

Why Most Homeschooling Systems Devolve, and Why You Can't Plan a Startup

I was homeschooled. My mom began with big dreams, checklists, and curricula. Each year, the intended structure broke down bit by bit. This is a common experience for homeschoolers. It happened to me and my wife too. We ordered a massive, detailed curriculum for our son, bright 5 year old that he was, and planned every day's activities. As a concerned parent, I even got a few smart home features installed as I could then control them from my phone while homeschooling my son. Unfortunately, our plan for homeschooling fell apart in a few months. Within a few years, we were unschooling.

This is a feature of homeschooling, not a bug.

You can think of homeschooling your kid like launching a startup. You have this wonderful thing with massive potential. It grows fast. You craft a detailed business plan, product roadmap, sales and marketing funnel, purchase all the best automation software, and build a stack and procedures for how you'll schedule weekly department meetings before you even have departments. You're ready to scale!

Then you meet the market and a funny thing happens. Your fancy CRM and all its detailed glory can't keep up, so you use side spreadsheets and sticky notes for everything. You tell yourself you'll eventually integrate it into the CRM. But by the time you're large enough to worry about the best process, you've learned your original CRM was a bad fit for your model anyway.

Your cobbled patchwork (is that a mixed metaphor?) of systems and activities is the only kind that can survive early growth stage, which requires constant adaptation, experimentation, and flexibility. This messiness isn't a problem for startups, it's the only thing that makes them possible. It's why big bureaucratic corporations can't do rapid innovation.

If you tried to impose corporate structures on startups, or even the same structures on two different startups, you'd stifle them when they were most vulnerable AND when they had the highest potential upside. They could create value, but would burn cash and require constant subsidization. And as information and transaction costs come down, the nimble startup approach of decentralized action is moving up market. More and more larger and larger companies are trying to do more of it. It's the environment good ideas need to realize their potential.

Kids are fundamentally, radically different from each other. Siblings or not, the individual differences far outweigh similarities. And kids are very different from their parents, both in

fundamental ways and because of the stage each is in. Your education roadmap is about as useful for their learning as a ten-year plan for how to schedule casual Friday at a startup. What you and they need are openness, flexibility, constant feedback, experimentation, enough resources to try things (just like in startups, way less than you think), a sense of play, and an acceptance of the fact that you are along for the ride as much as you're guiding the mission.

The notion of a year-long plan created in an Ivory Tower and imposed on all students of the same age without deviation no matter what market feedback is coming is absurd and tyrannical. Imagine an incubator like Y-Combinator paying some smarties to come up with The One True Business Model, roll-out schedule, target market, hiring strategy, budget, and action plan, and imposing it upon every one of the startups in their program. Oh, and demanding every company produce and sell the exact same product.

Of course this is a crude analogy and kids and startups are different in many ways (you don't own or sell shares of your kids, for example). Here's the key insight that's helped me enjoy the chaos, gained after launching a startup while unschooling my kids: If you're a homeschooler, don't feel guilt if your plans crumble around you. Your kids are relentlessly curious, and even if you abandon formal teaching altogether, they will learn. They cannot be stopped. What they learn will be more valuable to them than any imposed plan created in the abstract for and intended to produce, "The average kid".