



≡ SCHOOLS



THE HOMESCHOOL REVOLUTION

Minnesota parents' interest in homeschooling has surged in the last few years, fueled by COVID-19 school closures and the politicization of education. Parents are increasingly frustrated and dissatisfied with the public schools.

Only 44.6 percent of our state's students can do grade-level math, and just under half can't read at grade level, adding to a long-term trend of mediocre academic performance and stagnant and declining test scores. School hallways and classrooms are increasingly unsafe.

Minnesota families are ditching public schools, and finding homeschooling is a challenging but fulfilling alternative.

Yet many parents find the prospect of homeschooling intimidating. I understand. Twenty-five years ago, my then-fourth-grade daughter — after attending four schools in five years — was still struggling to learn to read. Skeptical friends tried to dissuade me, but I concluded that homeschooling was my only alternative. Three years later, with the personalized instruction I could give her, my daughter was reading at the 90th percentile. Today, she's homeschooling her own children.

In 2020, there were about 28,000

BY KATHERINE KERSTEN

homeschoolers in Minnesota, up from about 20,000 pre-Covid, according to the Minnesota Department of Education. Parents of many backgrounds — black and white, religious and secular, Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota residents — are discovering a vibrant educational world that remains virtually invisible to the rest of the state’s population.

Some parents view their foray into homeschooling as a temporary “rescue mission,” in one mother’s words. Others are “trying the water” by teaching early grades. A growing number expect to continue all the way through high school.

Kari Hannay of Independence, who began homeschooling in 2020, is one of those moms. The oldest of her three children — ages 9, 8 and 6 — is dyslexic. “In retrospect, Covid was a great gift to us,” she says. “We were getting set up for failure in the public schools. We looked at all the options, but nothing seemed good in my ‘mom gut’ but to keep them home. Now, I’ll never look back.”

Homeschoolers typically score 15 to 30 percentile points above public school students on K-12 standardized academic achievement tests, according to the Oregon-based National Home Education Research Institute. But equally or more important, say many parents, is the opportunity homeschooling provides to build a strong, vibrant, morally grounded family culture.

Cassie Deputie of North Branch brings a unique perspective to this task. Her husband, Alexander, fled to America from war-torn Liberia as a refugee when he was a child.

“My husband understands from personal experience that American freedom is worth defending,” she says, “Public schools used to teach the common culture that formed the mindset of our nation, but that’s no longer the case. Without a moral people, our Constitution doesn’t work. Our

decision to homeschool our children is one important way we work to make that happen.”

How do you know if homeschooling is right for you?

Cristine Trooien of Westonka, director of the Minnesota Parents Alliance, started homeschooling her then-five-year-old twins during Covid in 2020 and continues today. People seeking her advice “say, ‘I’m not a trained teacher,’”



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she observes. “Their top question is ‘How doable, how realistic, is this?’ Their second question is ‘What about socialization?’ I tell them homeschooling is not a lifetime commitment — you can always put them back in school. The real question is, ‘Is this the right next step for your family?’ You don’t get a do-over in your children’s education, so it’s important to make sure they’re in the best possible learning environment.”

Molly Koop, a mother of eight and

veteran homeschooler from Forest Lake, adds this: “You may not be a certified teacher, but you know your child best, how they learn and what they need.”

The homeschool discernment process has four steps, according to experienced home educators: Know the law; get advice from others about how to adjust your life; choose a curriculum; and find a support group.

Under Minnesota law, a parent is automatically qualified to teach his or her child. You start by filing a “letter of intent” with your school district’s superintendent. The law requires that you teach certain subjects, but says nothing about how or how often. Your children must take a nationally normed standardized achievement test every year to assess whether they’re at grade level. You keep the results for your files, and do not need to submit them to public authorities.

Several organizations post the simple steps and forms necessary to start homeschooling on their web sites. These include the Minnesota Association of Christian Home Educators (MACHE); the Minnesota Homeschoolers Association (MHA), a secular organization; the Child Protection League; and the Virginia-based Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). All also offer a rich variety of homeschool resources.

For most parents, the primary “barrier to entry,” notes Trooien, is a concern that “homeschooling will take over your life, that you have to submit regular lesson plans and drill down eight hours a day.” For her, the biggest eye-opener has been how efficient the process can be. “You can educate an average K-3 child on basic reading and math in about an hour a day,” she says. Generally, with children in grades 4 to 6, the target is to finish with academics by noon.

