

Community & Lifestyles

Parents, children prefer homeschooling

by Delia Guzman

As controversy rages over such programs as No Child Left Behind, school vouchers and charter schools, homeschooling has emerged as a vital and popular alternative for parents and their school-age children.

A recent study by the National Home Education Research Institute and the Home School Legal Defense Association states that more than 1.1 million children are homeschooled in America today. In Pennsylvania, the number of children in homeschools has risen by about 2,000 each year since 1996, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Locally, many people are choosing homeschooling as their best option over public and private schools.

Before moving to State College, Lori Lapp was living in what she called a "rather rural" area and was worried about both the quality and the proximity of her local school district.

"I wasn't thrilled with the busing situation. The kids would've had to spend an hour each way on the bus just to go to school. It seemed dangerous and a waste of their time." Instead, Lapp chose homeschooling for her son and daughter.

Katherine Daly, who homeschools her three children in Centre County, began 12 years ago.

"I started because my oldest daughter was born in October, so when she was finally eligible for kindergarten, she was almost six," Daly said. "She had taught herself to read and was reading Shakespeare plays to herself. Kindergarten didn't seem appropriate for her academically, but she was not emotionally mature enough to be advanced to first grade. She has always been a self-directed learner, so homeschooling seemed the obvious choice."

Laurie Bonjo, another Centre County mother of two, considered homeschooling because of her son's severe asthma.

"At the Montessori school he attended at age 3, he was not being dressed appropriately for going outside for recess. The teachers seemed to want him to dress himself—at age three and a half!—instead of ensuring that he was dressed warmly. He got severe colds, and he was just always sick. They thought he was 'willful,' but the problem was his asthma medication so aggravated him that he couldn't be the calm and peaceful child that the Montessori program demands. Rather than try to fit the structure of his education to him, they tried to fit him to their structure. I got tired of that."

"I've been able to cover areas he doesn't easily excel in—grammar, language—and find what works best for him."

--Lori Lapp

Bonjo homeschooled her children until they were in sixth and seventh grades.

Although parents choose homeschooling for different reasons, the clearest benefit homeschoolers cite is the fact that they spend so much quality time with their children.

"I like being a student of my kids," Lapp said. "I get to study them and figure out their strengths and weaknesses, and we have the time to focus on those things."

Homeschooling parents, graced with small classrooms and sometimes just one student, have the freedom to tailor their teaching styles and the pace of coursework to their children's needs, something a public school teacher with 20 or 30 students would be hard-pressed to do.

"With my son," Lapp said, "I've been able to cover areas he doesn't easily excel in—grammar, language—and find what works best for him. For instance, this year we tried a couple of different programs, and then finally one of them just clicked for him."

Supplies for homeschoolers are everywhere, no matter how conservative and structured or liberal and experimental the parent wants to be. Many choose accredited programs designed specifically for home-based learning. In addition, the State College Area School District has an administrator who works with homeschoolers to evaluate their children's academic work.

Bonjo also consulted many resources, including *Teach Your Children to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*, by Phyllis Haddox, Elaine Bruner and Siegfried Engelmann. "Worlds open up when you get the tools necessary to read, and you easily get over that hump. The book stresses a flow-chart rubric that suited my son's learning style."

Daly's lesson plans are just as personalized: "Ideas come from the children. Sometimes we find an interesting book at the library, or maybe a PBS program, or newspaper article, or another homeschooling family gets us going on a theme. We study what they are interested in. Sometimes we are all working on something together, and sometimes they are all



Photo by Suzan Erem

Sarah Lapp goes to "school" and studies at her dining room table. Lori Lapp homeschools Sarah and her son, Ben, instead of enrolling them in public schools.

studying different things."

"Typical" schooldays are only typical in the sense that learning is occurring. "Our days change with the seasons," Daly said. "In the summer, spring and fall, we do lots of field trips or outdoor activities. In late fall, winter and early spring, we do more book work."

Lapp's children start school at 8:30 a.m. and, "depending on how well they're focusing, sometimes they're done by noon. Sometimes it's later." They then do their home chores, and evenings are spent together as a family, without the concern for helping kids with homework that publicly schooled children have. "They do it all during the day. It's so much more efficient," Lapp said.

Lapp and Daly are quick to note they are not "anti-school" or "zealots." Lapp praises the State College Area School District for its open attitude toward allowing homeschoolers to participate in its programs. Her daughter takes violin lessons at Mt. Nittany Middle School. She also sings in the Nittany Valley Children's Choir. Her son plays Little League baseball and Pee-Wee football. Daly's daughters all dance at The Strawberry Hill Center for Creative Arts in downtown State College. Martha and Clare take piano lessons, and Kate is going to play soccer and take swimming lessons. The children's circle of friends expands as they explore their interests.

Sometimes, there is a point when home-

schooling may not be enough. Due to Bonjo's rural home setting, she and her children decided that "homeschooling just wasn't really providing them the opportunity to integrate with their peers."

They then made the transition to public school for middle school. Bonjo's son made the honor roll his first semester back in public school, and he was named Student of the Month last December.

"The children's transition into public school has been seamless. They're loving the academics and the school environment and just getting to hang out with other kids. They're getting to do real group activities like plays."

Bonjo is clear that if her children wanted to come back to homeschool, they would. "Right now, this just feels right for us as a family."

Daly is also following her children's lead as they mature. "I am concerned with facilitating my children's learning and helping them find ways to achieve their goals. If one of my children finds that she needs to go to school to learn something that she can't learn at home, I would encourage her to go to school," Daly said. "My oldest daughter wants to be an artist, so I may try to find a mentor or apprenticeship for her. My second daughter is mechanically inclined and is interested science, so she may need to go to school at some level to pursue her interests. So far, we are taking one year at a time."