



The “H” Word: Home Schooling

by
Shery Butler

A

s a public educator, I frowned on parents who chose to teach their children at home—until I became one of those parents. My family moved to a rural town because of my husband’s job. When my children entered the public school system, I was surprised to find limited services for the gifted and talented. Students with above-average ability were allowed unlimited access to the library and the Chapter One computer lab until school officials cited regulations that only students in the gifted program were permitted to use the lab. No other computers were available to students at the school.

I approached the school administration about making simple, inexpensive curriculum modifications like curriculum compacting and subject skipping for bright students. They responded positively to the request; however, when changes needed to be made to accomplish these goals, administrators said, "If we make changes to accommodate bright students, it will open a Pandora's Box, and we'll have to do it for others."

I saw my children stymied intellectually in a system that was more committed to protocol than education. The intellectual dry bread and water being offered was hard to swallow. I elected to look for alternatives. The private school, while academically sound, had few minority students. Fearing such an environment might teach my children to be segregationist, I explored other alternatives. Ironically, home schooling provided the answers.

Who Home Schools?

Researchers who study home schooling estimate "about 1.5 million students in the United States are home schooled" (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1998, p. 66). Subsequently, there are as many reasons for home schooling as there are home schooled families. My family chose to home school for curriculum enrichment and acceleration opportunities. Other families choose home schooling for moral and religious reasons, to remove students from unsafe school environments, to save private school tuition fees, to meet specific needs of both the challenged and gifted learner, and to take advantage of travel opportunities. The paths that lead to home schooling are endless and personal.

What Laws Regulate Home Schooling?

Before a decision to educate at home is made, parents should conduct a thorough

investigation of the process. Each state has its own requirements for parents who want to home school. Some states have embraced home schooling more warmly than others have. In Alabama, a parent is allowed by the state to home school if he or she holds a valid teaching certificate or joins a church-sponsored home school organization. Sponsoring churches have requirements that vary from group to group; however, most ask parents to maintain daily attendance records and report grades. Some home schooling organizations require attendance at monthly meetings, while others require yearly testing to ascertain teacher effectiveness. As a state-certified teacher, I was required to present the local board of education an annual letter stating my intent to home school, and I had to include a list of the textbooks I would use.

Home schooling is legal in every state; however, the laws that govern it vary widely (Sharp, 1997). Anyone interested in finding out specific requirements for his or her state should contact the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). This group is an excellent source for information on home schooling. Additional references are available in the resource section at the end of this article.

Parental Backgrounds

The educational background of parents who home school varies. A large percentage of home school parents have had some college and many hold degrees, though not all in the field of education (Rudner, 1998). Research reveals no relationship between student achievement and teacher certification among parents who home school. Generally, home schooling is successful not because of the special degrees held by parents who teach, but because "home school students and their families are very serious about education" (Billups, 1999, p. A8). Home schooling requires a major

commitment from the parent/teacher and the student. People who begin projects with a great deal of enthusiasm, but have difficulty following through once the novelty has worn off, should probably look for other educational alternatives. Individuals who are undisciplined or have difficulty sticking to a schedule should think twice before undertaking home instruction responsibilities. It is wise to spend time investigating the home schooling process and consider both the benefits and drawbacks that apply to the situation before undertaking the commitment.

Curriculum Options

After understanding state requirements, as well as the pros and cons of home schooling, parents need to select a curriculum that meets educational and personal objectives. One of the best ways to learn about good curriculum is to ask other successful home schooling families what works for them. Find parents who have similar educational goals and personal objectives and examine the curriculum they use. Check the accreditation of the program before signing up.

After talking to a family and reviewing the materials, I used the Calvert curriculum from Calvert School located in Baltimore, MA. Started in 1897, the school offers placement tests, subject and grade skipping, an enriched curriculum, and maintains an official transcript. The Calvert Program offer an advisory teaching service that allows students to get feedback from someone other than a parent and grades all tests. Because home schooling was a solution for a short-term problem, and I knew my children would be re-entering the public school system at some point, I used the Advisory Teaching service. My children looked forward to the letters and photographs they received from Calvert's Advisory Teachers. Mrs. O'Connor, the teacher

continued on page 46

continued from page 45

who graded the French tests, always wrote an introductory note in French for students to interpret. "The Calvert Home Instruction Department is accredited both by the Commission on Elementary Schools, a division of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Commission on International and Transregional Accreditation (CITA)" (*Calvert School Catalog of Home School Courses*, 1999, p. 3). Not only did the Advisory Teacher service provide feedback and additional motivation for students, the transcript from an accredited institution was more palatable to the educational officials when my children re-entered the public school system.

