

# Writing Our Own Curriculum

Schools generally have carefully planned courses of study that carefully avoid teaching things over and over again. If dinosaurs are studied in first grade, then they won't be taught again in second grade, long division won't be introduced before simple division, and so on. Schools need to make careful plans so that the many teachers can work together. These careful, orderly plans are the school's "curriculum." Parents who teach their own children don't share the same difficulty. They know what their children know and what they have already done (unless of course the children had attended school for awhile!). While many homeschoolers use a correspondence school or "package" curriculum which sets out just such an orderly course of study, others, like us, follow their interests and their children's interests and flexibly build a curriculum as they go along.

We don't know exactly what we will be doing in six months, so, when we describe our curriculum to outsiders we tell where we have been.

## Cover All Subjects

If you need to seek approval for homeschooling from your school district, be prepared to do a good bit of writing. You'll most likely be asked for a "curriculum outline" or "planned course of study" for your children, which basically just means your overall plans and goals and possible resources you'll use in every subject area. It does NOT mean they want you to detail every moment of the next 180 days you spend with your child. It also does NOT mean that you have to PURCHASE a curriculum, though if you do, this of course makes your communication job much easier. You may then merely share with the district what you've bought, and it will in all likelihood look very official and get you approval. You can write up your own plans, though, and that is what this chapter is mainly about. And although the job can seem overwhelming at first, it can indeed be valuable to you in really sorting out your ideas, helping you realize what a good environment you are providing for your children at home. Here are some thoughts and ideas on how you might go about this work.

First of all, it means you will say SOMETHING about all of the required subject areas. In Pennsylvania, for example, for elementary school education, you need to say something about English (to include spelling, reading and writing); arithmetic; science; social studies (geography, history of the United States and PA, civics); safety education; health & physiology; physical education; music; and art.

THERE IS NO OFFICIAL "STATE CURRICULUM" OTHER THAN JUST SUCH A LIST OF SUBJECT AREAS -- it is up to each district to interpret these areas as

they see fit. And so it should be up to YOU also to interpret them as YOU see fit. BUT say something about each subject. Don't leave anything out or you're setting yourself up for them to say your program is incomplete or not well-rounded.

To this I'd add another, purely optional heading -- social education of your child. Say something positive about your child's social opportunities -- family values orientation, sibling relationships, "peer" experience in outside classes or clubs, participation in any organized homeschooling events (fairs, potluck suppers, homeschooling weekend, field trips), family visits, service work in community, "team" participation, access to wide age range of friends, church activities, evidence of social responsibility, etc. Many school districts will hit you with questions about this -- be ready to answer with specifics.

Do feel free to stress that your program is INTERDISCIPLINARY, meaning that although you have written each subject up separately, that in reality, you try to INTEGRATE as many subjects areas as possible. (This just means do several things at once -- i.e. study fractions while doubling a recipe or learning musical note values, or use mathematics to help set up a history time-line or measure wood for a building project.)

Also it would be very appropriate to say something about your child -- his learning style, interests, hobbies, strengths, developmental "weaknesses" if any. Don't be afraid of making your child seem not quite perfect in every area -- Kathy Terleski found that her district really appreciated her honesty and insight in problem areas. You can use your description of your child in defending your particular plans, saying that you have tailor-made your curriculum to fit his/her special needs.

If your child has never been in school, you might want to describe what you HAVE ALREADY done, and then indicate that you plan to continue in the same way this upcoming school year. Use any good past successes as further proof of your qualifications to teach.

## **List Resources**

Make LISTS of everything that could possibly be listed that might have an impact on what you do with your kids. Later organize it all into subject areas where possible. You may decide not to actually include everything in your final write-up, but you'll feel better about having some "extra evidence" to pull out if needed.

Count books and periodicals in your home, perhaps in each subject area. Mention if you frequently go to bookstores with your child, or the library, or library book sales, or swap books with other homeschooling families, or give books as gifts to your

children. Let them know you are LITERATE -- they won't necessarily assume you are. Unfortunately in dealing with most school people, you will have to prove your worth every step of the way. They may already have a mental image of homeschoolers as "abusive," totally uneducated parents, who can barely read or write, until you prove yourself otherwise.

