

# Clearing the Air about Home Schooling

by George E. Pawlas

Home schooling is evolving with the times and gaining popularity in the U.S. Schools and parents can collaborate to provide "what is best" for children.

he practice of home education has undergone dramatic change and growth in recent years and is now legal in all 50 states. The topic has drawn the attention of parents, educators, policy makers, and the general public. When asked why they choose to home school their children, most parents will comment that one of their goals was to facilitate the development of intellect and character, not merely to prepare students for college or a career. There may be no single right answer for educating children, but a relationship between schools and home schools could benefit both.

The importance of parents teaching their own children has been recognized for centuries. The 19th-century U.S. country school belonged to the community. Students were taught values and skills by family and friends (Tyack 1974). As our nation developed, more trained and certified educators taught students in public and private schools. However, in recent years a growing number of parents are choosing to take full responsibility of educating their children in their own home schools. Some of these parents cite the struggles of dealing with the public school bureaucracy, lack of discipline in many public schools, religious reasons or preferences, and overcrowded classrooms as reasons for home schooling their children.

The U.S. Department of Education (2000) has estimated that 750,000 students are home schooled in this country, and the number of students being schooled at home is growing by about 15 percent per year. Ray's (1997) estimate of 1.23 million home schooled children in the U.S. exceeded the total public school enrollment of New Jersey, which has the tenth-largest student population. Home schooling is more prevalent in certain areas of the country. In the Brevard County (Florida) School District of more than 60,000 students, more than 1,500 students-a 21 percent increase from 1997 to 1998-are being home schooled. In Florida, as of the 1999-2000 school term, the total is estimated at more than 37,000 students (Carothers 2000). The number of home schooled children in California rose from 60,000 in 1990 to 150,000 in 1997 (Ray 1997).

# Methods of Home Schooling

Home schooling is defined as a learning/teaching situation in which children/teenagers/young adults spend the majority of a regular school day in or near their home instead of attending a conventional school. Home schooling or home education does not always occur at

George E. Pawlas is an associate professor of educational services at the University of Central Florida. He is on the editorial review panel for The Educational Forum and serves as associate counselor of the Omicron Lambda Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi. home. It is common for home schooled students to have significant interactions with adults and children outside their own families. Rakestraw (1987; 1988) found that home schooled children participated in religious activities, interactions with other home schooled students, music and sports activities, and neighborhood or community-service activities such as Scouts.

Shedden (1999) reported a new concept for home schooling: home school cooperatives. In Brevard County, Florida, several families are teaming up to share the jobs of teacher and administrator. Co-ops can be viewed as alternatives between private schools and home schools, allowing home school families to tap resources they might not otherwise have. High school co-ops offer such courses as chemistry and physics. According to Shedden (1999), students meet as a class once a week. Parents are the teachers and, although not necessarily certified to teach in their state, they may have the subjectmatter knowledge required to teach students. Forty-one states have no minimum academic requirements for parents who want to home school their children (Kantrowitz and Wingert 1998). Ray (1997) found that parents' educational backgrounds have no substantive effect on children's home school academic performance.

Online high schools are another alternative home schoolers are using in greater numbers. CompuHigh, affiliated with the private Clonlara School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, offers several high school courses. Students must pay an enrollment fee plus a fee for each class they take. The Florida High School, an online school, began operations in 1997 as a result of a \$1.3 million state grant. Course offerings continue to be added, with the hope that courses will be offered to all Florida high school students.

Technology can possibly be seen as the next wave in home schooling. Although some advocates see the value in technologyoriented instruction, others stress the value of continued emphasis on personal interaction and involvement in the community for home schooled students. In addition, many home school families do not own computers or modems that would enable wide use of technology. However, the computer age and the Internet may be changing the whole complexion of home schools. Support groups are now widely available, along with enriched resources. Therefore, teaching in isolation no longer seems to be the norm.

Ray (1997) indicated that 24 percent of home schooling parents in his study indicated that they used a computer curriculum package. He also reported parents were quick to employ personal computers, with 85 percent of home school families reporting they owned a computer, and 84 percent saying their children use a computer in their education. By comparison, Ray (1997) cited national norms for computer use for all U.S. families as 34 percent (own a computer) and 26 percent (children use it for school).

# Home Schooling Resources

Many parents who have home schooled their children have recorded their experiences and suggestions for others. Bell (1997) has chronicled her experiences in *The Ultimate Guide to Homeschooling*. A former teacher, Bell has home schooled her own four children and now owns the Home School Resource Center. Lahrson-Fisher (1998) wrote a handbook for Oregon parents containing resource information to help them get started.

The World Wide Web is rapidly becoming a source of information for parents who want to home school and have the ability to gain access to an ever-expanding source of data. One site, Home Schooling Information and Resource Pages, contains a wealth of information, support and encouragement, thoughtful writings, and helpful resources. More than 25 years of home schooling experiences back up the contentions of the editors and publishers of the site. The Resource Index is particularly useful. because it provides links such as: Books and Publications, Software Companies and Online Resources, Curriculum and Correspondence Programs, Higher Education and College, Selected Homeschooling Books, Support Groups, National/ International Organizations, and State Laws and Regulations. See sidebar for additional resources.

