

The Adventures of a Reluctant Homeschooler

By Erica Klein, REALM Parent

If anyone had told me that I would one day be a 'homeschooler' I would have told them that they were nuts. There was no way I would have ever considered taking on the responsibility of teaching our son, Dar. And now, guess what, I'm two years into being a very happy homeschooler at The Realm. I wonder if I'm the only mom who feels like this whole parenting journey has been about showing me over and over that I really don't know, and can't control, anything. This is Dar's REALM story:

I approached finding him an elementary school like a military operation. I had a spreadsheet and visited just about every progressive leaning private and public school, west of the 405. Basically I was obsessed with finding a school that would foster a love of learning over testing, stress and homework. Dar was an eager learner, and we didn't want him to lose his enthusiasm.

We were thrilled to get him a spot in a progressive local school and he started the year with such excitement. He entered Kindergarten on the older side (July birthday), with age appropriate early literacy levels but quite advanced math skills. We felt so fortunate to have found a school that ticked off so many of the boxes we thought we wanted for him, and also nice kids, and a parent community we really clicked with.

Nonetheless, within a couple of months my husband and I reluctantly admitted to each other that we both had pits in our stomachs that something was not quite right. He started shrugging a lot, rolling his eyes when asked what he did that day, was indifferent about going to school, and also started using the word 'bored' a lot. He had never used that word before. We couldn't put our finger on it other than to say his light was becoming dimmer and dimmer with each passing week.

We second-guessed ourselves and wondered if he was just changing with age. Perhaps a normal part of growing up is to say you don't like school? Especially since this happened to be a very special school for so many of the kids there. It follows a gentle, child-led, play-based model, great for kids who would hate sitting at a desk in a traditional, more rigid environment. And yet, not all schools work for all kids, and this was just not working for him. He would have been happier to sit at a desk! He was ready and craved more teacher-directed, rigorous, learning opportunities. Because he is a rule follower and wasn't acting out in class in any way, when we met with the teachers and administration to discuss our concerns, they didn't see what we were talking about. They thought he seemed happy and was doing just fine. We asked if they could provide differentiated math work and the teacher did her best but it was

simply not realistic for us to think there might be enough time and bandwidth for one teacher to sit and teach one kid out of 21, and just giving him his own work sheets did not fit with their philosophy, nor would it stretch him or teach him anything new. Then we asked the administration if they would consider moving him up a grade to provide him with more challenge (which he could have legally done since he was a July birthday), but they philosophically don't believe in moving kids ahead and moreover he was not ahead in literacy. So we were in a tough spot: It's not like there was any one thing wrong with the school, but the whole point of sending him to a progressive model was for him to continue to love learning - and this was having the opposite effect. On the other hand, there was no way we could stomach sending him to an overly structured, traditional, testing-focused model. We didn't want to have his light equally snuffed out by too much homework, stress and rote memorization.

That's when I decided to walk into The REALM to see what after-school programs they offer so that we might at least try adding enrichment classes. I stopped in one morning, saw groups of kids fully engaged, having fun and working in small groups, and I remember saying, "Wait, what the heck are all these kids doing here during the day??" I had never heard of homeschooling at The REALM; it seemed so completely foreign and I couldn't wrap my head around it. I met with Vicky and she explained how it works and it sounded amazing. It was hard to believe anything could be as good as it seemed. I wanted to go there for classes, too!

Still, it just *looked* so different from our preconceived notion of education. My husband and I were very concerned about things like no recess and no outdoor space. How could it possibly work for such an active boy who loves soccer, monkey bars and tag? I was also terrified that even if that semester we were able to put together a solid full-time schedule, what if in the future we couldn't, and I would have to spend my days teaching him myself or driving him around town to other facilities/teachers? We worried if he would get enough social interaction and that we would be leaving such a great community. And of course, the biggest question of all (and the one that we still get asked ALL the time from well meaning friends and family), 'how would we know if he was 'on track'?"

I asked a ton of questions of parents of REALM kids, other homeschoolers, the administration and some of the teachers, and their answers totally reassured me, but it was still nerve-wracking. Just so...different. (And to be honest, I kept getting stuck on the word 'homeschool'). So, we figured to have him try The REALM for a few days to see how he liked it to help us figure out if perhaps we should send him there for Grade 1.

