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# Families Home Schooling in a Virtual Charter School System

Carol Klein  
Mary Poplin

**ABSTRACT.** Contemporary educational options have increased in recent years as families have sought alternatives to traditional choices. Three of these, home schooling, charter schools, and virtual schools, provide the foundation for a new institution called the virtual charter school. This new alternative provides curriculum to home learners through advanced technologies within the charter school setting, allowing for innovation, freedom from traditional structure, and tuition-free education for students. The California Virtual Academies, a network of virtual charter schools, provided the opportunity to explore the phenomenon from the families' perspectives. The following questions were posed: What are the characteristics of families that are currently involved in home schooling through this innovative model? Why do families pursue this means of education? What are their experiences? How does it look in daily practice?

**KEYWORDS.** Charter education, charter schools, contemporary reform movements, educational alternatives, families, home schooling, parental choice, technology in education, virtual education

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## INTRODUCTION

Families of all socioeconomic levels are seeking alternatives to public schools. Many parents, after considering the lackluster results of traditional schools, have sought alternate forms of education that could meet their own standards of excellence (Hetzel, Long, & Jackson, 2001). Three powerful innovations—home schooling, charter schools, and, most recently, virtual or cyber-schools—are each having an impact on our society's contemporary ways of educating its young. Although these are providing new choices to parents, teachers, and students, they have also, perhaps unknowingly, changed the face of a once monolithic public school system.

Adding to the list of reform-oriented alternatives is a new pioneering effort that appears to have successfully merged all three of the aforementioned innovations—the virtual charter school. This innovation uses advanced technologies to deliver curriculum, and the recipients of this curriculum are home learners, including those of the home schooling population. This institution also functions within the charter school setting, which allows for innovation, freedom from traditional structure, and tuition-free education for all its students. We posed the following questions: What are the characteristics of families that are currently involved in home schooling through a popular network of virtual charters? Why do families pursue such an arrangement in the first place? What are their experiences? How does it look in practice during a typical day? First, we briefly present the most recent research on each of the three alternatives before focusing on virtual charters for home schooling.

### *Home Schooling*

Home schooling, the oldest and largest of the three reforms, continues to be an increasingly popular alternative to traditional schooling (Belfield & Levin, 2005). It is now recognized as more mainstream, given the diversity and numbers involved in the movement (Collom, 2005). Ray (2006) states that the population is quickly growing among minorities (15% is now non-White/non-Hispanic) and has had an annual growth rate for several years of between 7% and 12% in the United States, making it one of the fastest growing forms of education today. Estimates on the number of students involved are between 1.9 and 2.4 million for the 2005–2006 school

year. Home schooling has been defined by Russell (1994) as “75% or more of what the family considers to be schooling is provided by or conducted under the supervision of the parent(s)” (p. 2). Lines (1991) viewed it as instruction and learning that take place primarily at home in a family setting with a parent acting as teacher or facilitator of activities. Activities may be planned or not, but learning involves pupils who are family members doing grade K–12 work.

According to Ray (2002), this home-school movement grew out of an alternative school movement in the 1960s and 1970s and was also reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s by a public perception that government schools were on a downward spiral (Hetzel, 1998), through reports such as “A Nation at Risk,” the decline of Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) scores, international comparisons, and safety concerns. Hetzel et al. (2001) found that the 332 parents who responded to their survey believed that their children receive “better instruction in morals, values, and academics, in a safer environment if they are home schooled.”

Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, and Marlow (1995) found certain trends to be identifiable in the home schooling sample they studied. First, they found it to generally be a “white, middle-class movement, chosen primarily by relatively young parents living in traditional nuclear families” (p. 43). These parents also tended to be well educated, with the fathers often employed in jobs with flexible hours. For many of these parent educators, religious and spiritual convictions were found to be a prominent feature of their daily lives that directly affected their decision to home school. Third, this group was found to be politically conservative. Finally, these parents have had “little confidence in a wide spectrum of social institutions, including those commonly perceived to be conservative in nature” (p. 43). In spite of these trends, Mayberry et al. did stress that the movement is by no means homogeneous.

Though a variety of structures may be used, studies reveal that students in these environments are thriving (Medlin, 2000; Rudner, 1999; Taylor, 1986). Academic achievement scores of home-schooled youngsters have been found to range from above average (Van Galen & Pitman, 1991; Witt, 1999) to exceptionally high (Rudner, 1999). Two large studies exemplify these findings. The first, released in 1992 by the National Center for Home Education, was composed of a nationwide sample of over 10,000 K–12th-grade home-educated children. Data revealed that the average percentile rank scores ranged

from 65 to 82 on the complete battery of subtests, whereas the national average was 50 (Medlin, 1994). The second study, a 1998 study completed by Rudner (1999) of 20,760 students using the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (grades K–8) or the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (grades 9–12), found home-schooled students were typically in the 70th to 80th percentile. Interestingly, Rudner concluded that these findings represent a 1-year lead for younger students and a 4-year advantage for children in eighth grade, compared with traditionally schooled children. Ray (2006) states that home-schooled children continue to typically achieve 15% to 30% higher scores on standardized tests.