Most publishing companies will sell the state-approved textbooks used in your area to parents who home school. My experience has been that they charge more to individuals for a book than they do for an institution.

Many home school curricula offer video instruction for advanced-level and enrichment courses. Investigate the services each company offers to see which one best meets the instructional needs of your child. Often, parents pull curricula from several publishers to get the materials that are best suited for their children.

Advantages to Home Schooling

Having the ability to tailor curriculum to individual needs is one major benefit of home instruction. Students can work at or above their proficiency level. "Almost one in four home school students (24.5%) are enrolled one or more grades above their nominal grade" (Rudner, 1998, p. 15). Students are engaged in learning because the curriculum is selected specifically for each individual and is based on interests and needs. When my daughter was in sixth grade, she needed a challenge in mathematics.

She took a math placement test from Calvert School that confirmed the need. She was then placed in a seventh-grade textbook for math. I wondered how skipping sixth-grade math would affect my daughter's Stanford Achievement Test scores. She rose one stanine in her total math score, and her interest and motivation in mathematics increased while she worked the more challenging problems. "The evidence is overwhelming that acceleration in some of its many forms should be included in any comprehensive set of services for the gifted. As in any provision, when it comes to deciding on the best services for a particular student, the needs, interests, strengths, and weaknesses of the individual are the most important information" (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991, p. 79).

Families who home school enjoy scheduling flexibility that is impossible when students are in a classroom setting. Some home school families begin lessons each day promptly at 8 a.m., others start at 10 a.m. Each family sets its own schedule based on their activities and time clocks. Students can spend as much time on one subject as they like. If students are reading a particularly interesting history lesson, they do not have to stop after an hour and wait until the next day to complete the reading. They can finish that chapter and go on to the next, if interested. The same is true with mathematics: If students need more time to grasp a concept, they've got it. If students are breezing through an English lesson, they can complete it and move on to another subject. They don't have to do busy work or wait until classmates are through to move to the next subject.

The amount of time to complete a set of daily lessons at home is considerably shorter than it takes at school, largely because students are self-paced. Students can also bring textbooks with them and study almost anywhere. My children once took their books to the

beach, studied each morning, and explored the ecosystem in the afternoons. When students finish schoolwork, there is plenty of time left in the day to study topics of interest, develop hobbies, practice instruments, help with community service projects, create web pages, participate in mentorships, and so forth. Like many children, my son had an intense interest in computers when he was in junior high school. As part of his home school day, he independently studied computer programming manuals and worked with mentors to learn what he needed to develop his own web page. Thereafter, he served as a mentor to online friends who also wanted to develop personal web pages.

Severe weather, health, and safety concerns are minimized when students study at home. When students are physically ill, they can study in their pajamas, at a slower pace, or simply rest until they feel well enough to tackle a lesson.

Disadvantages of Home Schooling

Whenever home schooling is brought up, someone invariably states that lack of socialization is the number one disadvantage to home education. In reality, home schooled children are socialized in a variety of settings. The public school system does not possess the only means by which an individual may be socialized. "The typical home schooled child is regularly involved in 5.2 social activities outside the home according to a recent study by Brian Ray of the National Home Education Institute" (Mattox, 1999, p. 13A). Children who are home schooled interact with others in public settings (i.e., libraries, restaurants, theaters, churches, clubs, sports teams and sporting events, field trips, music, dance and art lessons, Scouting, 4-H, and so forth). Add to this list interactions with family, neighbors, and friends, and one

can see the possibilities for social interaction in many arenas with interesting people of all ages. Home-schooled students develop social confidence with parental guidance and support. Generally, parents who home school do not list lack of socialization as a disadvantage because their children *are* socialized—just differently.

One disadvantage to home schooling is the loss of an income in a family. Many home schooled families have made a decision to live on a single income so that one parent may be dedicated to the task of instruction. Can the family manage on one income for a sustained period? One mother who needed a second income drove a school bus and taught her children when she came home from her morning route. She admitted the difficulty and the confinement of the job, yet she believed home schooling was best for her children and saw the part-time job as a way to help her family financially and follow through on her commitment.

Some families find home schooling confining. "In it's day-to-day reality, home schooling demands not merely time and energy, but a sense of direction and a plan" (Guterson, 1998, p. 71). There is a certain amount of time each day that *must* be set aside for instruction and schoolwork. Neighbors who like to drop in and visit or friends who like to phone regularly have to be invited to do so at noninstructional times. Unfortunately, I have seen where a child elected to return to public school and was unprepared because of the parents' lack of commitment to the demands of home education. This child fell into the hands of caring public school teachers who worked to remediate her in the areas of weakness.

