

# Mary Pride's Curriculum Secrets

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Edition

## Choosing the Best Curriculum

Probably one of the most vexing questions for novice home schoolers—and often for veterans as well—is “How can I be sure I made the best curriculum choices?” Everything out there sounds so *good*, but you’re not Bill Gates, so you can’t buy it *all*! And even a fine curriculum can create problems if it’s not well suited to your talents and pace of life.

To complicate matters, we usually make exactly the wrong choices when we start out. If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it 100 times—“Unit studies are for creative, bohemian types.” “Only organized types like textbooks.” Wrong, wrong, *wrong*! You have to be *especially* organized to get all those materials together for your unit studies, supervise the whole process, and make sure it gets cleaned up afterwards. Conversely, the less organized you are, the more helpful it is to have all your curriculum in one place—e.g., a textbook or workbook.

Another common first mistake is overbuying. This is natural and you shouldn’t kick yourself about it too much. Just drop off the excess at the next used-curriculum sale.

To avoid overbuying in the first place, just get what you need for the basic “core” subjects and *when you have these under control* THEN get that darling art program or history quiz game. Don’t feel you must beat yourself to death trying to make time in a full day for “extras,” no matter how cute they are.

Let’s walk through your front door and see if we can figure out which type of curriculum is best suited to you and your family.

- ✓ **You have a place for everything and go nuts if everything isn’t in its place.** A sure sign of an organized personality. Suzy Spotless is a good candidate for the unit study or lapbook approach. Especially if she can co-op with her friend, Olive Organized. Check out KONOS and A Journey Through Learning.
- ✓ **You moved in a year ago and you still haven’t unpacked all the boxes in the basement.** Betty Bohemian shouldn’t even

think of trying unit studies as her primary curriculum! She needs an easy-to-use program with all the pieces in one place. If this is you, textbooks and workbooks are your best bet, or possibly Time4Learning’s online curriculum (secular) or Alpha Omega’s Christian “Switched On Schoolhouse” software-based curriculum (now also available online as “Monarch” or via Alpha Omega Online Academy)—at least until you’ve unpacked!

- ✓ **You have piles of books everywhere.** The Charlotte Mason “living books” approach might work well for you. You will love sharing your favorite books with your children and having them narrate them back to you. Family plays, drawing and painting, going for long nature walks, and so on all fit your slow-paced, reflective lifestyle. Check out QueenHomeschool.com and SimplyCharlotteMason.com.
- ✓ **If you love books, but prefer a faster pace of life,** Sonlight.com’s Christian literature-based curriculum is another option. Looking for something secular? Check out BookShark.com (the secular version of Sonlight) and BuildYourLibrary.com.
- ✓ **You can never clean up the (pick one) kitchen/garage/sewing room/workbench/art table because there’s always another project or two on it.** You will be more comfortable if your home education program includes a lot of hands-on learning. Please do not confuse hands-on learning with unit studies! It’s the difference between fixing the car and preparing a term paper on cars, complete with photos and models of cars and a biography of Henry Ford. Unit studies may include hands-on learning, and hands-on learning may lead to unit studies, but they are *not* the same thing. If you love projects, but don’t want to try to fit them into a “curriculum” mode, consider using a simple online curriculum such as Easy Peasy or Time4Learning,

## My Personal Favorites

Everywhere I go, the first question other homeschoolers ask me is, "Which curriculum do you use?" I steadfastly refused to answer this question, for the following reasons:

- (1) Since we are all different, with different size families, different responsibilities, and different gifts, I don't think there can be a one-size-fits-all curriculum. I might love a resource, and you might hate it.
- (2) I didn't want all the suppliers whose products I *don't* constantly use to get mad at me!

However, upon more mature deliberation, I'm sure you're smart enough to realize that my favorite products are just that—*my* favorite products. So, if you're curious, here they are!

- ✓ **For preschool**, I love the Frank Schaeffer workbooks and TREND "wipe-off" books. You can get them at any teacher's store, or through Amazon. Finally, for an inexpensive preschool curriculum, you can't beat Bio-Alpha's *Slow & Steady, Get Me Ready* (also available through Amazon).
- ✓ **For kindergarten**, we used Calvert Preschool—which *used* to be their Kindergarten program (<http://bit.ly/2FLOYvv>). It's just a step up from preschool and is loads of fun. Your little one gets to model with clay, make collages and paper curls, cut and paste, dress up and act out stories, and do just *tons* of classic children's art activities. You read classic children's stories and poems, sing nursery songs, play classic games, and teach them about seasons, colors, numbers, letters, etc. A wonderful first learning experience!
- ✓ **First and second grade** are the time to build arithmetic, handwriting, and phonics skills, and in my opinion dragging in a lot of other formal subjects at this point merely confuses the child. For phonics, we used Sing, Spell, Read & Write (suedickson.com) halfway and then switched to Teach Your Children to Read Well

which allows your child to quickly get through the core subjects, and save your energy for planning those great project!