Though research is limited, parental motivation for this choice is another common research theme or at least serves as a beginning point for further inquiries into this phenomenon. The research of Montes (2006) found top motivators for home schooling to be religious convictions (41.31%), better education provided at home (47.12%), and poor learning environment at school (23.47%). Collom (2005) identified four motivations of home schoolers in a charter in Southern California to be 1) academic and pedagogic issues, 2) dissatisfaction with public schools, 3) religious values, and 4) issues related to family life. Collom concluded that differing motivations do not translate neatly into distinct groups of home educators, that the population is heterogeneous with varying and overlapping motivations, and that parents who are home schooling have higher levels of education. He also suggested that religious reasons had subsided some since earlier studies.

### *Charter Schools*

Though home-schooling parents have withdrawn from the system to deal with their concerns, another wave of reformers has opted to address challenges from within the system. Public charter schools have emerged in the last 10 to 12 years to pursue alternative ways of meeting the high academic standards that are essential for today's students. They are the most widely used form of school choice in the United States today (Fowler, 2003). Their appearance, which had its beginnings in the early 1990s in Minnesota (Marshall, Gibbs, Greene, Nelson, & Schofield, 2001; Morse, 2001), has spawned great controversy, with reactions ranging from a sense of great hope and promise by advocates to sincere alarm and vigorous opposition from differing voices.

Though no silver bullet, school choice, which is the impetus behind the charter school movement, appears to be here to stay (Fowler, 2003), perhaps because our society has long since become accustomed to the need for multiple choices in everything. By 2002, 39 states had charter school legislation (Kennedy, 2002) with more than 600,000 students attending 3,000 charter schools nationwide (Schemo, 2004). According to Stuart Wells, Slayton, and Scott (2002), this success is attributed in part to the uniting of multiple reform groups (e.g., Black separatists, civil rights leaders, progressive or free school educators, and conservative free-market economists), thus affording broad-based popularity and bipartisan support.

Manno, Finn, and Vanourek (2000) define public charter schools as “an independent public school of choice, freed from rules but accountable for results” (p. 736). The charter school must meet accountability standards in return for funding and autonomy. Its goal is to close the achievement gap and curtail bureaucratic excesses. Specific legislation is in place to monitor and review charter school practices usually every 3 to 5 years. Charters can be revoked if the set standards or guidelines on management and curriculum have not been met (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

Even though the charter schools provide an alternative to the traditional educational setting, they must be open to all students. In theory, anyone (e.g., private business, interested parents, and/or community members) can apply for a charter and form a public school if their plan is valuable, workable, and accepted by local governing authorities. State boards of education have been receptive to different philosophies with innovative pedagogical approaches for their conception (Marshall et al., 2001).

The Center for Education Reform has provided up-to-date information on charter schools. According to their report, the charter school movement is still unfolding and in its adolescent phase. In the fall of 2005–2006 the number of operating charters in the United States stood at 3,617 and was spread across 40 states plus the District of Columbia with over a million students enrolled (Allen & Heffernan, 2006). This is an increase from the previous year of 217 charters (Georgiou, 2005), attesting to the rapid increase in interest. The Center for Education Reform reported that states with multiple charting authorities have four and a half times more charter schools than those who only allow school board approval. Also noted was a rise in the number of universities/colleges who are becoming

sponsors. Though many might still believe that charters take only the best students, 75% of students actually fall into the category of "at risk." Georgiou found that charter school students are more likely to be proficient in reading and math than students in neighboring conventional schools. She also stated that housing developers and community-based organizations are now assisting charter schools by renovating, building, or leasing new facilities. Some developments in city centers may help to reduce middle-class flight.

LaFevre (2005) reports several studies that suggested charter schools are especially beneficial to low-income and minority students while serving diverse populations of students. It was found that fewer charter students repeated grades or dropped out compared with their traditional counterparts. According to the same analysis, California (the state in this study) has an above average ranking for charter school law and by April 2005 had authorized 533 charters that serve 181,928 students. At that time, student ethnic composition for these charter schools was White, 54.4%; Hispanic, 26.6%; Black, 10.8%; Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.4%; and Native American, 2.5%.

Finally, Manno (in Peterson, 2006) offers evidence that although charters may cause trouble for some school districts, they often wind up saving money for the state. Charters may cost less to operate per student than traditional schools. For example, charters in Ohio received \$2,300 less per pupil than local school districts in 1999–2000. It was estimated that seven of the largest districts in Ohio would have each received \$20–60 million dollars less in state funds had they operated under the charter school funding formula. Manno cautioned that some charter schools have attracted greedy operators; thus it is crucial to have a system of review and monitoring firmly in place to hold all participants accountable to state expectations.

### *Virtual Charter Schools*

Fundamental changes in society have driven, at least in part, the new demands for virtual charter education (Davis and Roblyer, 2005). Anytime, anywhere access to information is now commonplace, and learners are coming to expect such experiences to be a part of their educational opportunities. This kind of schooling is offered by virtual charter models, which have recently been defined as "a hybrid of public, charter, and home schooling, with ample dashes

of tutoring and independent study thrown in, all turbocharged by Internet technology” (Greenway and Vanourek, 2006, p. 4).

Growth of these new schools continues to soar. Currently, there are 147 online-only (virtual) charter schools in 18 states serving 65,354, which is 4% of the public charter population (Rotherham, 2006). The benefits of virtual charters include the ability to serve a wide range of students, public financing, innovative curriculum and its delivery, and the ability to retain students who may otherwise drop out of public education (Rapp, Eckes, & Plucker, 2006).

