



## Interview With Duke Pesta of FreedomProject Academy

**Dr. Duke Pesta, academic director at FreedomProject Academy, a homeschooling option, defends against attacks targeting homeschooling, and tells why it works better.**

In our current world of social-justice warriors, radical liberalism, and politically correct safe spaces, many parents are questioning if their children are receiving the best education — or any education at all. For the most part, homeschooling or private schooling is an option only for the affluent or devoutly religious. What does that leave, then, for providing a good education for the rest of the populace?



Dr. Duke Pesta, academic director at FreedomProject Academy, is passionate about education and fervently defends the classical education that FPA provides. He explains why a classical education is better than the education a public-school student receives, and how online schooling is a very real possibility for average-income families.

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**The New American:** *Those in the public-school realm often have an opinion of homeschoolers as being “indoctrinated” children, with severe religious ideals. They’re being brainwashed by their parents; they’re a cult; homeschooling is for overprotective parents who want to control every part of their child’s life, etc. What is your rebuttal to all of this?*

**Dr. Duke Pesta:** Some of the words you just used — cult, overprotective parents, indoctrination — are ironic coming from the public-school people because that’s exactly what’s happening in the public schools. You could make an argument that the collectivism of public schools — now especially because we’ve centralized them, federalized them under things like Common Core — what you’ve got now is one great big, government-sponsored cult that is teaching kids the same thing, imposing all sorts of ideologies on kids like transgenderism, global warming, homosexuality; getting these kids sexualized way younger developmentally than they should be — forcing that on your kids! So, it’s not just the pot calling the kettle black, it’s the pot calling the *imaginary* kettle black. I would go this way: Every homeschool family is different; every homeschool family has a different way of doing it, has a different angle to it, has a different set of family values behind it. So ironically, homeschooling is the antidote to the cult of big government public schooling — especially now that it’s all been federalized. So, there’s that thing, number one.

The second thing I would point out — the only remaining argument from the public schools is that homeschoolers are not socialized. When you look at what’s going on in high school, middle school, and elementary school campuses, you’ve got sex between younger kids at younger ages, you’ve got an epidemic of bullying, you’ve got an inability of schools to protect your kids. If this is the type of socialization the public schools teach, our kids don’t need it. I would much rather have my moms and



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dads in charge of who my kids hang out with, the kind of recreation they do, the type of athletics they do. And I'd much rather have my moms and dads make their own choices about when to teach sex, or values, or virtues to the kid. So, there's really no compelling argument in that cliched list that you hear from advocates of public schools. They're losing more and more kids — non-religious homeschooling is at its highest level ever because a lot of moms and dads who aren't religious are balking at the bullying, the intimidation, the indoctrination, the weak standards, the standardized testing.

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**TNA:** *That leads into my next question: Let's say you have some parents who are interested in the classical education, but they aren't religious. What do you tell them?*

**Pesta:** Well, we *do* have students in FreedomProject who do not identify religiously. We make it very clear that we're two things: We're a classical school, which means we teach logic, we teach economics, we teach real history, we teach kids *how* to think, not *what* to think. We're a classical school. But we're also a classical school that's rooted firmly in Judeo-Christian values, which means we believe that the Greco-Roman world — with its focus on reason, rationalism, and logic — is perfectly compatible with the Bible and biblical revelation. And so, morally and ethically, we try to instill in our kids the values that go all the way back to the Sermon on the Mount, back through the Ten Commandments, and in educational classes, generally, we focus on those subjects like logic and reason and history. So, we let them know, and most moms and dads who are from a secular perspective love it because we don't talk about theology and we don't talk about dogma in our classrooms. We're non-denominational. Since we're a non-church school, we believe it would be inappropriate if we taught your kids a specific denomination. We'd be taking from you the right to teach whatever your denomination is.

So when we talk about biblical values, we talk about shared understandings of Judeo-Christian values as they have obviously manifested themselves in the history, art, politics, and culture of the last 2,000 years. Most secular moms and dads who have taken us aren't the least bit bothered by the fact that their kids have to take the Latin language. They're not bothered that we have them read the great Christian writers of Western culture such as Dante, or Milton, or Shakespeare, because they understand that that's part of our history and culture.