- ✓ **You feel more secure if your children are studying Latin, French, art history, and piano.** If you come from an intellectually upper-class or literary background, or have these kinds of aspirations for your children, you are a candidate for the Classical Approach. Some popular sources: Classical Conversations (which meets in local groups around the country), Memoria Press, Classical Academic Press, and Veritas Press.
- ✓ **You have an eagle or American flag on the front of your garage.** Take a look at the Principle Approach. This all-American style of education takes dedication and a desire to deeply study American history. It is based on the way American children were trained in past centuries. HELPFUL HINT: If you have a plaque of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" in your living room, or *any* George Washington memorabilia prominently displayed, this is a clear sign the Principle Approach may be just what you're looking for. You can find these materials at FACE.net.
- ✓ **You have to count on your fingers to make sure you haven't left anyone behind.** Unless you are a super organized person, those with large families might be smart to lean towards "packaged" curriculum. This will not only save you time, but make it possible for the older children to help with the teaching of the younger. It works best if they can teach the same material they learned themselves—so once you find something you like, it's worth your while to stick with it. This comes both in textbook/workbook packages, with DVDs and audio CDs sometimes available to accompany the courses (A Beka, BJU, Rod & Staff, etc.) and "all-in-one" packages that include a mix of hands-on materials as well as teaching guides (Heart of Dakota or My Father's World, for example). Secular alternatives: Timberdoodle, Winter's Promise, Build Your Library.

(MaloneyMethod.com) or Alpha-Phonics. For math, I liked Calvert Math or Bob Jones University Press's kindergarten math workbook, followed by Calvert Math for the next six grades. Need extra help? Try Developmental Math and the "Key to . . ." fractions and decimals series from Key Curriculum Pres. Both are available from ChristianBook.com)

- ✓ **For reading practice**, we used library books. Bob Books ([www.bobbooks.com](http://www.bobbooks.com)) and the Sing, Spell, Read & Write readers are great for beginning readers.
- ✓ **For third through fifth grade**, a mix of Sonlight ([sonlight.com](http://sonlight.com)), Calvert, BJU Press ([bjupresshomeschool.com](http://bjupresshomeschool.com)), and Switched-On Schoolhouse ([aop.com](http://aop.com)), depending on the amount of teaching time available. If you have the time, Calvert's discipline of creating formal math papers and frequent writing assignments creates a great academic foundation. Our children also responded well to the incentive of seeing what the Advisory Teacher is going to say about their papers and tests. But the history books Calvert currently uses for fifth- and sixth-grade history start off with "Attila the Hun was really a nice guy" and go downhill from there. The BJUP fifth-grade literature program is especially great, and Switched-On Schoolhouse was my SOS for semesters when teaching time was short.
- ✓ **For supplemental unit studies** (since we didn't use a unit-study program as our main curriculum), I liked KONOS ([konos.com/www](http://konos.com/www)). Be sure to purchase the topical index to all three KONOS volumes. This makes "KONOS moments" easy to plan. HELPFUL HINT FOR THOSE NOT USING UNIT STUDIES AS THEIR MAIN CURRICULUM: try them on Fridays, as one-week segments interjected into your regular school year, or during the summer months. And take it *easy*—just one "little" project can take *hours*! If you'd like to do *big* projects, consider a weekly unit study co-op with other families.
- ✓ **For supplemental math practice**, the Barnum Software Quarter Mile series ([TheQuarterMile.com](http://TheQuarterMile.com)) is great. So is School Made Simple's Calculadder series ([SchoolMadeSimple.com](http://SchoolMadeSimple.com)).

