, and we're living better since we started collecting it last year." That does sound a little self-serving, does it not?

But do I really care if the government controls the education of my children? Does anybody remember why we started homeschooling fifteen years ago? If government does such a tremendous job at educating children, why do parents see the need to support a private school movement or the homeschooling movement? I guess if my values in life are convenience, big houses, and an extra \$10,000, then I wouldn't see any downside to taking the ten grand. For example, is freedom from increased government involvement in our lives (which, according to the guy from the Faith program, probably isn't going to be that significant anyway), of more value than \$10,000? I guess that's the question. But another question that keeps coming back to me over and over again is this: Why would families go to jail in the 1980s and 1990s over their insistence on the right to homeschool their children? Why would parents like Juergen and Rosemarie Dudek be willing to serve three months in prison and pay exorbitant fines to the German courts for homeschooling their children in the year 2008? Are these people crazy, or do they see something that I am missing?

Okay, if the government funded and controlled just a little piece of the education of my children, perhaps they would be reticent to seek any additional control over that education. You wouldn't think government would ever try to expand its control and extend its big old camel neck and shoulders into the tent, would you? Could such thinking be an attack of naivete, especially since history has only proven the opposite 1,000 times over again.

But, as I think about this matter of freedom and government control, I think the issue goes even deeper into the human spirit. Suppose for a moment that I am an unwed welfare mom or the live-in boyfriend of some welfare mom living in the inner city of Chicago. Would the funding of my family's sustenance on the part of the local government welfare office have a negative impact on my character, on who I am, and who my family will be in a generation or two from now? What do these handouts do to the character of the families involved? If somebody else is going to feed my children, what does that do for my sense of responsibility, my own love and care for my children? What does that do for my children's perception of the solidarity and relevance of family? How does this undermine the significance and importance of family in the hearts and minds of children? Certainly, these government hand-outs have done little to sharpen the character of these families, or to strengthen the family unit. In 1960, only 5% of children were born without fathers. Today, the rate is 37%, an increase of 700%. And speaking of inner city welfare moms in Chicago, a whopping 70% of black children are born without fathers. Have the government programs done anything positive for the character of these families and the strength of a nation? It looks to me like things are just getting worse and worse. Charity without personal accountability seems to corrupt responsibility.

Now, back to me. I'm sitting here wondering what this free money from the government in Colorado would do to my character, my sense of responsibility to my family, and my commitment to provide my children with the best education I can possibly find. If it doesn't weaken my sense of responsibility, could it possibly weaken my children's sense of responsibility to their children in years to come?

If the homeschooling movement is about anything, it is about parents recovering the responsibility for their own children's education. And a huge part of recovering that responsibility is taking ownership of the funding of it. Will the government dollars undermine the will to be responsible, and the desire to be free?

I think of the words of that great patriot, Samuel Adams who understood the value of freedom and was willing to die for it:

"If you love wealth more than liberty, the tranquility of servitude better than the animating contest of freedom, depart from us in peace. We ask neither your counsel nor your arms. May your chains rest lightly upon you and may posterity forget that you were our countrymen?"

Freedom used to be a value. I wonder if the breathtaking contest of freedom and the will to take the responsibilities of self-government are what it takes to create a prosperous and a blessed land.

But, there is a fairness issue here, and I brought this up to my wife. "How can it be fair," I asked, "that the government taxes me \$5,000 each year for state and local taxes, and I see almost no return on that taxation by way of subsidization of our education costs?" At first I think she was a little taken back by the impeccable logic behind the question. But, after thinking about it for a moment or two, she returned with a helpful analogy:

"Honey, what if the government initiated a Tennis Shoe fund, because all of God's children need shoes. Now each year, the Internal Tennis Shoe Service would tax you \$300 for this fund. At the end of the year, they would issue you a Voucher for \$200 so you could buy shoes, keeping \$100 for administrative costs. Of course, you would be limited to certain government-approved vendors and certainly you would be forbidden from purchasing shoes with any kind of Christian insignia upon them. Don't you think a better idea would be to keep your money and go get your own shoes? That is the difference between a voucher and a tax credit."

So the questions just kept flowing and flowing. Is freedom that important? How much freedom are we going to lose for \$10,000 a year? How do we know how much control the government will attempt to impose on us ten years from now if we take this money today? Would I go to jail over the right to educate my children the way I see fit? Are we making too big of an issue out of this?

Freedom has been a major issue in the past. Didn't we fight a war over that back in the 1770s? As I recall, there were a good many covenanters, independents, pilgrims, and puritans who were imprisoned, tortured, burned alive, drowned, and hanged because they insisted on the freedom to appoint their own pastors, instead of taking the ones certified by the state. Wasn't this nation founded by extremists who would sooner die in a wilderness than submit to a state-controlled church?

Freedom is an important value. Some will die for freedom for the church and the right to religious worship. Others will die for freedom for the family and the right to determine the education of their children. Then others could hardly find anything worth dying for.

Is there *any* value for which we might be willing to lay down our lives? Maybe that's the question we should be asking. Then we might be willing to spend \$200 on Christ-centered curriculum and the freedom to make our own choices in the education of our children.

Note: The Faith program does not exist. It is used for illustrative purposes only.

*Homeschooled himself in the 1960's and 70's, Kevin Swanson and his wife, Brenda, are now homeschooling their five children. Kevin has 35 years of experience in the homeschooling movement and serves as the Director of **Generations with Vision** – a ministry he founded to strengthen homeschool families around the country. www.generationswithvision.com*