

Workplace Trends

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ATLANTA'S GREENBRIAR MALL
In 1967, the first Chick-fil-A restaurant opened in Greenbriar Mall in Atlanta, Georgia. At the time, we had to convince mall managers that a quick-service restaurant wouldn't make a mess of their facilities. Lucky for us, they listened, and the first restaurant laid the groundwork for the great American!



The number of homeschooled children has tripled over the past decade, leading to workplace changes as these children make their way into the workforce.

HOME

By
Robert J.
Grossman

WHERE THE SCHOOL IS

At Chick-fil-A headquarters in Atlanta, Andy Lorenzen helps recruit the 30,000 front-line workers at the company's 1,000 restaurants across the country. It's a daunting task in the fast-food industry's revolving-door environment. It's especially challenging at Chick-fil-A, where the goal is to hire young counter workers and kitchen aides—average age 17—for the long run. As of last year, more than half of Chick-fil-A restaurant operators had come up through the ranks.

To find reliable employees, Chick-fil-A prefers to tap what it believes is a unique source of talent—high school- and college-age homeschoolers—young people who have been educated at home rather than sent to public or private schools.

"They're smart, ambitious and very driven," Lorenzen says of his homeschooled employees. "They have a high level of loyalty to the business, are diligent and have a good work ethic." A nine-year HR veteran at Chick-fil-A, Lorenzen's success depends on the quality of his hires. "When it comes to homeschoolers, I've only heard good things from our restaurant operators who employ them." ➡

CHICK-FIL-A OPERATOR JOE JEFFCOAT (FOREGROUND) HAS HOMESCHOoled ALL 10 OF HIS CHILDREN, INCLUDING SARAH, WHO IS NOW AN ASSISTANT MANAGER AT THE RESTAURANT. BEN MONTGOMERY IS ONE OF THE DOZENS OF HOMESCHOOLERS JEFFCOAT HAS HIRED OVER THE YEARS, FINDING THESE STUDENTS TO BE STABLE AND MATURE.

Chick-fil-A may be on to something. Homeschoolers are popping up everywhere, moving seamlessly into college and the workplace, thriving in internships and in entry- and professional-level jobs. They're also making a mark as entrepreneurs.

At New Times Media, publisher of an independent weekly newspaper in San Luis Obispo, Calif., Tamara Cohen, a 24-year-old homeschool alumnus, is the youngest account executive on staff. Bubbly and gregarious, Cohen does not fit the homeschooler stereotype of bookish introvert. "To succeed in my field, you have to be self-driven and good at networking," she says. "In sales, it takes creativity to learn what's important to your customer."

Rebecca Durkee, 24, recently moved from Schroon Lake, N.Y., to Los Angeles to take a restaurant chef position. People who learn that the outgo-

ing, take-charge Durkee was homeschooled are surprised. "There's a stereotype of homeschoolers—that we're reclusive geeks," she says. "I'm not that way at all. I'm extroverted, a leader and interact well with others. Homeschooling has helped me decide what I believe for myself and not to be afraid to express my views."

Many who have had no personal involvement with homeschooling think it's a fringe educational theory practiced mostly by religious fundamentalists. Indeed, most parents who homeschool their children are guided at least partly by religious principles, and many are evangelical Christians. But some parents who homeschool their children are Muslims, Orthodox Jews or of other faiths, and still others are driven more by secular educational philosophies rather than religion.

As the homeschool movement goes mainstream, it is converting thousands of parents fed up with perceived shortcomings in public education. The number of homeschooled children has tripled over the past decade. Those in the first

wave have graduated, gone to college and entered the workforce, and now employers are getting their first glimpse of what homeschoolers can do. Anecdotal reports show that homeschoolers are thriving. Long before they get their first full-time jobs, many have accrued years of experience through apprenticeships, part-time employment or work in their families' businesses.

"They're well-versed in basic business principles," says Gary Knowles, professor of adult education at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of

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Toronto. Knowles, who has studied home-educated adults, says, "There's a sense that if they want to do something, they can. They have discipline to either run their own business or become quite focused employees."

Critics of homeschooling contend that it's not a well-rounded education, that its graduates lack exposure to real-world diversity and that they don't have social skills needed for success in an increasingly team-oriented work environment.

HR not only must consider such concerns but also may have to grapple with questions such as how to evaluate someone who doesn't hold a state-issued high school diploma. Also, most home-schooled students go on to school their own children at home, creating a greater need for flexible work schedules. Moreover, homeschool vendors are gearing up to offer package deals to employers on curricula and materials that can be added to companies' benefit packages.

By the Numbers

As many as 1 million children—up from approximately 300,000 in 1988—are being homeschooled. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in August released the first-ever comprehensive study on homeschooling and pegged the number at 850,000 students in 1999. The actual number could be almost 17 percent higher or lower, says NCES statistician Stephen Broughman.