**TNA:** *How about deeply religious families? Do the parents mind their children being exposed to texts by authors whose religious traditions may be different from their own?*

**Pesta:** I'm proud to say that not a single one of our parents has ever complained that their kid is a Baptist but is getting too much Catholic, or their kid is Catholic but is getting too much Lutheran. We've done a really good job keeping those decisions with the family. And those decisions include each student using his own family's Bible for the scriptural readings.

In our literature classes, they're reading traditional, classical texts. They'll read Plato and Aristotle and Homer and Virgil — the great Greek and Roman writers. But they're also going to read Dante and Milton and Shakespeare and Chaucer — the great Christian writers. They'll read the Roman-Catholic Dante in the 14th century. Then they'll read the radical Protestant Milton in the 17th century. Then they'll read the Anglican C.S. Lewis in the 20th century. Then they'll read the Book of Job in ancient Jewish text from 3,000 years ago. And so, consequently they're getting exposed to all sorts of different



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writers. Any complaint you might have is undercut by the fact that you're reading six other different kinds of Jewish/Christian writers.

**TNA:** *Some of the "classical" classes that you offer are Latin, phonics, logic, philosophy, and rhetoric. Why are these classes important?*

**Pesta:** They are the courses that built liberty, freedom, and personal responsibility in Western culture. It's undeniably true that if you go back to the Old Testament, through the New Testament, through the last 2,000 years, that the Judeo-Christian ethic and value system is what gave rise to the Magna Carta. It's what gave rise to the Declaration of Independence. I ask my kids all the time: If the Western world is as bad as all these liberal professors say it is, how come human rights, civil rights, women's rights, minority rights, gay rights — how come those things grew up exclusively in Western culture? I think part of it is because of the tolerance, the flexibility, the historical superiority of the values that emanate to us from the Scriptures. The Founding Fathers, as we know, were deeply studied in a scriptural worldview. We know that liberty and the rights of the *individual* are most championed in Christianity.

Classical education is predicated on the notion of critical thinking. We want kids to be able to think critically. One of the major problems in American public education right now with all the federal control is that it's short on critical thinking — letting kids think for themselves — and it's long on telling kids how to think and feel. And so, with the type of coercive education they're getting, the only answer to it is critical thinking in classical education. We give them the information, we help them to come to their own opinion, but ultimately they have to decide for themselves what they believe. If logic is thinking logically and correctly, you could make the argument that rhetoric is how you express that in ways that will move other people. Rhetoric is really the science of being able to speak logically and move people with your words to virtue. I think in every way, what we do at FreedomProject — a classical education steeped in Christian values — that is *the* answer to *every* single one of the problems we've named about the government schools.

**TNA:** *How do you think FPA develops a student as a person?*

**Pesta:** The primary objective of a classical education is to create and mold a human being in virtuous action. It's not about getting a job. All this career-ready crap you hear in middle school and high school; that's the wrong way to approach it. The first purpose of education is to morally improve students, make them more civilized, and make them more understanding and thoughtful and reflective. Make them better people! And only secondarily do you make them more proficient in the subject area. Ironically, in the American government schools today, character education *and* actual education for knowledge and mastery — those things have been eradicated. What we're doing is very different: Read the great books of Western culture, learn how to think logically, study languages such as Latin that force you to become more methodical, so that your character develops, your worldview develops. And then because of those emphases, your mastery of subject matter will rise, and you'll be able to integrate your personal and professional life into one wholistic unit, which is the objective here — to be a full person.

**TNA:** *Playing off that, what obvious differences do you see in a student who has gone through FreedomProject, versus one who hasn't?*

**Pesta:** One thing that's obvious immediately is that our kids are farther along. When kids come to us from the public schools, they're usually now about two years behind where they should be; they've been treated like babies in some regards. The other thing we recognize is that our kids are growing up



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largely free from the bullying, from the sexualization. All those things that the public schools do to take power and decisions away from the parents — to strip parents of their right to raise their kids as they see fit — we give back to parents. We give grades and tests and assignments and really important teaching on really important books, and let the parents do the rest. That's the way it should be. Parents should be the primary points for moral and ethical development, and we should just help it. In the public schools, they're taking away the morality. In the public schools, the Judeo-Christian morality and ethical and virtuous behavior in a religious context is being replaced with radical, political activism.