Older students are usually quite independent, and a rule of thumb for an average learner, parents say, is one to two hours per child per week spent correcting,

encouraging, reviewing progress, and keeping students on track. High school students often require substantial support in coordinating their classes to prepare for future academic and vocational pursuits.

Why this greater efficiency? Julia Doffing of Ham Lake, a former teacher and mother of six, compares the two modes of instruction: “In a classroom setting with, say, 25 kids, so much time goes into setting up for lessons (“take out your books and turn to page 15”); classroom management and discipline; hall passing, recess and lunch; and the downtime kids spend waiting for the teacher to answer five classmates’ questions.”

“Homeschool is more like private tutoring,” she explains. “When you have a discussion with your children about what they’re learning, you can get to the bottom of what they don’t understand very quickly.”

This efficiency “opens up a world of options,” says Trooien. With the time gained, you can explore your children’s interests in science or history, immerse them in classic books that most schools no longer teach, or seek out fun, life-enhancing extracurricular activities.

Customized education

The ability to customize is one of homeschooling’s greatest benefits. “I like to say that in homeschooling, every child has an IEP” (individualized education plan),” quips Brad Bjorkman of Heppner’s Legacy Homeschool Resources bookstore in Elk River. The store carries 4,200 titles and describes itself as the only brick-and-mortar homeschool store in the upper Midwest.

“You can’t imagine the rich diversity of curricula available until you begin digging in,” agrees Koop. “If you google ‘science curriculum,’ there are so many choices, it can be stress-paralyzing.” Early in her homeschooling career, Koop

used a “curriculum in a box” that offered day-by-day lesson plans. She customized as she gained experience and family circumstances evolved.

Every homeschooler has examples of the benefits that tailored instruction brings. “Kids in a classroom are all expected to learn the material at the same time,” points out Hannay.

In homeschool, you don’t have to hold them back artificially. One of Molly Koop’s sons, who had ADHD, just

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—Homeschooling parent
Julia Doffing

couldn’t sit still as a youngster, she recalls. In a homeschooling setting, she could tell him to “take a break — go run laps or ride your bike” when he was restless or seat him on a bouncy ball during lessons, which enabled him to focus.

Doffing, who has four sons, says boys often need more intriguing ways to learn, and more competition, to keep them from asking “Why should I care?” and giving up. For example, when teaching her five-year-old son “sight words” in reading, she transformed a Tupperware container into a “monster mouth.” When he got a word right, he couldn’t wait to “feed” his flashcard to it.

An older son had no interest in learning to count out change until she

told him, “You need to learn so you can make sure no one cheats you!” “His whole attitude shifted,” she laughs. “He learned quickly after I began to pretend to give him the wrong change, and he had to catch me at it.”

On a more serious note, she says, “When kids are hungry for information and ideas on a topic, you can have a 45-minute discussion. You can dive into it so deeply. Those are the discussions you remember.”

Jessica Kegley, of Elk River, says one of her children is a “night person.” “His mind just clicks in the evening,” she explains. “With homeschooling, we can do math at the best time: after dinner.”

Kegley’s flexible schedule also allows her to change her instructional approach when her kids’ needs require it. During the pandemic, one son experienced significant anxiety. “I just needed to be mom for a while,” she says. She enrolled him in an English class at a co-op in St. Paul, where “he put his best foot forward” for his in-person teacher, and his motivation returned.

For many adults, revisiting grade-school math can provoke anxious feelings, and the prospect of teaching it is even more daunting. How can you do so confidently when multiplying fractions is something you’d sooner avoid than dive into?

The key to success in math is to find the learning approach that’s right for your child, advises Brad Bjorkman of Heppner’s Legacy bookstore. “Some math curricula are multi-sensory, for wiggly hands that need to touch things,” he explains. “Some are based on building a strong foundation of understanding, like Singapore Math, and others are ‘spiral’ — repetition-based.” At the store, Bjorkman first asks probing questions to assess how a child learns and then suggests a well-matched curriculum.

Koop uses “Beast Academy” — an innovative, comic book-based curriculum for ages 6 to 13 that’s heavy on mental math — for one of her children. “He would do it all day long if he could,” she confides.