- ✓ **For music lessons**, if you can't find local classes (check with your homeschool support group!), try software or video. Simply Music has great piano lessons on video ([simplymusic.com](http://simplymusic.com)). For guitarists, there's eMedia Guitar Lessons ([emediamusic.com](http://emediamusic.com)). For more help, try the many how-to-play video courses from Homespun Tapes ([homespuntapes.com](http://homespuntapes.com)). They have courses for just about every popular musical instrument. For music theory, try the God Made Music series ([praisehymninc.com](http://praisehymninc.com)) or Music Ace Deluxe ([harmonicvision.com](http://harmonicvision.com)).
- ✓ **Grades 6–8** are mostly a waste of time. Science courses are a smorgasbord of "facts." History is High School History Lite. English is Grade School English Heavy. You could use the MathEssentials.net course to get algebra-ready ASAP and then go straight to high-school math. Now would also be the time for a real writing course ([Clearwaterpress.com](http://Clearwaterpress.com), [Konos.org](http://Konos.org), or [IEW.com](http://IEW.com)). If you haven't started a foreign or classical language by now, check out FlipFlopLearning.com, ExcelerateSpanish.com, TheULAT.com, MemoriaPress.com, and GreeknStuff.com. I also like Christian Light Education's textbook-based literature courses ([clp.org](http://clp.org)), Covenant Home Curriculum's "Streams of Civilization" history modules with quizzes & tests ([CovenantHome.com](http://CovenantHome.com)), and Apologia's General Science and Physical Science courses ([Apologia.com](http://Apologia.com)).
- ✓ **For algebra through college math**, we love the Saxon series ([hnhco.com/home](http://hnhco.com/home) school). Chalk Dust math DVDs ([ChalkDust.com](http://ChalkDust.com)) are another good choice.

### *Other Popular Favorites*

Here's what's hot on our Facebook page .

#### **For grade-level curriculum:**

- Easy Peasy All-in-One "free" curriculum . You still have to pay for the ink, paper, etc. to print out the online worksheets. ([allinonehomeschool.com](http://allinonehomeschool.com))
- Heart of Dakota ([HeartOfDakota.com](http://HeartOfDakota.com))
- My Father's World ([mfwbooks.com](http://mfwbooks.com))
- Timberdoodle ([Timberdoodle.com](http://Timberdoodle.com))
- Apps of all kinds

### For math:

- CTC Math online (CTCMath.com)
- Khan Academy free math & science video lectures (KhanAcademy.org) - best used to supplement rather than the entire curriculum
- Math-U-See (MathUSee.com)
- Math Mammoth (MathMammoth.com)
- Teaching Textbooks (TeachingTextbooks.com)
- Life of Fred Math (<http://bit.ly/2TbQ5aU>)

## High School at Home

Every course you take in high school is available in college. Or maybe it's the other way around—the first two years of *college* are a waste of time, since all but courses such as Organic Chemistry are available in high school. I don't see why our children should go through this twice. Which leaves us with several alternatives:

- **Take the SAT and enroll in community college straight out of eighth grade.** Many community colleges will let you take their courses while you're still in high school. Once you complete your state's high-school graduation requirements, those same courses also count for college credit. (This is called "dual credit.") Plus your child can live at home, the social scene isn't as drastic, and it costs a *lot* less. **Bonus Tip:** *try to take only courses that apply to a specific degree, and not to drop many, since they will be counted towards future financial-aid eligibility.*
- **Spend the high-school years learning a trade,** while reading enough history, etc. on the side to keep the state happy.
- **Help your child start a business or get work experience in the family business** while he reads history, etc. on the side to keep the state happy.
- **Create your own custom high-school program** geared to your child's own talents and interests. This can include apprenticeships, travel, research, sports, community service—in short, anything included in a good Montessori high-school program. **Bonus Tip:** *To find great educational travel and service opportunities, visit*

*StudyAbroad.com* (select program type "High School") and *www.acacamps.org*.

- **Mix correspondence high school courses,** such as those from American School (AmericanSchoolOfCorr.com) — the lowest-cost option, with courses that are easy A's if you do all the work — with **online courses,** such as those from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Independent Study High School (HighSchool.nebraska.edu) and CollegePrepScience.com. Add some practical and worldview training from sources such as Worldview Academy (worldview.org), Summit Ministries (summit.org), and TeenPact (TeenPact.com), and then **take lots of Advanced Placement or CLEP exams to get college credit.** For AP courses online, check out *aphomeschoolers.com* and *ScholarsOnline.org*. To study for CLEPs, look up "CLEP" and the subject on Amazon.
- Encourage your child to get deeply involved in **major interests** (e.g., martial arts, the ThinkQuest competition, Civil Air Patrol . . .)

I personally lean to a mix of the last three options. This method has turned out two National Merit Scholars and one National Merit Commended. Of my nine children, two now have MBAs, one is a chiropractor, two more have Masters degrees in science & engineering disciplines, one is a nurse, one is employed as a videogame developer, one became a webmaster, and one is working on her Ph.D. So if you're also wondering if homeschoolers can get into college, yes, they all did!

As you're now a *Practical Homeschooling* magazine subscriber (which is how you got this report!), be sure to read the college admissions column in every issue. It contains invaluable advice on how to prepare for college, how to package yourself for admissions officers, and how to win scholarships.

Enjoy your homeschool journey: we'll be there helping you all along the way!