We took a personal day from his school, chose a sample day and I nervously dropped him off at The REALM on a Monday at the end of February. We were praying for some clarity but didn't expect to have any until he tried a few days at the very least. At the end of the day when I went to pick him up, I anxiously waited by the front desk

not knowing what to expect and then I saw him—he literally bounced and ran towards me with the biggest smile on his face. I remember choking up and holding back my tears as he talked a mile a minute, telling me all about the amazing things he learned and did that day. ...Did I know Ben Franklin in addition to being a founding father started public libraries, was a newspaper publisher, and also invented bifocals and lightning rods? Did I know how string instruments create sound with vibration? And on and on. He had that old light in his eyes that had all but disappeared. He was so happy, chatty and so...satisfied. Then he announced that The REALM was ‘his place’ and asked to go back again the next day.

It was very confusing, though, to take the word of a 6 year old, especially since we would lose his spot at the other school- and it was easier to get struck by lightning than get that spot in the first place. So we tried another day at The REALM, and again, he was positively buoyant, grinning ear to ear, when I picked him up, lit up by all he had learned. We were amazed that again, he wanted to share details of what he did in every class and didn’t just shrug to the ‘what did you do today’ question. (It’s still our daily ritual to talk about each class). Then the real litmus test- we sent him back to his old school for a jog-a-thon event. The kind of activity he really lives for, and the kind of thing you get to do at a big ‘normal’ school. And he did love it. He threw himself head first into it, and had a blast with his friends. When it was over I explained that they don’t have things like jog-a-thons, and even recess, at The REALM, yet he insisted that he didn’t care. The REALM is my place, he repeated with even more conviction.

So we decided to roll the dice, pulled him out of Kindergarten and started sending him to The REALM full time that March. We figured it would be great for grade 1 and maybe grade 2 but by grade 3 we would transition him back to a ‘real school.’ However, it didn’t take very long for us to realize that this wasn’t a stopgap solution, but a better educational option than we had imagined in our wildest dreams. When I try to explain The REALM I always feel like people think I’m exaggerating. This is one of those rare situations when the reality is even better than it seems on paper. Here are the top reasons it is an amazing fit for Dar and our family:

1. At The REALM he is totally connected to his teachers. He is heard, loved and valued and it encourages him to develop his voice, ideas, confidence and critical thinking. And because they truly know him, they know when he should be stretched and challenged and when to support him and bolster his self-confidence.
2. He can go at his own pace. It is true differentiated education because with Vicky’s guidance (she observes and really gets to know each kid), we choose classes based on his developmental not chronological age in any given subject. Also the small class size means that the teachers can differentiate even further. He has bounded ahead in math and takes classes with the older kids and also gets to work with his (amazing) math teacher in private tutoring sessions - which he adores. (As an aside, It makes me wonder how many kids

are sadly held back by an age-centric approach to math.) Conversely, he was perfectly supported at his own pace in literacy, which allowed him to come to it in his own time, and now he's a confident, blossoming, reader and writer.

3. It's the perfect balance of teacher-directed and experiential learning. The project-based method at The Realm is meaningful and rigorous in all the right ways. Guided by the teacher, the hands-on approach makes it stick - and makes it fun. We are constantly surprised by how much he has been able to absorb without being made to jump conventional learning hoops like tests and homework. Even in subjects that one would think require studying and repetition like spelling, geography, and history, he is soaring ahead and has a trove of knowledge without the mind-numbing rote memorization.
4. Just about every one of his teachers is 'that one teacher who changes your life' and makes you fall in love with a subject. And he has between 7-12 different teachers each semester! The teachers pitch and design their own classes and curriculum each semester, so they are invested, innovative and passionate about reaching the kids in meaningful ways. There are obviously some he has better chemistry with than others, but the ones he doesn't connect with are no less exceptional, we just don't choose their classes. The REALM recognizes that there are different communication styles and makes sure to have a wide variety of teachers. So, instead of a kid having only one teacher for a school year, with whom they may or may not connect (as in regular schools), at The REALM you can select the teachers to best fit your child. This brings me to:
5. He doesn't just think of himself as only a 'math kid'. He has been exposed to so many other subjects and in such exciting ways from his beloved teachers, that he has discovered so many other interests and passions. In his case (so far): architecture, sculpture, geography and cultural studies, computer programming, dance, and robotics are high on his list
6. We make sure to balance his schedule with outdoor REALM classes. This has resulted in higher levels of physical activity than he ever got in gym class- hiking, sailing, dance, sports, jogging, etc. Hikers Club in particular has furthered his stamina, love of nature, independence, social skills and grit.
7. Beyond traditional academics, they offer classes that are so practical and prepare him for life. There are too many to mention but here are some examples of what I mean: 'Careers Around Us' (where the kids get to visit and understand different career opportunities), or 'City Explorers' (where kids get to learn how things in the world work like how to read train maps, decode building signs, redesign City Hall to make it more welcoming, etc.) or 'How things work' (where they dissect household electronics and figure out how they work), 'REALM Bistro' (How to run a restaurant and learn math in the process. I laughed so hard when Dar came home one day explaining the 5 steps of being a good server and proceeded to introduce himself and ask if I would like something to drink while I peruse the menu) ... I can go on and on, there are so many of these amazing, pragmatic, offerings!