List any "resource materials" you own or have borrowed from libraries -- tapes, records, films, videos, games, posters, science equipment (telescope, microscope, magnifying glasses, measuring cups, rulers, thermometer, etc.), globes and maps, sports equipment, art supplies, musical instruments. Don't worry too much if your child has not yet used these materials -- say you PLAN to use them, and list that they are available, that you always seek to provide your child with a wide variety of resources in all subject areas.

List any TRIPS you've taken in the past year, or plan to take in the coming year, and how you will INTEGRATE these into your "program" (make book about, scrap book, do experiments or art work as follow-up, tie in with history study, part of music appreciation program). Think not only of museums, and other "official" trips, but also of informal visits to friends' homes where your children might have been exposed to new ideas or "educational" toys or art or music, or to a new environment such as a farm, home-made house, or home business. Think of discussion ideas these visits generated, and list THEM.

List any family hobbies -- gardening (there's biology for you), cooking (math, chemistry, history, safety), pets (biology, responsibility, math -- how much does it cost to feed a goldfish for a year?), hiking (nature study, phys. ed.), going to concerts (music appreciation, social ability), stamp collecting (history, civics, art appreciation).

List any official textbook materials that you own, stating clearly that you purchased these materials yourself (this often impresses). Also list any "teacher"-type resource books you own or have read. Let them know that YOU know you can find the books you need to help plan a good program. After all, the textbooks that teachers use in college are not locked up in colleges -- they are often in your local library, second hand book store or library sale.

List any RESOURCE PEOPLE you are involved with, however sporadically. Good titles to use for these people might be "educational consultant," "curriculum advisor," "(specific subject area) specialist," or "private tutor," where appropriate. Think of librarians, private instructors, friends who happen to be certified teachers, friends who are enthusiastic about their fields or hobbies whom your kids might come in contact with (builders, friends from different countries, collectors, craftspeople, piano tuners, plumbers, etc.).

## Put a Coat and Tie on it

TYPE TYPE TYPE your final draft of your plan -- even if you have to barter services to get someone else to do it. Any format that makes your plan look more FORMAL, WELL-THOUGHT OUT, and ACADEMIC is useful with a tough district. You indeed want them to feel that you have gone to a lot of trouble to come up with your plan, and that you want it treated with respect. Typing is sort of like having your plan wear a coat and tie. Also keep in mind that the school people may not even read your document AT ALL, but they will look at its format and general headings.

Your philosophy and purpose CAN BE to have your children involved in choosing and planning and evaluating their own specific work, with your "parental guidance" of course. Don't feel you necessarily have to spell out EXACTLY what you plan to do in each area -- what specific books you'll read, etc.. You could instead state that your child will help in choosing and discussing books from a wide variety of types -- fiction, non-fiction, biography, historical fiction, mystery, folk-tales, drama, science, etc. Again, a goal you could write into your plan is that you want your child to realize the wide variety of books and resources available in all subject areas -- AND that is WHY you do not want to be limited to one textbook (such as the school district's). Just DON'T let the school people get the impression that you "don't do anything," just because you are not following some "canned curriculum" (or using their textbooks).

Do feel free to dress up your language a bit to make it seem more "educationese," but don't get caught in the trap of not knowing what you're saying (just like the school people...). Simple, clear writing is always good -- and appreciated. Here are a few terms that might be useful to you, though:

- *Sustained Silent Reading* (SSR) -- this just means that the child will choose his own reading matter, and read on his own without interruption or questioning -- you know, he'll READ. You might put in some time-frame on it -- "Jesse will be involved in a SSR reading program for at least 30 minutes daily, and keep his own record of books completed." SSR is a code word all administrators will know.
- *Sustained Silent Writing* (SSW) -- Yep, this is just plain old writing -- but writing that is self-chosen, not criticized by teacher while kid is writing. You might list here the types of writing your child has done, or that you hope to lead him to -- letters to friends or businesses, poems, journals, essays, submissions to magazines that publish children's work, reports on research, etc.

## Specify Evaluation Measures

Provide for some means of evaluation -- especially if you want to argue out of the yearly standardized test routine (not easy). Offer something ELSE -- you will share yearly a portfolio of your child's work in all subject areas, you will write up progress statements quarterly describing your child's work in all areas, you will have a private evaluator do a regular evaluation of your program, etc.. If you feel a strong point of your program is your history or science work, you may find that many standardized tests do not measure ANYTHING about those areas. You may want to offer some extra documentation to the district about these areas if that's the case. In fact, do ask WHAT areas are tested yearly, what test they use, what the purpose of the testing program is (they usually have to say it is "diagnostic," that it is designed to help the teachers know strengths and weaknesses so they can teach better -- NOT so that they can "flunk" kids, OR so they can say you can no longer homeschool...). Even if you do agree to yearly testing, I'd still recommend you also try to meet regularly with school people to share concretely what you're doing -- you don't want them to ONLY have test scores to evaluate your child by, especially if your child doesn't happen to test well.