New questions are beginning to arise as new policies, programs, and roles require greater definition. Judicious responses will help pave the way for greater efficacy as foundations are laid in these areas. Huerta, Gonzalez, and d’Entremmont (2006) state, “As non-classroom-based charters expand to other states, policymakers will need to identify the teaching and learning, organization and governance models employed by non-classroom based charters, and address how they fit within the existing definitions of what is permissible under both charter legislation and general state education statutes” (p. 3).

Addressing these issues will not only provide clarity for charter contract fulfillment, but will strengthen accountability measures as well. Huerta et al. found the following emerging issues to be salient: (1) determining per-pupil funding for non-classroom-based charter schools, (2) establishing accountability measures of student performance and program quality, (3) defining enrollment boundaries and funding responsibilities, and (4) monitoring the influx of traditional home schoolers who are new to public education.

Another area that will need attention as virtual schools increase is teacher preparation. Although good communication and organization skills are always endemic to teacher success, a good classroom teacher is not necessarily a good online teacher. Those who succeed in online learning need to possess a certain set of skills to enable them to thrive in cyberspace (Davis & Roblyer, 2005). Necessary will be a paradigm shift in perceptions of instructional time and space, ways of engaging students through virtual communications, and virtual management techniques, just to name a few. The role of the teacher is sure to evolve in these new environments. Davis and Roblyer see these roles as counselor, assistant, teacher, and designer. The new demands on the teacher will require preservice programs to become well versed in these emerging competencies.



## METHODS

This study sought to describe the demographics of parents participating in six virtual charter schools in California, their reasons for participating and their experiences, their children's achievement, and their daily routines. The study included all six of the California Virtual Academies (CAVA),<sup>1</sup> the first of which was established in 2002. The six virtual charters were diverse in terms of location, urban to rural, and size. (For extensive detail of the academies and their operation, as well as California charter laws, see Klein [2006].) The CAVA network is part of a larger national network of virtual charters that operate in 12 states and partners with the for-profit educational company "K12." The Virginia-based K12 Company was created in 1999 by a team of educational experts, including the board of directors' chairperson, William Bennett, former Secretary of Education. The mission of the company, according to Ron Packard, K12's first CEO, was to provide "a world class curriculum that every child could have access to." K12 provides CAVA with curriculum as well as administrative staff, computer systems, infrastructure, and systems to fully manage the schools. The K12 curriculum covers six subjects: math, language arts, science, history, art, and music. It provides more than 600 lessons per grade level. Part of its foundation is the Core Knowledge Sequence of E. D. Hirsch (1999), who asserts the importance of cultural literacy and intellectual capital.

At the time of the study (2004–2005 school year) CAVA student enrollment was 2,051, serving a total of 1,422 families. The number had approximately doubled each of the 3 years that CAVA has been in existence. The six sites ranged in enrollment from 99 to 1,059 students. Class sizes range from 30 to 35 students (currently 25), and teachers are expected to be in touch with families regularly through e-mail and phone. Face-to-face meetings with families are scheduled every 45 days. Teachers monitor attendance and academic progress of the students, support families with instructional and learning needs, and complete report cards.

### *Data Collection*

The head of schools at CAVA provided an administrative contact person for the study who permitted the parent survey invitation to be electronically mailed to all 1,422 families in CAVA through their

teachers. This contact person also provided a list of parents to approach for the 10 interviews. The survey was developed based on the literature review and expert examination and gathered background and demographic information as well as parental perceptions using both forced-choice questions and open-ended prompts. The survey was piloted before posting online through Zoomerang, which provided survey software. State test results were also obtained from three of the six sites—an urban, suburban, and rural site (largest, mid-size, and next to the smallest site). In phone interviews parents were asked to describe their experiences with the virtual home school charter, the benefits and/or positive outcomes from the partnership, and any areas they would like to see improved. Finally, four parents offered to journal a typical day in their lives.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Characteristics of Parents in this Virtual Home School Charter***

Of the 1,422 surveys that were sent by the Internet teacher, 146 parents voluntarily completed the survey, 143 mothers and 3 fathers. Detailed results are presented in Table 1. Slightly over 90% of the parents are married. Approximately 30% of the respondents were parents of color, and 70% were white. There was a wide range in parent ages and family income. The educational level attained by the mothers who predominantly responded was high, with only 5.6% having either not completed high school or only completed high school. Over 60% of the families have more than two children with grade levels spanning K–7 (the highest grade available in CAVA at that time), and over 60% have been home schooling for 2 or more years. Ninety-seven percent of the children work on school for 3 or more hours per day.

Most parents who returned the survey claimed religious affiliation: Protestant (41%), Catholic (17%), Jewish (1%), other (33%), and no religion (7%). Future work should request clarification from those who mark “other”; it could be members of nondenominational Christian churches, Muslims, or other faiths. Our intuition from this and other data is that these are largely members of the newer nondenominational Protestant churches who either do not overtly know and/or express their affiliation to Protestantism. If this is true, as

TABLE 1. Demographic Information ( $N = 146$ )