**TNA:** *With private and online schools, two obstacles people face are cost and time. What do you tell parents who don't know if they can afford to have one parent stay at home?*

**Pesta:** It's a sacrifice. Like anything worth doing with your kids, it's a sacrifice. You've got to find a way to make it work. If you've checked out our prices, we're really low. For less than \$2,100 a year, you get a full year's worth of classes, taught real-time by actual teachers. We're fully accredited, so your kids can get diplomas from us. Our graduates are getting into good colleges. We do have tuition assistance, so for needy families, we can and do help. Having said that, there's also the other side of the coin, which — as you said — is time. That seems to be the bigger problem. A lot of times, mom and dad are both working so they can buy their kid leather tennis shoes and cellphones and little computers and have them in very costly after-school experiences. That's fine. If you want to have mom and dad working so that you can have all those luxuries for your kid, then do it. But are those luxuries, in the long run, more important than their education? What's your kid going to remember 20 years from now? Where they went that particular summer vacation? Or are they going to remember the education they got that now lets them take care of their own family? If we're working so hard to provide luxuries, and scanting kids on their education, we're doing them a disservice. Having said that, older kids can manage themselves, so for upper middle-school and high-school kids, they should be able to do a good part of this without having mom look over their shoulder.

**TNA:** *If a kid is interested in FPA, but is scared or hesitant, is there any way to "test the waters"?*

**Pesta:** Sure. Any mom can call us at any time and we'll give her some access codes, and she can hop into a couple of live classes and watch in real time. We also have a lot of classes recorded so she can watch three or four dozen classes if she wants, just to get a sense of how they work and what goes on in them. We have placement exams that are free, so if a mom out there just wants to get a sense of where her son or daughter in fourth grade would rank against our fourth graders, just take a placement exam. There's no obligation. Take our test, we'll give you the grades, and we'll tell you exactly where your kid fits. It can't hurt to take a look and see.

**TNA:** *What about workload? Is there any good way to estimate that?*

**Pesta:** It's the workload you'd expect of any student. You're going to take four to five classes a semester, and they're going to have homework in those classes. The nice thing is, we don't have the kids eight hours a day. The average for a middle- or high-schooler is 10 hours a week that they're actually in classes. If you factor in all the wasted time in public schools — gym and study hall and lunch and recess, and all this other stuff that kills a day — you can give a kid a really, really good education in three hours. We have a good pace because the kids aren't sitting in a classroom hour after hour. They're getting a chance to diversify what they do. You're able to focus more in shorter periods of time. When you think about the types of assignments [public school] teachers are mandated to introduce to kids under Common Core, where they're taking up time in math to do politics, they're taking up time in social studies not to teach history but to talk about 116 different genders, they're burning up classroom



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time. They're dragging it out, and they're politicizing it, and they're watering it down, and they're adding all sorts of things that belong at home with the parents, not in the schools. On every front, it's a failure, and the results of what's happening in our government schools prove that.

**TNA:** *Do you discuss current topics in your classes so that there isn't any chance of a high-schooler getting out in the world and being naïve?*

**Pesta:** Of course! We don't just teach kids American history, we teach kids American civics too, which means we teach the history of what happened in this country, and they also read the founding documents, they read the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They come to understand not just the history of America, but how government is supposed to function. So if they're taking an American Civics class and learning about the Second Amendment — if you look at the news right now, the Second Amendment is under attack — so in a class like that, of course they would talk about current events. What they *won't* get is a one-sided, ideological cramming into their head of a worldview they must adopt or else.

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As Dr. Pesta said, and as most of us know, public schools have been declining in quality for decades, and are now at an all-time low. Rather than being educated objectively, children are being molded into liberal social-justice warriors. If you are considering taking your child out of public school and would like to learn more about FPA, check out the website at <https://www.fpeusa.org>.

  
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