Ask to see the school's textbooks (teacher's copies if possible) and their curriculum write-up to "help" you in writing up your own plan. You can often borrow general goal and philosophy statements from these books -- and how can they refute them? Many of the schools' goals are fine -- for example, "All children will receive reading instruction based on their individual needs and appropriate to their potential for learning. It is essential every child develop a positive self-concept recognizing their unique abilities, but simultaneously an understanding of their weaknesses..."

In general, you don't have to change the way you're teaching in order to write up your own curriculum. You just have to learn how to put what you are already doing in the best light.

## **Jesse's Fourth Grade Curriculum**

When faced with writing an "official" educational plan this past year for Jesse, age 9 and considered by the district a 4th grader, I realized I had to come up with a touch (at least) of fancy language to describe what we do about reading. I knew I couldn't just say, "Oh, we just let Jesse read whatever he wants to and he reads a lot." So here is the admittedly somewhat overblown prose I finally chose. Mind you, it's not the way I'd talk about our reading at home to friends, but it seemed appropriate for the school folks, and apparently did the trick. They asked no questions.

Jesse will be involved in a literature based, sustained silent reading program, reading daily from self-chosen material for at least 45 minutes.

He will try reading from many different genres: fiction, biography, plays, non-fiction in all subject areas, poetry, magazines, newspapers, etc. Length of readings will vary from short articles and selections to long childrens' novels (ie. *Caddie Woodlawn*, and other Newberry Award Winner books). He will keep his own record of books completed, and will discuss his reading daily with parent tutor. Attention will be given to noting the author's voice, appreciating style differences among different authors, comparing and contrasting similar books. He will focus on an author of choice and read several works by that author, comparing how the works are similar or different, how the author changed his approach or developed a consistent style. We will discuss tone, plot structure, characterization, recurring themes, use of language, and our own reactions and responses to the piece read.

We will not use a basal reader textbook, as our program is literature-based, and our goal is to allow Jesse access to the finest in children's literature and let him find his own reading level. We own at least 1200 children's books in our home, in all subject areas and levels of difficulty, and also use books borrowed from various libraries and homeschooling friends. We find that owning our own books gives a great love of reading, a sense of ownership of the whole process of reading, and we give great priority to buying books as gifts for the children.

Communicating with a school district is not the time to be as concise as possible -- if you can string something out, do so. (This may remind you a bit of the "padding" you may have done with term papers as a high school or college student. After all, in a sense you are dealing here with the same people once again.) But at the same time, do know what you are talking about and don't close yourself into corners of verbiage. Where ever possible give yourself options, outlets, other choices. I liked it that I did not lock us into saying we would read any specific books (an impossible thing for us to plan in advance), and I did not commit us to using ANY workbook or textbook type materials -- no comprehension drills, no vocabulary drills, no "five questions at the end of the story" stuff. Just committed us to real reading and talking about what we read. Just what we do best around here.

Some parents we've talked with wonder if they can feel confident in putting down in a plan or curriculum or evaluation that they just TALK about books and ideas with their kids. This on-going discussion with our kids, this conversation, may seem so natural to us perhaps that it doesn't seem important or worth mentioning, doesn't seem as concrete as saying our child has completed so many workbook pages or so many "skill" worksheets. But when we really start looking at what the real EXPERTS in the reading and language field say, I think we can gain more confidence in our folksy

home approaches. After all, the schools would love to have as much discussion time as we have at home throughout our days -- they just don't have the time. I remember very well when I was a teacher that it became a distraction if kids wanted to jump in with a comment about a book I was reading aloud to a group. It was a tangent that got us off track, and would soon have 20 other kids jumping in with their thoughts and reminiscences and anecdotes. But at home how different -- with just a few "students" we can explore all these tangents and let them become new roads to related learning. School teachers might love to be able to have book discussions during lunch time with their students (a common occurrence around here), but school cafeterias just aren't conducive to it.