8. Instead of being geared to tests and grades, he works passionately throughout the whole semester towards displaying his work at the end of semester Open House. He puts his energy and pride into the process, not a letter or number result. He says he'd rather go to The REALM even on weekends and holidays and refuses to miss any classes. He absolutely loves it.
9. For his parent-teacher conference, we meet with all of his brilliant teachers. Each one truly knows him and gives us the most authentic assessment of him - far more than any test scores could ever illustrate. We hear deep analysis of his strengths, his challenges, his thoughts, interests and difficulties, both academically and socially. The teachers, together with Vicky and Jessie, collaborate with each other and us, a team dedicated to helping him reach his highest potential.
10. Each semester the schedule has been so well designed that he always has a full and exciting course load. I had no need to fear that the fabulous schedule of his first semester was a one-off. Also, I barely do any work with him at home. Ironically, I probably have less to do as a homeschooler outsourcing at The REALM than had he stayed in regular school!
11. He is extremely social and is so confident and comfortable walking into new social situations now. Because at The REALM they play with kids of all ages and because every class has different students, he socializes with so many different kids in a day, and yet he has the benefit of the closeness that can develop when there are no more than about 8 kids in any given class. It's the best of both worlds.
12. My husband and I also happen to love the parent community and the teachers. We were prepared to sacrifice a community in lieu of a better academic fit, and thankfully we didn't have to.

Dar has made great friends – both kids and teachers. We notice that REALM kids look people in the eye and talk comfortably and confidently to adults. There are a lot of schools that talk a lot about mindfulness and social emotional learning, but The REALM lives it. Vicky, Jessie and teachers are fully engaged and watchful, and help the kids navigate social situations and communicate kindly and effectively. The kids are guided to celebrate what makes themselves, and others, 'perfectly imperfect', and to act with integrity, inclusivity, and intention.

So, maybe you're still wondering, how do we know he's on track?? I have two answers to that question. Firstly, I question the relevance of the conventional 'track'. I believe, (and there is much written these days on the subject), that the old-school academic benchmarks will not be as relevant to our 21st century kids and will not give them the tools that will be needed. The work world is changing so much that problem solving, well-rounded and broad range of knowledge, working with others, creative and critical thinking are being deemed more and more important. When we look at his incredible work, projects, his notebooks and hear from him all that he has learned, it's obvious The REALM model is stretching his brain in so many directions, and developing critical thought and problem solving skills, grit, and a deep, practical,

knowledge of himself and the world around him. This is the 'track' that I'm most happy he is squarely on. 2. While I'd like to say I'm so laid back that I don't care about conventional benchmarks at all, I still do, and it's very easy to see that he is flourishing on that 'track', too. There are great online resources to double check grade level skills and he is consistently ahead. I also totally trust the pedagogy and Vicky and Jessie as heads of school. The few times I have had any concerns that there may be a skill he needs to sharpen, I talk to Vicky, Jessie or his teachers to be sure that nothing is falling through the cracks. It's amazing how receptive they are and also so nimble at making modifications to suit him if there is anything that he might be lacking. I love that they aren't attached to any one dogma and are so open to listening and quick to put ideas in motion.

I can't believe that this happened only two years ago. It seemed like such a big, hard, decision at the time but the reality has been so smooth and easy. Writing this blog post is reminding me of what an emotional time it was. I remember how uncharacteristically weepy I was back then. I've since come to realize, and recognize in the teary faces of so many other parents when they first walk in to The REALM, it can strip you raw to have your instinct shouting at you that your kid isn't doing well while your head keeps trying to convince you that maybe it's not so. And then the profound relief of seeing them thrive again is indescribable. I so appreciate the guidance and feedback I got while we were trying to make this decision and I hope this post can pay it forward to anyone who may be grappling with similar uncertainty about this educational model.