How Do Home School Students Compare to Those Educated Publicly and Privately?

Lawrence M. Rudner, professor at the University of Maryland, independently compiled a survey for the HSLDA. Rudner looked at the achievement test scores and demographics of 20,760 home schooled students in 11,903 families (Billups, 1999). According to his report,

On average, home school students in grades 1–4 perform one grade level higher than their public and private school counterparts. The achievement gap begins to widen in grade 5; by 8th grade the average home school student performs four grade levels above the national average. Another significant finding is that students who have been home schooled their entire academic lives have the highest scholastic achievement. The difference becomes especially pronounced during the higher grades, suggesting that students who remain in home school throughout their high school years continue to flourish in that environment. (HSLDA, 1999)

Last year, Amanda Leggett, a home schooled high school senior, was a National Merit Scholar. She chose to attend Wheaton College in Illinois (M. Leggett, personal communication, March 25, 2000). Amanda was home schooled for five years beginning in eighth grade. She used curricula from A Beka, Bob Jones, and some supplements from other publishers. In her 11th- and 12th-grade years, Amanda was dual

enrolled a junior college where she amassed 45 college credits by the time she graduated from high school. Mrs. Leggett modestly credited Amanda's scholastic success to "internal motivation and emphasis on hard work." While Amanda was active in church, she participated in recreational sports and other activities. "In the public setting there is much too much focus on extra curriculums—students come home too exhausted to study well in the evenings. Students should be alert and attentive to studies" (C. Leggett, personal communication, June 20, 2000). Mrs. Leggett was actively involved in Amanda's lessons, using quizzing and drills before tests. To prepare for college aptitude tests, Amanda used an ACT study book and an interactive SAT CD-ROM, which she liked because it provided immediate feedback and tips. Mrs. Leggett stated, "Regardless of school arrangement, active parental involvement is the distinguishing characteristic in student success" (C. Leggett, personal communication, June 20, 2000). All around the country, similar success stories are popping up.

How Did Home Schooling Affect My Family?

In May, my son graduated from the Alabama School of Mathematics and Science in Mobile, AL, a residential high school for bright students. He was home schooled for two years and skipped a grade in the process. This example may not demonstrate any advantage to having once been home schooled, but perhaps it shows no liability in his education or socialization. At age 13, my daughter, who was home schooled for four years and also skipped a grade during that time, re-entered public school last fall as a ninth grader. She maintained a

continued on page 48

continued from page 47

spot on the A–B honor roll each reporting period and was one of the school's athletes, playing on both the school's volleyball and basketball teams.

When I was home schooling my children, I had a public school educator tell me that I would never work for the public school system again because of my decision to home school. I understood her feelings against this form of education because I once shared her beliefs. However, she was incorrect. I am currently employed as a teacher to gifted students. I am a public school educator who now has a heart for education in all of its forms: public, private, home schooling, mentorships, and apprenticeships. As an educator, I've come to realize I do a disservice to my calling to only smile on those forms of education that authenticate my background. I have looked at home schooling from the inside and found a movement that helps individual students maximize their potential. I challenge other educators to become informed and supportive of this positive alternative in American education.

How Did Home Schooling Affect My Public School Teaching?

Three lessons from my family's home schooling experience can be applied to the classroom:

- Lesson 1: Allow bright students to work at their pace, and use rapid pacing where appropriate for group lessons.
- Lesson 2: Provide opportunities for students to conduct in-depth research in an area of interest.
- Lesson 3: Most importantly, provide opportunities for parents to actively participate in student learning.

Bright students work faster than

many of their peers, so allow them to work at their own pace and use rapid pacing for large-group instruction. *Rapid pacing* is a form of acceleration that takes place on a lesson-to-lesson basis.

Lessons must be paced quickly so that students are always reaching and being challenged by new ideas. Since gifted students can assimilate new ideas rapidly, slowly paced classes soon become classes where the students grow bored and their minds tend to wander. (Fleming, 1982, p. 32)

Rapid pacing has been used with mathematically precocious students, and it has worked well for me in the study of short-term thematic minicourses. Rapid pacing may require more homework of students.