Some observers think there are more than 1 million homeschoolers. Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI), a home education information and research organization in Salem, Ore., believes his estimate of 1.2 million to 1.8 million is reliable. "Homeschool people are very privacy-oriented, slow to give information to government entities," he says. "Because I'm viewed as objective by homeschoolers and [by] state and federal governments, all are less reticent about sharing information with me."

A similar range of figures is put forth by Ron Packard, CEO of K12, a McLean, Va.-based business that sells homeschool curricula. The fledgling company, founded by former Secretary of Education William Bennett, is attracting investors who are convinced there's gold in the burgeoning homeschool market. "There are between 1 [million] and 1.8 million homeschoolers,"

Packard says. "Twenty percent are on the fringes—the 'preach and teach' faction that want religion embedded in every subject, and the 'unschoolers' who don't want any formal education. Neither of these is for us. Our market is the 80 percent in the middle—religious and secular—who are united in that they want a great education for their kids."

Mitchell Stevens, a professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., and author of *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement* (PUP, September 2001), says even if homeschoolers total around

850,000, that would be double the number in charter schools and "greater than the enrollment in the Chicago public school system. Homeschooling is a boutique option, but it's legitimate."

Indisputably, it's an option that families have been selecting increasingly over the past 30 years. In the 1970s, there were 15,000 home-educated children. According to Ray and others, the total will increase 7 percent to 12 percent per year. Growth in recent years has been fueled by "violence, health issues and dissatisfaction with public education," says Laura Derrick, president of the National Home Education Network (NHEN), a national advocacy group in Austin, Texas.

What Happens All Day?

The issue for HR professionals will be how to evaluate the type of education a homeschooled applicant received. While some states mandate that homeschoolers submit curricula for approval, keep logs of subjects covered each year and have students take regular standardized tests, others leave it completely to the discretion of the parents.

Homeschool families typically start out relying on established curricula or trying to replicate public school as they recall it. As they get more comfortable, they adjust, settling into a modus operandi more their own. Parents who lack expertise in a particular subject may find another parent or a tutor to provide instruction, or they may have the student enroll in a community college or correspondence course or school online.

"At some point, every homeschooling parent hits a brick wall," says Cafi Cohen, author of *Homeschoolers' College Admissions Handbook* (Prima Publishing, 2000) and a parent of two homeschoolers now in their 20s and

Extra Online Resources

For more information on homeschooling, links to homeschooling organizations and a list of what each state requires of homeschooling parents, go to the *HR Magazine* section of SHRM Online at www.shrm.org.

working. "None of us has the expertise to do it all, but we do have the expertise to be good networkers, to find people who do have the skills and are enthusiastic about teaching," Cohen says. "My job was to help uncover options, and there are a lot of them," including correspondence schools, community resources and now the Internet.

Because of homeschooling, Cohen says, "our kids got so far ahead. What it takes a school seven or eight hours to do, we were able to do in an hour and a half. We'd do academics for three hours a day and be finished, including any homework assignments." Cohen says her children could decide how to use their free time, "except they couldn't watch TV or mindless videos. ... My son got a private pilot's license; my daughter earned money to study abroad in Australia. Both signed on for volunteer work and paying jobs, and as a result, they had a pretty good sense of the work world before they hit college age."

Joe Jeffcoat operates a Chick-fil-A restaurant in Columbia, S.C. His wife, Carla, does most of the day-to-day instruction of the seven of their 10 children still at home. Her teaching day starts at 8 a.m. and usually ends at 1:30, followed by another hour for grading and organizing the curriculum. Joe teaches math and science about two hours each week. He's a graduate of Kennesaw Junior College—now Kennesaw State University—near Atlanta. Carla graduated from Rockmont College in Denver with a major in music. One of the three Jeffcoat daughters who completed homeschooling is a composer and piano teacher, another is an artist and painter who's also an assistant manager at Chick-fil-A, and the third teaches writing for homeschoolers.

John Notgrass, 22, graduated from his family's homeschool in 1997 in Cookeville, Tenn. Like many families undertaking homeschooling, his began by replicating a traditional curriculum. "We got burned out because we tried too hard to copy the public school method at home," Notgrass says. "Then we relaxed and developed our own approaches. We are believers in Christ but take a less formal approach than many evangelicals. We believe in having the family learn together." Besides being homeschooled, Notgrass has taken high school, college and correspondence courses and has studied subjects such as physics and calculus on his own. He scored a combined 1510 out of a possible 1600 on his SATs. Homeschoolers average 60 points higher than other students on verbal and math SATs, according to the U.S. Department of Education. In 1997, Notgrass joined his parents to form the Notgrass Co., which writes and sells

curricula in Tennessee history for homeschooling families. He handles the firm's finances and web site.

