

What Road is Your Homeschool Going Down?

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Veteran homeschoolers know the drill...put in your annual assessment selection with your third quarter report, assume your superintendent has accepted your choice if you do not hear anything, then submit either your child's testing results or narrative evaluation with your fourth quarter report. Like breathing, it is automatic. You walk down that road every year, not even giving it a second thought. It is that simple, unless your child is struggling. The struggling student has the potential to fail to make the 33rd percentile composite score on their annual standardized achievement test, or show one year's worth of progress. This is especially true for students with more significant special learning needs. For those parents, it may seem like the smooth road they had been traveling on from kindergarten through 3th grade is becoming bumpier and some sections may even be being washed out. The consequences of this are very serious.

Take a moment to step back and look at the big picture. Your homeschool can travel on many roads. These are Star Street, Denial Drive, Avoidance Avenue, Comparison Circle, and Remediation Road. If you have students who consistently breeze through school work and tests with straight A's and clear their standardized achievement tests in the 80th percentile or higher on all sections, then you are on Star Street, and you might just skip reading this article. If you have a student who is perhaps struggling in one or more areas, then your homeschool is possibly on one of the other streets and could be in danger. If that is your homeschool, I suggest you might want to read this article through to its conclusion. I will not spend any time on Star Street since this article does not apply to parents homeschooling on that road.

Let us move on to the first road, Denial Drive. On Denial Drive, parents overlook their child's struggles and focus on what they want to see. Let's face it, we are all in denial at some point for something. We are all human. The parent in denial may be telling themselves and or others that their child is just in a "stage" or will grow out of whatever their struggle is (academic, mental, physical, etc.). A parent may say, "My child does not have any learning problems. My child has a little trouble now and then, but it is nothing to worry about. My child just needs to apply himself more to his work. He needs more motivation. My child is just a little immature for their age." These parents fool themselves into believing either that their child will grow out of their troubled phase, or that their child's problem will go away by itself. Reality check: Learning struggles do not go away by themselves!

On the second road, Avoidance Avenue, the parent knows that their child is having difficulty by the child's resistance to doing the subject matter presented and/or is socially immature. Unfortunately, the common choice of the parent is to avoid the difficult subject by either watering down its content or more likely putting it off until the end of the week. It is not uncommon for these parents to switch curriculum multiple times during the year or not finish a subject by year-end. Some of these parents, though knowing that their child is struggling, refuse to seek help for fear of possible public school, government or other unwanted outside involvement. Reality check: Avoiding a problem will never solve it.

The third road is Comparison Circle. Comparison Circle is a dangerous road to travel. On this road, parents compare their children to others. Parents may say, "My children are better behaved than so and so's kids. So and so's child is a little behind in reading too." A parent may involve their struggling child in everything their peers are involved in, in an attempt to have their child do the same things as others. They do this while overlooking a learning problem that is brewing in the background. What a crisis if their children do not measure up to their homeschooled peers! God clearly states the real danger of this attitude in ***II Corinthians 10:12*** "*For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves, but they measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.*"

The final road is Remediation Road. Here parents keep a watchful eye on the progress of each of their children on an ongoing basis. When the road begins to get bumpy, these parents kick into 4-wheel drive. If the road is washed out, they build a bridge or go off-road. If something blocks their way, they get out, survey the situation, and figure out how best to either cut through, go over, or go around whatever it is that is blocking their child's progress. They do not sit by the way side waiting for someone else to come by and take care of their problem. They assess their child's situation regularly and take proactive steps to make sure they continue to move forward toward their goals.

Now that we have looked at the various roads that a homeschool can travel down, let us look at the danger that can lie at the end of them. How many of you have taken a full read of Regulation 100.10 lately? Have you ever read the section (i) (1-3) titled **Probation**? It is at the very end of the Regulation. Perhaps you thought it might not apply to your family. Go take a quick read. I have provided it below.

From Regulation 100.10

(i) Probation

(1) If a child's annual assessment fails to comply with the requirements of subdivision (h) of this section, the home instruction program shall be placed on probation for a period of up to two (2) school years. The parents shall be required to submit a plan of remediation, which addresses the deficiencies in the child's achievement, and seeks to remedy said deficiencies. The plan shall be reviewed by the school district. The school district may require the parents to make changes in the plan prior to acceptance.