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Age <sup>a</sup>		
20–29 years	7	4.9
30–39 years	59	41.0
40–49 years	70	48.6
50–59 years	8	5.6
Gender		
Female	143	97.9
Male	3	2.1
Ethnicity		
Asian	5	3.4
Black/African	8	5.5
Hispanic or Latin American	17	11.6
Native American/Alaskan Native	2	1.4
White	102	69.9
Other	12	8.2
Educational level <sup>a</sup>		
No high school diploma	4	2.8
High school graduate	4	2.8
Some college/university	54	37.5
College/university graduate	48	33.3
Postgraduate	34	23.6
Religion <sup>a</sup>		
Catholic	25	17.4
Jewish	2	1.4
Protestant	59	41.0
None	10	6.9
Other	48	33.3
Annual family/household income <sup>a</sup>		
Under \$15,000	2	1.4
\$ 15,000–29,999	10	7.0
\$ 30,000–49,999	34	23.8
\$ 50,000–69,999	26	18.2
\$ 70,000–99,999	33	23.1
\$100,000–149,999	24	16.8
\$150,000–199,999	11	7.7
\$200,000 and over	3	2.1
Marital status <sup>a</sup>		
Unmarried	14	9.7
Married	130	90.3
Number of children <sup>a</sup>		
1	19	13.1
2	42	29.0
3	40	27.6
4 or more	44	30.3

(Continued)

TABLE 1. Continued

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Number of years in home schooling <sup>a</sup>		
0–1	50	34.5
2–5	75	51.7
6–9	11	7.6
10 or more	9	6.2
Grade levels of children enrolled <sup>b</sup>		
K	28	19.2
1	28	19.2
2	32	21.9
3	25	17.1
4	27	18.5
5	29	19.9
6	18	12.3
7	33	22.6
Number of hours school work per day <sup>a</sup>		
1–2	4	2.9
3–4	80	57.6
5 or more	55	39.6

<sup>a</sup>Contained missing data.<sup>b</sup>More than one response was possible.

much as 90% of the respondents may have been Christian. Administrators at CAVA had the same intuitions.

Like previous studies, we find the population to be very diverse demographically. However, it would appear that the parent-teacher tends to more educated, more religious, and more likely to be married than the general population.

### ***Achievement Results***

The CAVA schools must submit annual standardized testing data from their students to the state as a requirement of their public school status. Testing sites are arranged each year in the spring, and students assemble to complete mandatory portions of the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. In 2004 the California Achievement Test (CAT/6) and the California Standards Test (CST) were required in grades 2 through 8. Also required that year was a written assessment in grades 4 and 7 and a physical education assessment in grades 5 and 7. The state expects 95% participation in each

assessment to avoid the risk of receiving a serious penalty (in accord with the No Child Left Behind Act).

Because of the newness of some of the CAVA schools and the fact that California test results for 2005 were not available at the time of the study, the results of 2004 testing were available from only three sites. School averages for grades 2 through 7 were compared with state averages for both the CST and CAT/6 portions of the STAR program. CAVA schools scored above the state averages in 15 of 18 grade categories on the CST English Language Arts. All but one grade category was above the state average in reading on the CAT/6 and all but two on the CAT/6 English. Two sites performed above the state average at all grade levels. Math performance in CAVA was weaker, however, with only 2 of 18 on par with state averages for the CST and 6 of 18 for the CAT/6. An improvement plan is in place to rectify this problem with proficiency goals to increase by 5% each year for 3 subsequent years when 75% of all students are expected to achieve at the proficient or advanced level.

The Academic Performance Index uses STAR results to measure school performance while monitoring growth over time by setting growth targets. CAVA was able to meet its Adequate Yearly Progress requirements and Academic Performance Index growth targets in two of its schools. The third school experienced a drop in Academic Performance Index due to increased enrollment. Plans for improvement and expansion were underway at the time of the study.<sup>2</sup>

### *Quantitative Survey Results*

The parent survey was administered online and collected demographic data on the participants as well as 37 forced choice (Likert scale) inquiries that sought parent perceptions on reasons for choosing to home school and the virtual charter, as well as their experiences (Table 2). In addition, four open-ended questions sought parent reasons for choosing to home school in the virtual charter as well as the quality of their experiences and any suggestions for improvement. Overall, results showed that these respondents were extremely positive toward this particular virtual charter home-school approach.

A total score for the 15 Likert scale items that measured respondents' evaluation of their experience with the virtual charter school

TABLE 2. Respondents' Survey ( $N = 146$ )

Reason	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Reasons for choosing home school		
To provide increased academic opportunities for my child(ren)	4.54	0.74
To embrace high expectations of excellence in learning	4.52	0.73
To ensure a safe environment for learning	4.50	0.83
To increase the opportunity for instilling moral values	4.48	0.87
To meet the unique learning needs of my child(ren)	4.41	0.87
To strengthen family bonds	4.34	0.87
For greater flexibility in scheduling studies	4.15	1.05
To become an effective role model for my child(ren)	4.09	0.94
Because of disapproval of some formal school practices	3.91	1.11
To express religious freedom	3.64	1.29
Reasons for choosing virtual charter		
To have tuition-free access to learning tools, materials, and resources	4.55	0.87
To provide instruction at home where I can have greater control over my child(ren)'s education	4.42	0.82
To benefit from the individualized program pacing (self-paced progression)	4.41	0.84
To increase my direct involvement with my child(ren)'s education	4.37	0.68
To gain a higher level of education than is available elsewhere	4.27	0.84
To enjoy the convenience of technologies that support learning	4.21	0.81
To take advantage of the built-in system of assessment that provides timely feedback on learning progress	4.17	0.91
To have the flexibility to plan learning activities around the family schedule	4.16	1.00
To utilize a more comprehensive instructional program than was formerly used	4.09	0.94
To belong to a reputable community of learners	3.83	0.99
To obtain professional support for instructional challenges if they arise	3.79	1.12
To receive customized support for special student needs (e.g., learning disabilities)	3.10	1.09
Evaluation of experience with virtual charter		
The curricular resources provided have saved me the time of gathering them on my own.	4.79	0.44
I appreciate having access to the high-quality learning materials.	4.79	0.43
If the possibility for this educational opportunity was repeated, I would take it again.	4.68	0.56
My child(ren)'s academic needs have been met.	4.65	0.60
Overall, the reasons that motivated me to home school have been sustained through this arrangement.	4.51	0.68
My family has enjoyed learning through the technologies provided in this educational program.	4.50	0.64
I value the accountability for learning that this school provides.	4.33	0.87

