

## **Amish Schools**

It may surprise some people to learn that most Amish children attended public schools before 1950. Indeed, some Amish fathers served as directors of rural public schools. The Amish were comfortable with small rural schools that were controlled by local parents. After World War II, some public schools required attendance until age sixteen. About the same time, many small schools closed and consolidated into large districts. Some Amish parents protested these developments because they were losing control over the nurture of their children. Moreover, they considered formal study beyond the eighth grade unnecessary for farming.

In Pennsylvania and in other states some Amish parents sat in prison for refusing to send their children to large public schools in the 1950s. Finally, in 1972, the United States Supreme Court, in a case known as *Wisconsin vs. Yoder*, ruled that Amish children could end their formal schooling at the age of fourteen. The court concluded that “a way of life that is odd or even erratic but interferes with no rights or interests of others is not to be condemned because it is different.”

Today a few Amish children in some states still attend rural public schools, but the vast majority goes to one- or two-room schools operated by Amish parents. Indeed, about 35,000 Amish youth attend some 1,300 private schools that end with eighth grade. Instruction is in English. For some "scholars," as Amish students are called, it is their first exposure to English. The teachers are typically Amish women who have not gone to high school but are graduates of Amish schools themselves. Nurtured through periodic Teachers' Meetings and by reading the *Blackboard Bulletin*, an Amish teacher's magazine, the teachers are largely self-trained. They are selected for their teaching ability and their embrace of Amish values.

The Lancaster settlement where Nickel Mines is located has nearly 200 Amish one-room schools with about thirty to thirty-five scholars attend each one. Scripture reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer opens each day, but religion is not formally taught in the school. The curriculum includes reading, arithmetic, spelling, grammar, penmanship, history, and some geography. Science and sex education are missing, as are the other typical trappings of public schools—sports, dances, cafeterias, clubs, bands, choruses, computers, television, teacher strikes, guidance counselors, principals, and college recruiters.

A local board of three to five fathers organizes the school, hires a teacher, approves the curriculum, oversees the budget, and supervises maintenance. Amish teachers, trained in Amish schools, are not required to be certified in Pennsylvania. They are the brightest and best of Amish scholars who return to the classroom to teach, often in their late teens and early twenties. Amish school directors select them for their ability to teach, their commitment to Amish values, and their availability. Amish teachers are frequently single women who terminate their teaching when they marry. Without the benefit of high school or college diplomas or any formal training, they manage nearly thirty pupils across eight grades. Periodic meetings with other teachers, a monthly teachers' magazine, and ample common sense prepare them for the task.

With three or four pupils per grade, teachers often instruct two grades at a time. Classrooms exhibit a distinct sense of order amidst a beehive of activity. Hands raise to ask permission to use the outhouse, get a library book, or clarify instructions as the teacher moves from grade to grade every ten or fifteen minutes.

The ethos of the classroom accents cooperative activity, obedience, respect, diligence, kindness, and the natural world. Little attention is given to independent thinking and critical analysis, the esteemed values of public education. Despite the emphasis on order, playful pranks and giggles are commonplace. Schoolyard play in daily recesses often involves softball or other homespun games.

Students receive a remarkable amount of personal attention despite the teacher's responsibility for eight grades. Teachers know parents personally as well as the special circumstances surrounding each child. Children, in some cases, have the same teacher for all eight grades. Indeed, all the children from a family may have the same teacher.

The quality of instruction varies considerably across the different Amish settlements. In some communities Amish pupils have scored very well on standardized achievement tests. However, the real test of Amish schools is not how they compare with high-tech suburban schools, but how well they prepare Amish youth for success in Amish culture. Using that standard, Amish schools appear to perform quite well. Amish schools promote practical skills to prepare their graduates for success in Amish society. In any event, the schools play an important role in passing on Amish values, developing friendships, limiting exposure to the outside world, and preserving Amish culture across the generations.

## Recommended books on Amish Schools and Education

- Dewalt, Mark W. *Amish Education in the United States and Canada*. Rowan and Littlefield Education, 2006.
- Fisher, Sara E. and Rachel K. Stahl. *The Amish School*. Good Books, 1997.
- Hostetler, John A. and Huntington, Gertrude Enders. *Amish Children: Education in the Family, School, and Community*. 1992. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Johnson-Weiner, Karen. *Train Up a Child: Old Order Amish and Mennonite Schools*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
- Keim, Albert N. ed. *Compulsory Education and the Amish: The Right Not to Be Modern*. Beacon Press, 1975.
- Kraybill, Donald B. *The Riddle of Amish Culture*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, rev.ed., 2001. (See chapter seven).
- Peters, Shawn Francis. *The Yoder Case: Religious Freedom, Education, and Parental Rights*. University Press of Kansas, 2003.