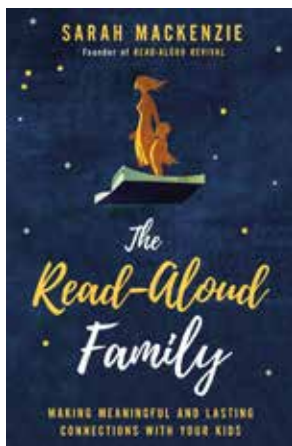
Some curricula, like the K-12 story-based “Life of Fred,” take students all the way through statistics and calculus. Parents can also outsource math instruction to a professional instructor at



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a homeschool academy; use HSLDA's advanced online math resources, or enroll proficient tenth-grade and older students in Minnesota's Post-Secondary Option (PSEO) program for high school and college credit. Organizations like MACHE, MHA and HSLDA can assist in navigating this dizzying menu of options.

Hillary Swanson, of Apple Valley, was pushed into homeschooling when Covid hit. Math was a particular concern for her then-13-year-old son, Elijah. In discerning their path forward, she and her husband sat down with a homeschooling



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family for lunch, and Elijah joined them. Swanson chose the "Easy Peasy" math curriculum. Through its links to Khan Academy, a high-quality online resource, Elijah now supplements his daily instruction with math problems that prepare him for the SAT.

Teaching writing — English composition — can also be a roadblock for parents. Here, top-notch options include the popular "Institute for Excellence in Writing" for middle

and high school. For scientifically based reading instruction, "Logic of English," based on the Orton-Gillingham methodology, often works well with dyslexic students.

How can you manage all this if you have children of widely different ages?

Kegley, with four kids ages 13 to 7, says, "We generally do math individually, and history together. In history the younger ones might do crafts associated with the period we're studying, while the older ones study the text."

"We do science and history together in age groups," explains Koop, the veteran mother of eight. "But I start working to make my kids as independent as possible in language arts and math once they are fluent readers. Of course, they must always check in with me. When they are older, we often rely on hybrid academies and PSEO."

Parents can also divide teaching responsibilities. New homeschooler Kari Hannay's husband, a trained chemist, teaches their kids science, while her mother teaches history and geography.

Alternatively, two or three families can split subjects, with one, say, supervising science and the other writing. Kegley meets weekly with another family for science experiments and hands-on projects in the kitchen. Koop has also used this approach. I say, "I'll do this for your small people, while you do that for my big people."

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Resources beyond the home

Opportunities to learn don't end at the kitchen table. Numerous co-ops, run by parent volunteers, offer both academic-related and extracurricular activities. MACHE, MHA and CPL post online lists of co-ops located across the state, from Aitkin to Winona.

One such group meets at the Church of Saint Paul in Ham Lake. This year, elementary students are focusing on geography and presenting reports on different countries, dressed as famous characters. The co-op conducts a science

fair, along with classes in activities like swing dance and personal finance. Some co-ops sponsor Halloween, Valentine's and Christmas parties, and others organize year books, dances, and graduation ceremonies.

Former homeschooler Clara Koop, now 20 and a college student, says in high school she participated in a book club through the Ham Lake co-op. "We read and discussed British and American literature when we were studying those countries in history — so many books I would never have read in public school, like *Anne of Green Gables*."

Kari Hannay says her co-op in Buffalo, which meets twice a month, has not only changed her kids' life, but *her* life. "The other mothers come alongside you and want to 'do life' with you," she explains, "Moms bring their curricula to share. They'll say, 'your child is struggling with reading? Here's what worked for me. Take it home and browse it for a week.'"

The Buffalo co-op regularly sponsors panels with experienced homeschooling moms — some with kids in college and beyond — who advise on topics like how to create transcripts for middle and high-schoolers, says Hannay. With support like this, she is confident she can homeschool successfully through high school.

As an example of "co-op creativity," Hannay points to a pre-Christmas "Market Makers" project she organized with other co-op moms, which focused on "what it means to be an entrepreneur." "My 5-year-old daughter made 'tie blankets' as stocking stuffers for dogs and cats, and my sons made hot chocolate cocoa bombs and caramel corn," she explains. "They researched their products, did a marketing analysis, figured cost-per-item and profit margin, and learned to make logos on Canva. At the fair, they cleared between \$77 and \$177 profit after paying me back!"