*(Continued)*

TABLE 2. Continued

Reason	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
This arrangement has accommodated my family's needs for flexibility in scheduling.	4.30	0.90
When technology challenges have occurred, support has been readily available.	4.14	0.87
My child(ren) has/have become more self-motivated to learn through this educational approach.	4.04	0.96
This approach was selected because it reduced educational costs for my family.	4.02	1.22
This relationship has helped solve instructional challenges by providing ongoing professional support.	3.84	0.92
My child(ren)'s social needs have been met.	3.70	1.06
My family has valued the opportunities to network with other families through this program.	3.64	0.96
This choice has been limiting to my style of home schooling.	2.19	1.14

The scale was as follows: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, no opinion = 3, agree = 4, strongly agree = 5.

was calculated. Higher scores indicate a more favorable experience. Scores ranged from 45 to 75 (out of a possible 15–75) with a mean of 64.17 (standard deviation, 6.16). This indicates that generally respondents had very favorable experiences with the virtual charter school. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the scale. The alpha was .79.

Independent samples *t* tests were used to determine any differences in experience with virtual charter school by age (20–39 years vs. 40–59 years), ethnicity (White vs. non-White), and marital status. There was no significant difference in the evaluation of their experience between the groups by age ( $t = 0.93$ ,  $df = 129$ ,  $p = .354$ ), ethnicity ( $t = 1.35$ ,  $df = 131$ ,  $p = .178$ ), or marital status ( $t = 0.98$ ,  $df = 25.01$ ,  $p = .337$ ).

Analyses of variance were used to determine differences in experience with virtual charter school by educational level, annual family/household income, number of children, and number of years home schooling. Once again, there was no significant difference in experience between the groups by educational level ( $F = 1.27$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .287$ ), income ( $F = 1.35$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = .937$ ), number of children ( $F = 0.98$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .423$ ), or number of years home schooling ( $F = 0.63$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .594$ ).

## DISCUSSION

### *Open-Ended Parent Survey Questions*

Parents also were asked to respond to four open-ended items in the survey: (1) Why did you become involved with a virtual charter school? (2) What motivated you and what has sustained your involvement? (3) What is the best part of your participation with the virtual charter school? (4) How could it be better?

### *Why Did You Become Involved and What Motivates and Sustains Your Involvement?*

When asked why they became involved and what motivated and sustained their involvement, five top themes emerged in the 137 open-ended responses from parents:

1. *Quality of the curriculum:* The quality of the curriculum was most frequently mentioned (61% of respondents) as the reason for selecting and remaining in this virtual charter school. Parents described the curriculum as “high quality,” “rigorous,” “thorough,” “comprehensive,” “engaging,” and “easily accessible.” It was also mentioned that the curriculum “takes advantage of the internet/computer” and is not in conflict with their values. Interestingly, the values issue was expressed in two very different ways: “respectful to our Christian beliefs” and “not too faith based.” Many just said they liked it or even loved the curriculum and had found it to be better than other home-schooling or public schools’ curricula, whereas others were pleased that it was sound, traditional, and/or classic. Parents also indicated that they themselves enjoyed learning from the curriculum.
2. *Various structures of the program:* The various structures of the program offered by the virtual school ranked second in importance to parents (50% of respondents). Many were pleased that the planning and gathering of lesson materials had already been done for them so that more time could be spent on actual teaching and learning. Structural features, such as the online school, organization of the curriculum, the extensive and diverse lessons, and flexibility with time, were all mentioned. The opportunity to have someone holding them accountable and to have regular



assessments of their children's progress was also strong structural features that parents appreciated. The supports provided by the teachers were often mentioned as a valued part of the structure. Uniformly, parents were impressed with the quality and immediate responsiveness of the teachers.

3. *Negative experiences in public schools:* Negative experiences in the public schools was the third theme (47%) that led parents to join the virtual charter school. Several responses revealed disappointment with the current public school system, and some responses involved children with special needs. Parents were dissatisfied with the quality and the content of instruction, pacing, lack of safety, conflicting values and morals, and the negative peer influence. Other negative experiences included overcrowding, too few teachers, and too little time with individual children.
4. *Program is free:* The fact that the program is free was the fourth theme repeated throughout the parent responses (18%). CAVA is tuition free, and many participants would not have been able to take advantage of this resource had it been otherwise. This clearly aids the diversity of the school population at CAVA.
5. *Family and religious values:* The final theme motivating parents to home school at this virtual charter were family and religious values (16%). One could easily argue that all reasons to embrace this educational choice are a matter of family values. However, some respondents specifically articulated how family and religion encouraged and sustained their participation in the virtual charter home school. Regarding religious values, one parent comments, "I wanted my child to learn at her own pace and keep Christ's word hidden in her heart." Another parent sums up many of the family values mentioned by respondents:

Improved quality of family life and freedom from being a slave to the school calendar and homework schedules after so many years was another plus. We feel we "reclaimed" the raising of our children in many ways; 30+ hours per week in the company of strangers not of our choosing was not always best for our children. What has sustained my involvement through good days and bad is the thrill of seeing my children "get it" in various ways, the pleasure I have from being with them each day and having their time when they're at their best (not tired from a long day at school, with homework ahead), and not least, the amount of material I am "re-learning"

or learning for the first time. It has been intellectually stimulating. I have also met a nice community of like-minded mothers locally.