Molly Pestinger, who was homeschooled and is a graduate of Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., where she studied social services, is part of a team of 10 professionals who staff a group home for teenage girls. She says her mother based her homeschooling on a variation of unschooling—a term referring to those who direct their own education, also called interest-initiated learning. "I had to use textbooks to meet college requirements," she says, "but otherwise my mom let me take responsibility for my education. She was a helpmate and fellow learner." Pestinger says homeschooling helped her become self-reliant. "It's made me realize that if there's something I need to learn, I have to figure out how to do it."

The Socialization Controversy

Critics of homeschooling argue that it isolates children at home with their families, thereby stifling their ability to interact effectively with the diverse world around them and leaving them inadequately prepared for the working world. "There are a few stories and cases that bear witness to that," says Knowles. "But most modern home educators are involved in their communities and participate in a wide range of activities. If you went to a conference where these people meet, you'd see these kids are very capable."

"Homeschooling doesn't mean you're locking your kid up every day," sociologist Stevens says. "Typically, there are support groups, gym classes [and] socials. Kids often are involved in part-time jobs [and are] active in church groups."

"It's basically a non-issue," adds Greg Cizek, associate professor of educational research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "If anything, research shows that because parents are so sensitive to the charge, they expose them to so many activities."

Says homeschool alumnus Durkee: "My parents were overly sensitive to the socialization thing. We did art and physical education; I was in 4-H. I had a good mix of friends, including those who went to public schools. We went to the mall, the movies ... did things all kids do."

The Washington, D.C.-based National Education Association (NEA), the largest teachers' union and perhaps the most vocal critic of homeschooling, contends that home-education advocates are too dismissive of the socialization benefits provided by public schools. The NEA went on record with a resolution opposing homeschooling, saying

such programs cannot provide students with a comprehensive education experience.

"Too often missing from the debate on homeschooling," says NEA spokesperson Melinda Anderson, "are the benefits that public schools provide children, like educating children to live and work in a global society where they will have to interact with people from different races, backgrounds and ethnic groups. This is best taught by experience... and public schools provide such experiences. Public schools also offer students the chance to sharpen skills required in today's job market, like problem solving in cooperative groups."

No two public schools are alike, homeschoolers argue. "We tend to overemphasize the civilizing impact of conventional schools," Stevens says. "The typical school is not a haven of diversity. Public schools are widely segregated by class and race."

To counter the socialization argument, some homeschool parents seek to have their children take part in public schools' extracurricular activities. The NEA is against such participation, and it appears that most school districts also oppose it. The NCES reported that only 28 percent of homeschool parents in its survey said their public schools offered extracurricular activities to homeschoolers, 21 percent reported they can get curriculum support and 23 percent said they're offered books and materials. The percentages of homeschool families that took advantage of these opportunities were substantially lower.

Workplace Implications

When Ray, who once taught science in the public school system, is asked to describe homeschooled students for

prospective employers, he paints a picture that's almost too good to be true: "Self-starters, reliable and creative, intellectually prepared, better than average, read voraciously, watch TV less."

At the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Washington, D.C., Larry Turner, senior scientist in the Office of Pesticide Programs, supervised a college intern last summer who was homeschooled. "He had a level of maturity well beyond what we would expect of someone his age," Turner says. "He had the ability to organize things, to think independently and to think out of the box."

David Poe, 23, a rocket engineer at the Atlantic Research Corp. in Gainesville, Va., was homeschooled through high school in an evangelical Christian home. Poe spent two years at George Mason University, living at home, and then moved on to Virginia Tech, where he graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. His boss, Rob Black, manager of ballistics, didn't know Poe

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was homeschooled before hiring him. The bottom line for Black, an aerospace engineer, is results. "David is typical of the engineers that work here," he says. "He's a self-starter; he's intelligent, good with math and is a logical thinker. He works in teams as well as anyone with his experience."

The Paper Trail

Employers who require job applicants to produce state-certified high school diplomas will have to decide how to handle homeschool applicants with diplomas that often are generated by parents. How do you know if they're on the level?

"There has to be some kind of objective measurement," argues Andrea Edwards, vice president of marketing at Staffmark in Fayetteville, Ark., a staffing company with 250 offices nationwide. "We ask for a high school diploma or an equivalent. It could be a GED [general equivalency diploma] or some other test that proves you have mastered the equivalent of a certified high school diploma."

Requiring the GED as an equivalent to a diploma for employment rankles Chris Klicka, senior counsel at the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a Purcellville, Va., organization that has led legal battles to legitimize homeschooling. Judge people by what they can do, not by pieces of paper, he urges. "The GED is for dropouts; it carries a stigma," adds

One untapped labor source consists of parents who homeschool. Homeschool advocates say parents could work part time if employers supported their schedules. Flextime, reduced schedules, requests for permission to use the computer to chat and instruct—all would help. Home teaching with online support, advocates are quick to point out, need not be a full-time venture; some may choose to supplement public schooling with part-time home education.