(2) If after the end of any semester of the probationary period the child progresses to the level specified in the remediation plan, then the home instruction program shall be removed from probation. If the child does not attain at least 75% of the objectives specified in the remediation plan at the end of any given semester within the period of probation, or if after two (2) years on probation 100% of the objectives of the remediation plan have not been satisfied, the superintendent of schools shall provide the parents with the notice specified in paragraph (5) of subdivision © of this section and the board of education shall review the determination of noncompliance in accordance with such paragraph, except that consent of the parents to such review shall not be required.

(3) If during the period of probation the superintendent of schools has reasonable grounds to believe that the program of home instruction is in substantial noncompliance with these regulations that superintendent may require one or more home visits. Such home visit(s) shall be made only after three (3) days' written notice. The purpose of such visit(s) shall be to ascertain areas of noncompliance with these regulations and to determine methods of any such deficiencies. The home visit(s) shall be conducted by the superintendent or by the superintendent's designee. The superintendent may include members of a home instruction peer review panel in the home visit team.

How did you like the last paragraph on "home visits?" Your child's education is very serious business. The school districts do not want parents to pull their children from public school, try homeschooling, decide it is not working for them, and then have the children dumped back into the system in worse shape than when they left. Regulation 100.10 and the Probation clause (i) (1-3) are meant to protect the homeschooled student. Protect them from academic failure through a process of accountability that is placed upon the parent teacher. If parents choose to homeschool their child, they chose to be that child's primary teacher. The teacher is responsible for teaching that child what state law requires. If a teacher in public school has a student who is failing in one or more subjects, he or she is

required to refer that student for extra help. That extra help could include a wide range of special education services including resource room, a reading teacher, speech therapist or other professionals. In our current political and educational climate, it is critically important that ALL homeschool parents understand the seriousness of having a homeschool put on probation.

A number of factors can cause a child to score below the 33rd percentile on a standardized test or fail to make one year's worth of progress. For scoring below the 33rd percentile, there can be problems including but not limited to trouble with the computerized scoring, the child feeling sick on the day they took the test, having been distracted during the testing, or any number of things. Failing to make one year's worth of progress can be the result of a significant special learning need, unexpected medical issue, or something else. Regardless of the factors, it is in the best interest of both the parents and the child not to wait until the last minute, late in the fourth quarter, to give a standardized test. This is especially true when the parents know that a standardized test is required for their child's annual assessment in that year.

I am a huge advocate for homeschooling year round and for giving a standardized test every year. Annual standardized testing also lets a parent make sure that they are covering everything they need to in order for the child to move up to the next grade. Testing every year also provides important data to the parent teacher allowing them to further focus on areas where the child is struggling. Say the child scored in the 90th percentile in math and 70th percentile in language arts, but they scored in the 40th percentile in reading comprehension. That right there is a red flag to the parent that the child needs help with reading comprehension. Parents should be keeping a close watch on the child's weekly test scores in their regular subject areas. If the parent sees that the child is struggling with consistently low-test scores in a subject, they should take immediate action to begin remediation through whatever means possible! That includes getting additional outside testing done to determine if the child has a learning disability and getting any testing accommodations that may be needed. Year round homeschooling allows the parents additional teaching time to help remediate any weak subject areas. This is so important when teaching children with special learning needs.

Standardized testing administered every year allows parents to monitor how the child is doing over time as the material increases in difficulty. A perfect example is reading comprehension. In grades 1 through 3 the reading comprehension passages on standardized tests are very concrete and do not require much conceptual thinking, if any. Starting in 4th grade, however, there is a big jump in difficulty of the reading comprehension questions because the child is required to use much more conceptual thinking in order to answer many of the questions. A child may start out in the 80th percentile in reading comprehension in grade 1, but may begin to slip into lower and lower percentiles as they move up in grade level and the reading comprehension passages become more difficult. If a parent begins to see a downward trend year-to-year (two standardized tests) in any subject area, the warning bells, whistles, and sirens should be blaring!