# Relationships with Public Schools

In 1996, *The American School Board Journal* and Xavier University conducted a national survey of nearly 1,000 public school executives to help determine the state of home schooling in the nation (Boothe, Bradley, Flick, and Kirk 1997). Although 91 percent of the administrators surveyed reported that children were being home schooled in their districts, the school leaders revealed a lack of knowledge of state and district/ school policies regulating home schooling. This statistic is especially troubling, because state laws generally place home schooling families under the indirect supervision of their local school district.

Until a few years ago, public school administrators generally knew that most parents who home schooled their children during the elementary years would send them to the public schools once their children reached middle school or high school age. These school leaders knew the subjects at these levels were too difficult for most parents to teach. The use of technology, co-ops, and other related reasons may be causing a change in parents' strategies. Ray (1997) found that 89 percent of 1,657 home schooling families he polled reported intentions to continue teaching their children at home all the way through high school.

In recent years, many school districts around the country are allowing home schooled students to attend school on a part-time basis and/or to participate in extracurricular activities. Some home schooling families take their children to public schools for special classes and services. The most popular services include speech therapy or career counseling. Other popular offerings include specific classes, such as French or physics,

# Web Resources for Home Schooling

Home School Legal Defense Association

http://www.hslda.org-Summarizes state laws.

National Home Education Research Institute

http://www.nheri.org-A research clearinghouse for home-schooling.

#### Center for Talented Youth

*http://www.jhu.edu/gifted*—An up-to-date resource for distance-learning programs.

### **Babbage Net School**

*http://www.babbagenetschool.com*—Alternative high school offering online, interactive courses in addition to approved college undergraduate and graduate courses.

## Home School Internet Catalog

*http://www.homeschool-nasco.com*—Curriculum needs for home schoolers are offered for sale by this company with more than 56 years of experience in the education market.

#### Homeschool.com

*http://www.homeschool.com*—This easy-to-use site is a good all-around reference for those interested in learning about home schooling.

# Homeschool World

http://www.home-school.com-A wealth of articles on home schooling.

## **Home Education**

*http://www.home-ed-magazine.com*—A home schooling magazine with plenty of relevant articles.

#### School Is Dead: Learn in Freedom!

*http://www.learninfreedom.org*—The home of multiple links and arguments for the promotion of home schooling.

and specific extracurricular activities, such as band or athletic teams (Boothe et al. 1997). Not all school officials are open to the idea of home schooled students participating on the school district's athletic teams. For home schooled students in the Easton (Pennsylvania) Area School District to participate in extracurricular activities, they must meet a rigorous set of guidelines, which were established in 1996. Included are weekly visits by teachers to validate that the student has passing grades in at least four major subjects. Parents must be responsible for all transportation to campuses and points of departure for games (Lafee 1998).

The Fairfax County (Virginia) School Board defeated a proposal to allow home schooled students to enroll in some courses at public high schools. Instead, the board adopted a proposal that allows the students to take courses through the Adult and Community Education program outside regular school hours. At least eight students would have to be interested in taking the same course before the county would agree to offer it at a centrally located site. In 1997, the Virginia General Assembly approved a measure that allows localities to receive compensation from the state for any home schooled or private school students they enroll in math, science, English, social science, or foreign language courses. The financial aid is provided under a formula similar to one Virginia uses for full-time students. Some board members indicated they were philosophically opposed to accommodating students whose parents have opted out of the regular school system (Benning 1999).

The California Interscholastic

Federation allows home schooled students to participate in public school athletics if the school district has a system for monitoring the quality of the home schooler's education. The Federation views home schooling as independent study-something that the state has recognized for 20 years. Many other state high school athletic associations, which typically set the operating rules for interscholastic athletics, do not want home schoolers to participate at all (Lafee 1998). Allowing home schooled students to participate could be a viable course toward establishing common ground between groups known to have had fundamental disagreements about education. It seems both groups could find ways to preserve what home schoolers like about home programs while exposing them to public schoolsa possible win-win for both groups.

More and more colleges and universities are accepting students who have been home schooled. The Home School Legal Defense Association (1997) revealed that 565 colleges and universities were accepting these students. Ray (1997) reported that 69 percent of home school graduates indicated that they planned to pursue postsecondary education, compared with 71 percent of public school graduates. Stanford University accepted 26 percent of the 35 home schoolers who applied for fall 2000 admission-nearly double its overall acceptance rate (Winters 2000). Before applying to colleges, home schoolers often enroll in a course at a local college or in a summer program at a competitive university to show that they can handle both the academic rigor and the social distractions of college life (Winters 2000).

## What Is Best for the Child

As advocates of public education, school leaders might not agree with parents' decisions to educate their children at home. Disagreement and friction often exacerbate the situation. Rather than focusing on the place where learning occurs, parents and teachers should focus on what is best for each child. A collaborative effort in which schools and home schoolers work together could be mutually beneficial. There are advantages for schools to find ways to keep communication lines open. As Stephen R. Covey (1989, 242) said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

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