Quality Control

At Chick-fil-A, the proof is in the batter, so to speak. The company recruits homeschoolers, finding their work ethic and personal qualities an unbeatable combination. Jeffcoat, the Chick-fil-A operator in Columbia, has employed 75 homeschoolers over the past 13 years. Currently, 10 of his 100 workers are homeschoolers, ages 15 and 16. He readily admits he favors homeschoolers. "People assume they will be socially handicapped because they've been home-

PUTTING A PAGE ON HOMESCHOOLERS

Klicka, who also is the author of *Homeschooling: The Right Choice* (Loyal Publishing, 2000). "There shouldn't be any stigma attached to home education."

Patricia Lines, a former U.S. Department of Education researcher and now a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based public policy organization, disagrees. "Homeschoolers are aware of what they need to do to meet diploma standards. Some enroll in correspondence schools that are licensed to grant certified degrees; many prepare portfolios that demonstrate their competence; others take the GED. I don't count the GED as discriminatory. It's an easy way for a homeschooler to satisfy the diploma requirement."

There always have been homeschoolers—missionaries, military personnel, Hollywood actors or wealthy families who could afford full-time tutors. But it wasn't until the 1960s that the option began to catch on with broader segments of the population. Sociologist Mitchell Stevens, a professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., says it's important to understand that, in the beginning, families that opted for homeschooling got there from radically different perspectives.

Today, most parents cite academic reasons for homeschooling their children, according to a study released in August by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). When parents were asked to name their reasons for choosing homeschooling, 49 percent said they believed they could give their children better education at home, 38 percent cited religious reasons and 26 percent named the "poor learning environment at school."

"Public education has lost its mandate from heaven," says Peter Conkson, associate professor at Teachers College at Columbia University in New York. "People view it more skeptically than they did 20 years ago, and with all the stuff available on the computer, you could

bound, but it's just the opposite," Jeffcoat says. "They have a good sense of humor and know how to act. Lots of kids have trouble with judgment, differentiating what's appropriate behavior in the work environment and on the ball field. Not these kids. They're stable and mature, good team players and likely to stand up for what they think is right."

In the final analysis, if you're hiring, homeschoolers may be a good investment. Cutting through the stereotypes, Lines, who has studied the movement for many years, perhaps says it best. "If I didn't know anything about someone other than their education background, I'd rather hop into a foxhole with a home-school kid

than one from public school. The homeschool kid will be a little better educated and dependable. It's just the law of averages." **ER**

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make the argument that a child with computer access can get more at home than in the classroom."

The NCES study also found the following:

- 80 percent of homeschooled students live in two-parent families, compared with 66 percent of students in conventional schools.
- 52 percent come from two-parent families in which only one parent is in the labor force, compared with 19 percent of students in conventional schools.
- One-fourth of homeschoolers' parents have bachelor's degrees, compared with 16 percent of the parents of students in conventional schools.
- The same percentage of homeschooled and non-homeschooled students lived in households with annual incomes of \$50,000 or less (64 percent).
- Sixty-two percent of homeschooled students are members of families with three or more children, compared with 44 percent of non-homeschooled students.
- Seventy-five percent of homeschoolers are white, while 65 percent of students in conventional schools are white.

As the number of homeschoolers has grown, so has the number of advocates and organizations purporting to speak for them. There are at least two national organizations and a clearinghouse as well as homeschool information associations in all states.

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) in Purcellville, Va., has 70,000 member families that are predominantly evangelical Christians, though anyone can join.

The National Home Education Network (NHEN), another national organization, based in Austin, Texas, is more eclectic than HSLDA. It attracts thousands of homeschool parents who are secularly focused or less religiously doctrinaire.

There are signs of discomfort among the various segments. Understandably, HSLDA, which has been around since the beginning of the struggle, sees itself as the rightful spokesman. But the evangelical Christian label makes some homeschoolers uncomfortable. "Homeschoolers are a more diverse grouping than the public face of it would suggest," says Christine Keen, a homeschooling parent in Bethesda, Md., who says she decided to homeschool purely for academic reasons.

The Pestinger family in Olympia, Wash., has witnessed the evolution. "Ten years ago, when we started homeschooling, the community was divided between the very religious Christian groups and the hippie groups," says Molly Pestinger, 23. "Now that's changed; there's a middle ground. We're Christians, but that wasn't the reason [she was homeschooled], and my mom was a hippie, but that wasn't the reason either."

Families may get into homeschooling for religious reasons or because they're dissatisfied with public education, says Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, in Salem, Ore., "but once they're in, their reasons change."

—Robert J. Grossman

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