### *Best Part About Participation*

There were 132 responses to this question, and six themes surfaced in the analysis of the texts. Again, with this open-ended question the quality of the curriculum came up as number one among the top six. Similar themes emerged in these open-ended responses primarily centered around the curriculum (36%), flexibility (20%), teacher support (14%), self-pacing (12%), ready to use (12%), and the features of testing and accountability (12%):

1. *Quality of curriculum:* The hallmark of CAVA appears to be the quality of the K12 curriculum. Parents repeatedly point to this as the best part of the CAVA experience:

The curriculum is phenomenal. My son has really been able to excel in certain areas due to his ability to work at his own pace. The best thing, however, is being provided with such high quality materials at no charge to my family.

2. *Flexibility:* “The flexibility that allows me to meet my child’s needs; I can slow down if I need to, or pause a subject for a time if she’s hitting a wall,” was the way one parent expressed the value of flexibility. Parents value the freedom afforded with this type of education to set their own schedules and make certain curricular choices that customize learning to the individual learner.
3. *Teacher support:* The advantage of teacher support in the virtual charter, which many independent home schoolers may not have, allows parents to receive prompt answers to curricular questions and advice for individual instructional or learning needs. Professional support motivates some who would otherwise not accept the challenge of this unique model of learning. One parent describes the teacher support in the context of the quality curriculum:

The best part of this experience is the system itself. The high expectations of the curriculum backed with repetitive, consistent lessons leading them into new ideas and subjects is amazing to watch as it works. The teacher support is wonderful. I feel I

can talk to my son's teacher about anything I need for my son's success. I feel the whole system is a wonderful well-planned curriculum that makes it easy for kids to learn and succeed.

4. *Pacing*: Families who choose this means of education are often willing to sacrificially provide for the individual needs of their children. This means that if their child excels, they want a program that can accommodate the needs of their quick learner. But if their child requires repeated exposure to new concepts and increased practice with certain academic skills, parents expect support for these needs as well. Parents note that the system allows for either of these needs to be accommodated so that students are able to progress at their own rate with the support and guidance of professional educators. One parent notes, "I am able to tailor my son's learning experience to his needs, move along at his pace, build on his strengths and focus on any areas of weakness."
5. *Ready to use*: Parents appreciated the fact that lessons are already planned and materials already gathered and delivered. In fact, the curriculum is ready to use. This aspect seems to be especially appreciated by home schoolers who have had to do these tasks for themselves in the past. The new freedom can then be translated into more time spent with children in learning activities. One parent explains "that the planning and research has been done for me, and it leaves me more time to spend with my children."
6. *Assessment and accountability*: The regular assessment of progress, state testing, and other methods of accountability form the final dominant theme in parents' responses to best parts of the virtual charter. Parents appreciate being able to know how their children are performing on skills and how they perform relative to other children of their grade in the state as well as appreciate the various ways the program holds them accountable for time and progress. Parents appreciate the immediate feedback on their children's progress. Two parents' comments are instructive here: "I am able to see my child's strengths and weaknesses" and "I have the opportunity to see where my son's educational level is. . . . I am able to work with him one on one and see where he struggles and see where he is strong." One parent who monitors her child's progress from work explains as follows:

The interface provided gives me the information that I need to help guide my child through the program. I monitor daily

progress from my work, and then I review the lessons with my child in the evenings and on weekends. Depending on the demonstrated level of mastery and the intuitive comfort level displayed by my child, I choose to either further review specific concepts or explore other concepts in greater depth utilizing other resources.

Two other parents note the advantage to the immediate feedback: “The accountability keeps me on track” and “Grading is done daily, which eliminates backlog.”

### *What Could Be Better?*

This question brought forth 123 responses from the parents. Analysis of these responses revealed one major theme: a need for increased social interaction, which 20% of the parents reported. Twenty percent of the parents said they could not think of a way to make it better, and the next most frequent comment, occurring only 7%, was a desire for more curriculum choice.

These data are interesting because they reveal great satisfaction with the CAVA program overall in that 20% of the respondents could find nothing to criticize. Two of the criticisms, increased social interaction and more choice in the curriculum, may be endemic to this educational model. For instance, some degree of isolation is to be expected when most of the learning occurs in the home away from other groups of learners. State curricular requirements for public institutions as well as online programs limit curriculum flexibility to some degree. Below are two rather typical responses that are related to the desire for increased socialization:

There is insufficient local community of practice interaction with virtually no social interaction available in the local areas covered by each of the teachers. Other home school programs utilize local facilities to provide enrichment and social opportunities for the children. While the chat areas created on Yahoo are great, they do not provide for parent meetings where curriculum or other items can be demonstrated or displayed. Such interactions should not be dependent on parent organized clubs and trips. One excursion and one teacher meeting a quarter do not supply

the necessary face-to-face interaction need for children. Also, due to time conflicts evening and weekend activities are needed.