Students are more engaged in learning when pursuing an area of interest; therefore, provide opportunities for students to conduct in-depth research in an area of their choosing. An interest inventory, such as Renzulli's Interest-A-Lyzer, can be administered to help students pinpoint these specific areas (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Time can be found in the daily schedule for exploration and research by compacting the curriculum. Curriculum compacting allows teachers to assess students' knowledge or skills in an area prior to instruction so that students do not spend time going over information they already know. Spelling and math are good subjects to compact because of the availability of pretest and posttest. Reis, Burns, and Renzulli (1992) compiled a guide to modify the regular curriculum for bright students that is helpful for those new to compacting.

While home schooling, I met numerous parents who had an intense need to be actively involved in the instructional process. Upon re-entering the public school classroom, I found the same was true of parents who support public education.

Early in the school year, Greg Corder, a pilot with Federal Express,TM and a parent of two children in the enrichment program, came and asked to be scheduled for time to work with students on rocketry. I am embarrassed to admit my first fleeting thought was, "I'll see if I can work you in, we've got a lot planned this year." Corder came and helped my class build and launch rockets, and he tirelessly helped other classes at the school during a study on aerospace. Corder believed so strongly that students should be exposed to these experiences that he personally funded the rocketry kits. Parents want to share their expertise—they need only be given the opportunity to share.

Not all parents want to be front and center in the classroom, but all caring parents can be front and center in educational practices in the home by establishing consistent guidelines that can be conveyed through the school.

1. Communicate a belief that learning is important. Set high expectations for students. If students are not learning at levels of expectation, find out the reason and kindly make modifications.
2. Meet with teachers to find out how to reinforce at home what is being taught in the classroom. Be persistent in requests and follow through on teacher recommendations.
3. Establish a "Homework First" policy. Outside activities come second. This confirms the belief that learning is important.
4. Establish a reading policy. For example, students must read at least two books a month.
5. Turn off the television or, at least, limit television and video viewing. Turn off or limit video and computer gaming.
6. Establish study hours. Use the time for drill, recitation, reviewing for tests, reading, and as a time for sharing new information learned. When all family members participate, this

communicates that learning has significance that sends a strong message to students.

7. Establish family fun hours for recreational and social activities. Make sure lots of laughing is on the agenda. This can be as simple as playing board games or seeing who can create the most unusual ice cream sundae—and eat it. This builds bonds, establishes trust, and creates an environment for sharing.

Please note, in every objective the emphasis is on *learning*, not grades. Working for grades is stressful. Learning is fun, powerful, and lifelong; parents are vital partners in that process. **GCT**

References

- Billups, A. (1999, March 24). Students in home schools perform better on tests. *The Washington Post*, p. A8.
- Calvert school catalog of home school courses. (1999). Baltimore, MA: Calvert School Publications.
- Fleming, G. A. (1982). Mathematics. In N. E. A. Maier (Ed.), *Teaching the gifted: Challenging the average* (pp. 25–34). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Guidance Centre.
- Guterson, D. (1998, October 5). No longer a fringe movement. *Newsweek*, 71.
- Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). (1999). The scholastic achievement and demographic characteristics of home school students in 1998. In HSLDA (Ed.), *Home schooling works—Pass it on!*, (pp. 1–12). Purcellville, VA: Author.
- Kantrowitz, B., & Wingert, P. (1998, October 5). Learning at home: Does it pass the test? *Newsweek*, 64–70.
- Mattox, W. R. Jr. (1999, February 3). Hidden virtues in home schooling spur growth. *USA Today*, p. 13A.
- Reis, S. M., Burns, D. E., & Renzulli, J. S. (1992). *Curriculum compacting: The complete guide to modifying the regular curriculum for high ability students*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (1985). *The schoolwide enrichment model: A comprehensive plan for educational excellence*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Rudner, L. (1998). *Scholastic achievement and demographic characteristics of home school students in 1998*. Retrieved June 15, 2000, from Education Policy Analysis Archives, 7(8), on the World Wide Web: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n8/>
- Shore, B. M., Cornell, D. G., Robinson, A., & Ward, V. S. (1991). *Recommended practices in gifted education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sharp, D. (1997, March 16). Is home schooling good for America? Your kids' education is at stake. *USA Weekend*, p. 004.
- Southern, W. T., Jones, E. D., & Fiscus, E. D. (1989). Practitioner objections to the academic acceleration of gifted children. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 33, 29–35.
- Hartland, MI 48353-0290
(513) 772-9580
- Curriculum**
Alpha Omega Publications
300 N. McKemy Ave.
Chandler, AZ 85226-9912
(800) 682-7396
(800) 688-2652 on-line academy
<http://www.home-schooling.com>
- A Beka Book
Box 18000
Pensacola, FL 32523-9160
(800) 874-2352 or (800) 874-3592
- Bob Jones University Press
Testing and Evaluation
Dept. W-2
1700 Wade Hampton Blvd.
Greenville, SC 29614
(800) 845-5731
- Calvert School
105 Tuscany Road
Baltimore, MD 21210
(888) 487-4652
<http://www.calvertschool.org>
- Christian Liberty Academy Satellite Schools
502 W. Euclid Ave.
Arlington Heights, IL 60004
(800) 832-2741
<http://www.homeschools.org>
- Keystone National High School
School House Station
420 W. 5th St.
Bloomsburg, PA 17815-9904
- Power-Glide
Foreign Language Courses
1682 West 820 N.
Provo, UT 84601
<http://www.power-glide.com>
Saxon Publishers
Mathematics
2450 John Saxon Blvd.
continued on page 48