We should feel confident and comfortable emphasizing the entire "literate environment" of our homes. Just look at what noted expert in the field Morton Botel wrote in the 1979 Pennsylvania *Comprehensive Reading Communication Arts Plan*, published by the Pennsylvania Department of Education itself:

Before school and systematic instruction begin, the earliest means by which young children learn to read are by listening and responding to literature at home. In fact, a literate environment at home usually produces children who read early and maintain their competence throughout school. Such an environment has several characteristics. Family members have a general commitment to the benefits and pleasures of oral and written language. There is a home library and writing materials. Family members read silently, read aloud to their children and to one another, and talk about what they read with each other....

The school should also provide a literate environment rich in language experiences that excite and challenge thinking and imagination, touch values and feelings, and improve reading and writing competence. For these purposes nothing is more effective than being exposed to literature by hearing and reading it and responding to its ideas, images and sounds.<sup>1</sup>

He continues to lambast (gently!) the schools for overusing "quickie" types of questioning and testing methods, urging instead the types of discussion and involvement common at home in families that love to read:

Begin (Quotation)

Research shows that elementary and secondary teachers seem to overuse questions that call for short answers rather than those that generate discussion and involvement.

Unfortunately they seem to be encouraged in this biased emphasis by the suggestions in many teacher's guides of basal reading and literature programs. The effect of this is to discourage and dampen student interest and involvement and thereby to limit the flow and quality of thought....

We propose a variety of productive activities to tap all the four comprehension perspectives....

- discussions
- compositions
- oral and choral readings and rereadings
- simulations (role-playing and informal dramatizations)
- question/answer formats
- retelling (including retelling by changing characters, actions, or setting)
- art and music interpretations<sup>2</sup>

So this expert, very well known and respected in the field of reading, is advocating just the sort of thing most homeschooling families do with reading already -- and if this is advocated from such an expert, then we should feel proud of what we do and very confident to relate such things on our plans.

Translating this concretely, around here we read aloud a lot ("oral reading and rereadings"), and we talk about what we read ("discussions"), each of us getting a chance to share responses and ideas and questions. When Jesse and Jacob spent many happy hours building a pretend "Borrower's set-up" while we were reading the wonderful Borrowers series of books (all about imagined little people who lives inside the walls of houses and who "borrow" all the little things WE lose all the time...), they were involved in both a "simulation" and an "art interpretation." For months any little throw-away was quickly grabbed by the boys and turned into a Borrower stool or chair, a Borrower bed. A leftover spice can became a miniature stove, scraps of woods were glued and nailed into tables and benches, crocheted doilies became fancy tablecloths and rugs. This was of course all self-chosen play to them, not an exercise in "comprehension" that I had cleverly devised -- I just gave them the space and the permission and let them know I was interested in their ideas. When they got all excited about imagining what would happen if the Borrower characters were living here, or trying to imagine future possibilities for them, they were engaging in "retelling by changing characters, actions, or setting."

Or what about when Jesse tells me during lunch about the wonderful book he's just been reading, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, a Newberry Award Winner about a young woman accused falsely of being a witch in colonial Connecticut. He lets me know how he feels about the actions of the characters -- many of them clearly unfair or



narrow minded to us. He's responding to the book personally and figuring out what the book means to him. And when I ask him to retell parts of the story to me (it has been 12 years since I last read the book myself, and I'm fuzzy on some parts), then he's retelling with a real purpose -- he's communicating with me because I really want to know about the book too. I'm not just quizzing him or trying to check up on his "comprehension skills." We are all responding to the book and it's ideas. Our "just talking" is really talk and discussion of the highest sort, and it's even largely initiated by Jesse.

You might even list it as a goal in any curriculum plan you need to write that your child will "initiate discussion about responses to literature through devising his own questions and retelling parts he was particularly moved by." What homeschooling parent hasn't been interrupted while reading aloud to answer a question a child has about the goings-on in the story, or what parent hasn't used a car ride to sometimes talk over favorite parts of books with their kids? Not in any "official" way that marks off this talking as a "lesson," but just as part of the conversation. I remember Jesse coming out with, "Hey, Mom, wasn't it funny when Peter Pan fooled the pirates that time on Marooner's rock?" on a car ride maybe a month after finishing reading the book together. Our discussions don't have to be planned in advance as our kids feel that books just naturally are a good topic of conversation.

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<sup>1</sup>M. Botel, *A Comprehensive Reading Communication Plan* (Working Edition), Spring 1979, p.3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 5.