Another parent reveals the need from a different perspective:

Because we home school and only have one source of income, extra activities are out of the question. Some examples would be music lessons, dance, language and sports. I wish that my children would be able to participate in these activities at the local school. Some parents have tried to include this as part of the home school experience by putting in their own time and money, but this has not been very successful.

### ***Parent Interviews***

Ten parents were interviewed; two of these parents were also board members of CAVA. All parents interviewed were women, even though at one household the father was the home-schooling parent. Two of interviewees had only one child, one had two, three had three, two families had four, one had six, and one had nine children. They were all asked one major question: "Describe your experience with CAVA and the virtual home school and what have been some of the benefits and positive outcomes and then think if there are any things you would like to see improved." The interviewer then probed for additional benefits and suggestions for improvement when participants hesitated. The themes that emerged confirmed the themes found with the open-ended survey questions and therefore they are not elaborated upon here. This was a good indication for use of data saturation, that themes emerging in the survey data were comprehensive. Briefly, these interview themes included how they had come to join the K12 virtual charter; the satisfaction with the curriculum, assessments, scheduling, and teachers; the importance of socialization, family values, and religious faith; and few diverse suggestions for improvement. All 10 parents had found CAVA and/or K12 from friends or family, although 2 parents mentioned specifically they had also come to know about K12 from either an interview or advertisement on Christian radio. They all reported in one way or another that home schooling was challenging and demanded sacrifices of income, time, and career opportunities, especially as they became one-income families.

In terms of their experiences, universally parents praised the curriculum with expressions such as “rigorous,” “comprehensive,” and “higher than the public schools.” Several again mentioned the placement and achievement testing as a distinct advantage. Most importantly, each one believed it made their own efforts to home school their children much better in that not only was the curriculum of high quality in all areas but it provided a structure and multiple opportunities to support learning. Two mentioned the fact that it was free, and all mentioned the advantage of being given all the materials they needed to do the program, including the computer and printer. Initially, four parents were concerned that K12 would have their students on the computer too much but were pleasantly surprised that this was actually not the case. Most of the parents had previous experience with either private schools or other home-schooling programs before CAVA.

A second issue that emerged in the interview data was the advantage of flexible scheduling. Some extended the school days into the summer and vacations, took time off during the week, and worked on Saturdays to keep up. The majority mentioned the issue of documenting their attendance as apparently required by state law as challenging. Some believed the curriculum was so complete and rigorous they felt pushed, whereas others had a peace about skipping certain things based on their children’s achievement and interest. Parents of large families mentioned the challenge of motivating their children equally. They noted that some of their children were self-motivated and some needed to be constantly monitored, whereas some needed more help than others in particular subjects.

Uniformly, the parents mentioned the teachers as being helpful, making meetings convenient, and offering special sessions for parents (such as for Algebra). Only one parent mentioned any concern and that was when one teacher was unable to explain an algebra problem.

Each parent addressed socialization and supplementary activities in which their children engaged: sports, opera, and church. Although some recognized that others were concerned about their children getting enough socialization, none of those interviewed believed it was a problem for them. The only exception was one parent with one son who wanted to play varsity sports; subsequently, he went back into the public schools to join a team. CAVA itself has some social activities periodically with field trips, and most parents were connected to other parents. One CAVA group has a chat room where parents provide help and schedule time together.

All but one of the parents (the board member) mentioned their faith, though this was not asked in the interview. This ranged from comments about Sunday school, Christian radio, using the Bible as curriculum, Wednesday Bible study day, to simply talking about God's plans for their families. One mother said she was "immersed in church." These church activities appeared to provide for some socialization as well. Again, it appears these parents are largely Protestant Christians.

None of the parents had significant concerns or recommendations for change. One parent who was a board member talked about different concerns such as assessments, attendance, record keeping, and meeting state demands that had arisen during the year. Interestingly, given that math scores are the lowest in the virtual charters, 5 of the 10 parents mentioned the difficulty of teaching math.

### *A Day in the Life of Virtual Home Schooling*

Four of the 10 parents who were interviewed agreed to sketch out a typical day in their lives as virtual home schoolers, though they all commented that days were very diverse and "typical" might be a misnomer. The online questionnaire used to obtain these data was divided into the following sections: morning, afternoon, and evening scheduled activities, plus additional comments. Respondents were asked to write about their routines during these three daily time blocks. The three most revealing findings in reading these journal entries are (1) the richness and depth of family life, (2) the almost seamless integration of school and family life, and the (3) ways in which this form of schooling helps parents know and guide their children toward larger life goals.

Parents described routines they had developed that added to the depth and richness of family life. One parent described that after she gets up early and walks the dog, she also gets each of her three children up at different times so that she can have some "one-on-one time" with each one at the beginning of the day. She gets her older children started on their work first so that she can be more available to guide her first graders work. They work until about 2 or 3 p.m. and then the children (and parents) begin other activities (i.e., music, ballet, science group, scout activities, and various church activities in the evenings). After commenting on the "wild schedule" they keep, the mother remarks, "It takes a great deal of organization to home school three and it is very exhausting. I am thankful to be with my kids and generally I find them to be kinder to each other."