Home Schooling Resources for Teachers and Parents

Organizations

- Home School Legal Defense Association
P.O. Box 3000
Purcellville, VA 20134
(540) 338-5600
- National Home Education Research Institute
P.O. Box 13939
Salem, OR 97309
(503) 364-1490
<http://www.nheri.org>
- National Home School Association
P.O. Box 290

Home Schooling

continued from page 49

Norman, OK 73071
(800) 284-7019
<http://www.saxonpub.com>

School of Tomorrow
P.O. Box 299000
Lewisville, TX 75029-9000
(800) 925-7777

Web Sites

American Homestead Association
<http://www.home-ed-press.com/AHA/aha.html>
Trade association of businesses and groups serving families by providing materials, programs, and services.

Homeschool Central
<http://homeschoolcentral.com>
Specializes in software, videos, new and used curricula, and books covering foreign languages, literature, science, and history.

Home School FindIt!
<http://www.computerage.net/home-school/findit>
Search by keyword or by category for home school resources on the Internet, such as curriculum suppliers, FAQ pages, and support groups.

Home Schooling
Gopher://lib.nmsu.edu/11/.subjects/Education/Homeschooling
Home schooling resources can be found at this gopher site.

Home School Internet Catalog
<http://www.homeschool-nasco.com>
Choose from books, games, software, videos, and hands-on tools for students of any age dealing with subjects including health and life skills.
Home School Legal Defense Association
<http://www.hslda.org>
Defends and advances the constitutional rights of parents to educate their chil-

dren. Advocacy, legal documents, and helpful teaching approaches.

Home School Resource Center
<http://rstts.net/home/index2.html>
This page has a brief description of the goods and services offered by the Home School Academy, including a help hotline, a newsletter, report cards, honor-roll certificates, and testing.

Homeschool World
<http://www.home-school.com>
Informs visitors about articles, organizations, events, legal issues, and supplies. Includes book reviews and a message board.

Jon's Homeschool Resource Page
<http://www.midnightbeach.com/hs>
Resources for home schoolers, with information on ideas and methods, with links to news groups and mailing lists.

Kaleidoscopes
<http://www.kaleidoscapes.com>
Join discussion areas for home schoolers focusing on support, curriculum, college entry, local education regulations, and learning subjects.

National Homeschool Association
<http://www.n-h-a.org>
Based on the philosophy that parents have freedom of choice regarding their children's education. Learn about vouchers and regulations.

School is Dead: Learn in Freedom!
<http://www.learninfreedom.org>
Essay advocates home schooling and provides a bibliography of guides, books, and articles about home education.
State Home School Organizations
<http://www.TeachingHome.com>
Lists organizations that inform about legal matters, events, newsletters, and local support groups.

Magazines

Growing Without Schooling
2269 Massachusetts Ave.
Cambridge, MA 02140
(617) 864-3100

The Teaching Home
Box 20219
Portland, OR 97294
<http://www.TeachingHome.com>

Books

Bell, D. (1997). *The ultimate guide to homeschooling*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Cohen, C. (1997). *And what about college?: How homeschooling leads to admissions to the best colleges and universities*. Cambridge, MA: Holt Associates.

Colfax, D., & Colfax, M. (1988). *Homeschooling for excellence*. New York: Warner Books.

Griffith, M. (1998). *The unschooling handbook: How to use the whole world as your child's classroom*. Rocklin, CA: Prima.

Griffith, M. (1997). *The homeschool handbook*. Rocklin, CA: Prima.

Guterson, D. (1992). *Family matters: Why homeschooling makes sense*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Kealoha, A. (1995). *Trust the children: An activity guide for homeschooling and alternative learning*. Berkley, CA: Celestial Arts.

Pride, M. (1990). *The big book of home learning: Getting started*. Wheaton: Good News.