

# The Hybrid Option: Best of Both Worlds

by Erika Ahern

I grew up in rural New Hampshire in the 1980's and '90's, before homeschooling was widely accepted. My parents made the courageous decision to homeschool my brothers and me in the elementary years, a decision that meant we pursued our education largely in isolation from other families. There was simply no homeschool community within driving distance. As a result, while I excelled in high school activities and academics, it was not until college that I found true friends – a community of young men and women who were seeking the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

God works all things to His purpose and now I am blessed with five of my own children. My husband and I embarked on the homeschooling journey, but our path looks different from the years I spent reading alone on a New England mountainside.

Today, not only is there a sometimes overwhelming abundance of homeschool resources (how to choose?) but also on the rise is the idea of “hybrid” schooling. The hybrid communities seek to provide the “best of both worlds,” with students attending traditional classrooms two or three days per week and spending the alternate days at home with their siblings and parents.

Available hybrid options are many – they may be secular or religious, classical or traditional, offering either *a la carte* classes or an entire curriculum and extracurriculars. Most aim to serve families who desire to homeschool with the support of a community. These communities offer

an alternative to traditional or public schools and often provide a moral and educational philosophy that is an extension of the family's own beliefs.

My own family has been blessed by one hybrid option in particular, Regina Caeli Academy, which operates in ten cities across the United States. Regina Caeli Academy's mission is lofty: to assist homeschooling families educate their children not only for success in this life but even more for heaven. Our motto, “Training the Mind to Form the Soul,” speaks to the need to develop individuals who can think clearly and critically *for the sake* of our salvation.

Our comprehensive, two-day-a-week program provides academic support in all subject areas and positive support for the whole family. The parents remain primary educators of their children, while our program provides tutoring, testing, curriculum, and structure to help everyone stay on track. To help ensure fidelity to the Church, every adult who works at the center—whether tutoring classes or caring for our nursery babies—takes an Oath of Fidelity to the Magesterium.

We use Mother of Divine Grace, a classical curriculum following the natural stages of learning in a child and based on Dorothy Sayers' essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning.” In the elementary school years, we focus on developing the skills of memorization, observation, and a joy in learning. In the middle school years, the dialectical stage, students develop reasoned arguments, logic, and organized thought in all subject areas. The later high school years focus on the skills of rhetoric, in which students learn to express themselves with elegance and

persuasiveness. By the time our students graduate, they are ready to meet the challenge of any college environment with both confidence and ability. Most of all, they are in love with the truth and beauty of their Faith while still retaining the joy of learning.

Classical education flourishes in the hybrid model. The classical method – especially as developed by Laura Berquist – emphasizes the spoken word, oral composition, and conversation as fundamental skills. Without the spoken word, students will never truly master the written word; without conversations with other persons, a child will not develop the capacity for prayer and adoration that is our final end in heaven. A hybrid program, such as Regina Caeli Academy, gives children plenty of time for Socratic discussion in the classroom as well as more fodder for conversations with their parents and siblings in the home.

Another benefit is the pooling of educational resources: at Regina Caeli, for example, my children can learn anatomy and physiology from a registered nurse while studying Latin with a classics major. The parents pool their resources to provide top-quality tutoring (hiring tutors from the outside when necessary), regular field trips, extra-curricular activities, and even a study abroad option in the high school. This collaboration, grounded in a devotion to the Catholic Church, provides support.

Thus, the hybrid model of homeschooling empowers parents as the primary educators of their children while giving them much-needed support. Community learning requires a certain submission of our own will and timeline – something that is often difficult for the independent homeschooling mom – but the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Learning in community automatically provides an accountability to our commitment to educate our children. We stay on target in terms of lesson plans, but are also challenged to be more faithful Christians.

Children enrolled at Regina Caeli also grow up in the knowledge that they are not alone as Catholics in our culture. While my own parents were truly the only Catholic homeschoolers for miles, my children inhabit an atmosphere in which *many* families are committed to Catholic formation. I am grateful to the other women at our tutoring center, who hold my children accountable to Christian charity, diligence, prudence, and the other virtues necessary to sainthood.

A question I'm often asked is why we don't simply convert Regina Caeli centers into five-day traditional schools. The primary reason is that our families are homeschoolers first: nothing can replace the relationship of a child with his parent. The hybrid option respects that reality and protects those precious, fleeting years when a child is at home. The days at home are quieter, providing space for children to read in silence, practice contemplation, learn the skills needed to run a household, and bond with their siblings. These days, for me as a homeschooling mom, have become more flexible because my children come home from Regina Caeli already tutored in new concepts and ready to practice them with me.

The great gift of homeschooling does not mean the loss of community. Through hybrid options, such as Regina Caeli Academy, parents can receive the support they need to truly raise their children with the best of educations and the most beautiful of Christian formation

*Erika Ahern is the Director of Education for Regina Caeli Academy. She and her husband live in Connecticut with their five children.*