A second parent integrates cooking lessons into the school day, starting with the children making pancakes from scratch and the children cooking dinner for the entire family once a month. She describes what she calls an ideal day revealing how family life and school allow her and her husband the much needed interaction to help their children move toward to college and career goals:

The children are taught that they are part of the family team and help with everything. They are learning to cook, clean, sew, organize, grocery shop, and do laundry. By learning these important life lessons they will be better prepared to organize and balance their college and professional lives. As parents, we can better understand who they are and help them choose career goals that match up with their strengths.

The importance of seeing their children learn in terms of knowing them better and being better able to guide them is a theme that emerges strongly in the journals.

A third parent details how the day begins for her two children with breakfast, a chore, 20-minute Bible study and prayer, and the pledge of allegiance. They alternate history and science in the afternoons, work on music and art in late afternoon, and schedule library and park days. Before bedtime she and her husband read to the children from optional lessons. Interspersed are all kind of family activities and chores. Her journal also reflects the blurring of interconnections between family and school and again praises the ability to know their children better: "The rewards are knowing what was taught and seeing it applied . . . in real life. Knowledge is one thing, but application is a blessing."

The fourth parent has children from kindergarten through 10th grade. They begin the morning with breakfast and cleaning the house in teams that switch assignments each week. They start the day by correcting any assignments from the day before, and she checks new schoolwork during lunch and readjusts the day if necessary. After lunch, the house is picked up again and the younger three take naps. They work again from 1 to 3 or 4 p.m. and then have free time, sports, physical education, and video and/or games. Her husband does any shopping during the weekdays. In the evenings she may help one who is struggling individually.



These brief overviews of four typical days give an extensive picture of the collaboration of family members with one another and the seamless, though complex, integration of (1) family interactions and values (chores, Bible reading), (2) the curriculum, (3) daily activities (meals, getting ready for the day, shopping, cooking), and (4) planning toward life and career goals. The juggling of children at various levels, organization and timing of different activities, independent and directed work, and integration of faith activities and other outside activities reveal a highly complex, delicately balanced day that requires extensive coordination and direction by parents.

## ***CONCLUSION***

The home schoolers in this virtual charter are similar to those in other studies. They have chosen home schooling for a variety of reasons, which include the curriculum, lack of confidence in the public schools in terms of teaching and learning, safety, and values. About 90% appear to be religious, and the desire to educate their children in ways consistent with the religious values plays a role in their decision and in the way they structure activities during the day. Perhaps the most revealing parts of the study are (1) the seamless way families have integrated work in the home, values such as religious instruction, and sibling cooperation with the work of schooling and (2) the importance of the assessment and accountability measures that are built into this particular system. Parents appear to use this information as ways to know their children better and to guide them toward future adult goals. This actually harkens back to preindustrial revolution education when families, their work, values, and religious beliefs, and their education were more unified (Jeynes, 2007). Could it be that our technological culture, born of the industrial revolution, has come full circle and offers again the opportunity to renew this integration of family, work, values, and schooling that was initially torn apart by the industrial revolution?

## **NOTES**

1. The six California Virtual Academies are as follows: CAVA at Jamestown, Jamestown School District in Tuolumne County; CAVA at Kern, Maricopa Unified School District in

Kern County; CAVA at Kings, Armona Union Elementary School District in Kings County; CAVA at San Diego, Spencer Valley School District in San Diego County; CAVA at San Mateo, Burlingame Elementary School District in San Mateo County; and CAVA at Sonoma, Liberty Elementary School District in Sonoma County.

2. Update on CAVA since the study. This last year closed with six CAVA schools in operation with school enrollments now totaling approximately 3,500 students. CAVA has sustained a rate of growth that has doubled each year. A charter application for an additional school has been granted by the state and is scheduled to open on July 1, 2006 with an estimated enrollment of 150 students. Two more applications were processed recently, and CAVA increased to eight independent schools by the beginning of the 2006–2007 school year, generating a projected enrollment of between 5,000 and 6,000 students.

Additionally, since the study first took place the teaching staff has more than doubled to 177 credentialed, highly qualified employees. Yet this amount is still not enough to meet the demands of next year's enrollment projections. This fact, coupled with CAVA's commitment to smaller class size (25:1), requires the hiring of additional teachers. Already CAVA has received 550 applications for these positions and, of them, 100 will be hired for the next school year, bringing the total teaching staff to 277.

CAVA continues to extend its range of grade levels each year. Last year grades K–9 were offered; next fall (2006) 10th grade will be added and so on until it encompasses all elementary and secondary levels, K–12. Synchronous online classes are now provided (via Illuminate) where more direct instruction and teacher-student interaction are possible. Socialization opportunities have increased so that optional activities/outings are available weekly if desired.

CAVA students have excelled on standardized tests in the areas of reading and language arts, but they still struggle in the area of math. The K12, inc. curriculum that is used appears not to be in sync with the California sequence of teaching math standards. Lessons for grades K–2 were rewritten and were available in the fall of 2006. It is intended that other grade level adjustments will be made as well. Curriculum support has also increased for CAVA teachers in hopes of alleviating this problem.

Another change has come in the area of clientele. Initially, the attraction to CAVA was predominantly from preexisting home school families. Today, however, these families comprise less than 20% of the schools' populations. The majority of families (70%) are now coming out of public and private schools. Last year 75% of the families returned, and this year retention has increased to between 79% and 80%.

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