For a parent who is new to homeschooling, who has recently pulled their child from public school, because of lack of academic progress or special learning needs, that parent should find out at what level their child is functioning at prior to diving head first into a homeschool-in-a-box grade level curriculum program. They should either use a skills inventory, administer the Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills - revised (available through PICC LEAH or HSLDA), or get private testing done to determine where the child's starting point is. It is good idea to give a standardized test to a child when they are first pulled out of public school. This will give the parent a base line score that they can use for comparison when they give a standardized test to the child at the end of the next school year. These two tests can be used to show one-year's growth, the other measure used in Regulation 100.10 to determine if a student's score shall be deemed adequate (Reg. 100.10(h)(1)(v)(b)). For instance, if the parent pulled the child from public school at the end of 8th grade and they gave them the CAT (California Achievement

Test) and they scored in the 20th percentile and then took the 9th grade CAT at the end of their first homeschool year and scored in the 20th percentile or higher, the child will have shown one-year's growth. Getting a baseline score will allow the parent the opportunity to put a remediation plan into place many months PRIOR to having to administer and submit a standardized test (if you are in a year where that is required), thus possibly avoiding the chance of a falling into a probationary situation. If they do not, that may be asking for trouble down the road.

Having your homeschool put on probation opens the door of your home to your school district, and not for tea and cookies with your superintendent! The Probation clause states: "If during the period of probation the superintendent of schools has reasonable grounds to believe that the program of home instruction is in substantial noncompliance with these regulations that superintendent may require one or more home visits." That is really scary! Many school districts in New York State are not homeschool friendly, so this should be an even greater incentive to buckle down and remediate if your child is struggling. If the parents need to remediate their child in any area, they must make measurable goals and objectives. Without measureable goals and objectives, there is no way to track the child's progress. Both parents, YES, BOTH, need to sit down TOGETHER and work out a plan. The parents should be accountable to each other in the formulation and implementation of the plan. The burden of remediation should NOT be borne by one parent alone. If the parents are members of HSLDA, they can contact the HSLDA Special Needs Coordinators for assistance and direction in setting up a plan. Parents Instructing Challenged Children (PICC) LEAH also has many valuable resources in the PICC LEAH Lending Library that can help parents with remediation plans and with the setting up of goals and objectives. PICC LEAH Lending Library Resources include the Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills – revised, Skills Evaluation by The Weaver Curriculum, Luke's Life List and Luke's School List inventories by Joyce Herzog, Be Your Our Reading Specialist, Teaching the Right Brain Child and Right Brain Phonics by Dianne Craft, and many other resources as well. Membership to PICC LEAH is free for all current NYS LEAH members. All PICC LEAH members have access to the PICC LEAH Lending Library. Library items are shipped to members through the mail for a small loan fee that covers postage and envelopes.

As a child progresses from grade to grade, if their foundational skills are not solid, they are going to fall behind. If the child has a learning disability, that learning disability is not going to go away on its own. Direct action on the part of the parent is required. If the parent is unable to help the child, then they are obligated to seek outside assistance from a tutor, outside educational consultant, or other professional. In some cases, the progress of a child with special learning needs may slow or even stop regardless of what interventions are taken. This can and does happen. In situations like these, it is imperative that both parents work with a professional familiar with their child's disabilities to make sure that their expectations are in line with the actual abilities and capabilities of their child. If parents' expectations are not realistic, they are asking for trouble. Parents cannot ask their child to do something they mentally and or physically cannot do because of a neurological problem. I am not saying that parents should give up when progress significantly slows or stops, but am saying that they need to be aware that they may need to adjust their expectations and accept the child God has blessed them with for who that child is. Parents should NEVER give up, but should constantly be in prayer asking for God's guidance to help them adjust to and equip their child to blossom into the beautiful human being the Lord has given them. Many children with special learning needs will continue to have those needs into adulthood. For these children, their parents may have to work to equip them with strategies to get them through the standardized tests, and cope with everyday life skills.

A homeschool can travel down many roads. God uses those roads to teach parents lessons. He uses our children to teach us in mighty ways. God has created each unique and beautiful child just like He

has created the flowers. These precious children need to be cared for and we parents are the gardeners who God has assigned to the task. Do not deny or avoid your child's problems, and do not compare your child to others. Weed, fertilize, and water the garden the Lord has planted in your family.

Parents never want their homeschool put in a probationary situation. The mission is clear: If your child is struggling, it is your responsibility to take proactive steps to ensure that you meet the needs of your child. Help, support, and encouragement are available through HSLDA (www.hslda.org) and PICC LEAH (www.piccnys.com). There are no excuses.

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