



STAYING HOME for school

by Cheri Pearson • illustration by Miguel Ibarra

The number of homeschooled children in the United States is estimated to be inching close to 2 million, with steady growth year after year. The year 2000 saw Amazon giant open an online store for homeschooling, and in 2004, PBS aligned with *Homeschooling Parent Magazine*, saying they considered homeschoolers to be "a critical audience." The Internet age has made it easier to access the option of homeschool, and resources are opening up as libraries and colleges are finding ways to accommodate them. So why are parents choosing to homeschool, and how do these students fair socially, academically and in transition to college?

According to a survey by the U.S. Department of Education in 1999, the top three reasons were better education at home, religion and the learning environment at school. With headlines disputing the No Child Left Behind Act, literacy coaches and teachers disgruntled with teaching for the TAKS test, resources being drained and concerns over safety and influence, parents have been considering alternative educational options like homeschool. Many parents are concerned that their children's individual learning styles are not being met by standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculums, and the costs are creativity and imagination. Parents are enjoying the freedom of educating their children, and some are simply doing it because it works for them.

Amy Hancock has chosen to homeschool her two children on a

"year-to-year basis," she says. "We have had quite a few baby sitters who were homeschooled. We were impressed with them. They were really together kids with good relationships with their parents." Initially, she thought "homeschoolers were weird. I typified them all as having chickens in their back yard, milling their own grain and Quakerish," she says. She soon learned that "normal people everywhere are doing it."

Even former teachers like Natalie Pasqualone and Twyla Heinlein have decided to homeschool their children. "The first time I heard of homeschooling was through a couple of teachers who had a spouse at home doing it. I thought it was strange. I was an optimistic new teacher. However, the longer I taught, the more it made sense. My faith in the system was shaken after I had seen a few of its failures," says Pasqualone. "There are going to be a majority of kids who do fine in the public system, but you cannot meet all the needs of all the kids. There is so much more you can provide at home."

Whether parents choose it from the outset or change course midway, a question that consistently arises among the general public is concern over isolation and socialization. "You could turn it around and ask the same question of any education system," says Joey Chanoi, a supporter of homeschooling within his own family. "I would say you would be better adjusted if you learn your values from your parents instead of your peers."

In a study published by John Wesley Taylor V, Ph.D., Taylor used a Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale and found that only 10.3 percent of homeschooled children scored low on self-concept compared to 50 percent of conventionally schooled children. A 1992 study by University of Florida professor Larry Shyers showed that there were less problem behaviors exhibited from homeschoolers in free play and group interaction. Research, studies and evaluations generally convey that homeschoolers are happier with themselves and less peer-driven.

"I would venture to say that 70 to 75 percent of homeschool families take it so seriously that they look at socialization and want to get children involved in community and extracurricular activities," says Mary-Lou Stenchly, an educational counselor at Calvert for almost 40 years. Many families have their children enrolled in outside sports, music, church youth groups, language classes or homeschool associations. In addition, the majority of homeschoolers have more than three siblings, and Linda Evans feels that if her children can learn how to get along with each other, then they can get along with anyone. "We talk openly about the negative conditions of the world. They know that it exists without being the brunt of it." Her daughter, Lorien Cannoy, says that the experience was positive and that she wants to homeschool her own children. "It was very easy for me to talk to grown-ups and different ages. Socially, I felt very capable," she says.

Some homeschool critics may also wonder if parents are qualified to teach their children in the first place. There are methods of “unschooling,” which allows the child to lead the instruction at his or her own interest and pace; however, most parents purchase a curriculum or enroll their child in online distance learning. Calvert, for instance, provides complete lesson plans with guided instruction and all books and materials needed for the year. Education counselors are available through the phone or live chat.

Other concerns arise with the perceived difficulties of homeschooling a teenager through high school and transitioning him or her to college, but Kyle Heinlein, a 16-year-old homeschooler, is not complaining. “Pretty much the only thing that really affects teenagers is that they are not able to hang out with friends all day,” he says. “During school hours, my mom’s the teacher. I might be able to push and coax for time on a project, but she can push and coax in the thought process.”

Kyle claims his transition to dual-credit courses at El Paso Community College hasn’t been very difficult, and he is maintaining a respectable 3.85. He says he has enjoyed feeling competitive academically and being in a classroom environment. Lee Sullivan, Ph.D., is the Dual Enrollment Homeschool contact at EPCC and claims to be “very honored to be the counselor that gets to do this. It has been very positive to work with these wonderful students. They adjust very well to college. I don’t think I have seen anything lower than a B, and they are focused individuals and serious students,” she says.

Some homeschool critics may also wonder if parents are qualified to teach their children in the first place.

Such reports beg the question of how most homeschooled students fair academically. Consistently, on average, they have scored higher on ACT and SAT tests. “In every subject and at every grade level of the [tests], homeschooled students scored significantly higher than their public- and private-school counterparts,” concludes Dr. Lawrence Rudner in a comprehensive study of more than 20,000 homeschoolers from 50 states. Prestigious universities like Harvard, Yale, Stanford and MIT have opened their doors to homeschoolers. Joyce Reed, dean of Brown University, stated in an alumni magazine article, “Homeschooling Comes of Age”, that “homeschoolers are the epitome of Brown students. They are self-directed; they take risks, and they don’t back off.”

Financially, homeschooling is more expensive than public schools and more affordable than private. Purchasing curriculums can cost approximately \$600 per child a year, and that does not include the extra expense of sports, language, music, art or dance class. (It costs the government an average of \$5,325 per student enrolled in public school.) Homeschoolers also do not receive tax breaks.

“Homeschooling is not for everyone,” says Lorien Cannoy. “It requires a lot of patience, yet it can be a very positive thing for people to do. Some people are career-oriented and need that outlet. Staying home would make them uncomfortable.”

Homeschooling is both a growing educational option and a huge commitment. There will be shining examples and pitfalls in any system, but on average, homeschoolers continue to prove themselves socially and academically. 