Beyond co-ops, there are hybrid-type, homeschool-focused educational institutions where parents can drop-off a child for academic or elective classes with a professional teacher. They can sign up for one class, or build a student's entire schedule around these offerings.

Home Educators Resource Organization (HERO) in Forest Lake, for example, offers classes for preschool to

grade 12. Electives range from arts, music and drama to woodworking, Mandarin Chinese, advanced Lego engineering and “Aristotelian Rhetoric.”

Mid-Metro Academy in St. Paul caters to students in grades 7 to 12. Rebecca Hope, the academy’s Executive Director, describes her institution as “somewhere between home learning and a private school.” Mid-Metro offers career-oriented classes in business, technology, art, and design for “young people who want to get an early start in today’s gig economy.” Along with core academics and the arts, it features courses on American government and the Constitution, along with a Student Senate program.

Hand in Hand Christian Montessori is a hybrid academy that serves homeschooled children ages preschool to grade 12 in Roseville, with additional campuses in Bloomington (preschool-5) and Wayzata (preschool-6). Executive Director Michelle Thompson says exploding parent demand recently prompted Hand in Hand to purchase the Blake School’s Highcroft campus in Wayzata. That school, which will open in Fall 2023, will accommodate about 320 students and will eventually serve grades pre-school to 12.

Yet another alternative is in-person academies with a “classical,” Great Books focus, such as the Saint John Paul II Education Guild in St. Paul. Parents can also take advantage of online educational resources like Hillsdale College’s “K-12 at Home,” the CiRCE Institute, the Classical Academic Press’s Scholé Academy, HSLDA’s Online Academy, and Athena Academy.

But co-ops and hybrid academies are just the beginning. Homeschoolers can supplement with field trips to the Ordway Theater in St. Paul or Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, join 4H and hobby clubs, and sign up for orienteering, survival backpacking or kayaking classes at local nature centers — all while other kids are at public school.

They can also begin to investigate a vocation. Jessica Kegley was surprised when her 13-year-old son expressed an interest in agriculture. “I found a dairy farm where he can volunteer,” she says, “and he went from knowing nothing about farming to wanting to apprentice

and pursue a career.”

“Farming motivates and connects the dots for him — in science, math and communications with the farmer. He’ll say, ‘Mom, we’re going to be harvesting corn silage today, here’s what I did with the vet today, and so on.’”

“My husband and I didn’t think he would go to college,” she reflects, “but now he says he wants to study agriculture and business. We need boys to feel like they’re becoming men.”

By law, homeschooled students can participate in sports and other extra-curricular (after-school) activities at public schools. Schools tend to be flexible on “co-curricular” activities like band and

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orchestra, according to Amy Buchmeyer of the Home School Legal Defense Association. Some school districts even have a homeschool liaison on staff, though districts vary in their receptivity.

Kegley’s middle-school-aged sons have participated in band in Elk River schools. “We’ve never felt we are treated differently than enrolled students,” she says. She anticipates that her boys will play baseball at the high school.

What about socialization?

This rich array of opportunities suggests that concerns about lack of socialization are largely a stereotype left over from the 1980s.

“When I was young, homeschoolers were sometimes socially awkward,” comments Cristine Trooien. “Now, to a good extent, it’s the reverse. Those kids weren’t living behind a mask for two years. They are used to interacting with adults and are often very comfortable, poised, and sure of themselves.”

Trooien adds that she and her children “have never been busier.” “We are

overbooked, doing things my kids love.”

Doffing, of Ham Lake, encourages prospective homeschoolers to “take a step back and consider: What does socialization mean?” In school, she points out, kids are in same-age cohorts. “How often, after all, do sixth graders talk to fourth-graders, or high school seniors to sophomores? The real question for parents is, whom do I want my kids to socialize with? Older kids, younger kids, multi-age siblings, trusted adults who can play a meaningful role in their lives?”

Former homeschooler Clara Koop says she especially valued the opportunity to develop close relationships with her homeschooled friends’ moms. “Now I’m in college,” she comments, “they’re my references for future jobs, my number one go-to for anything I need.”

Kari Hannay, for her part, is overjoyed at the close relationships her grade-school-aged children are forming by volunteering at a nursing home. Each child, she explains, has an elderly “best friend” who is always excited to see them. “They do birthday parties for people in memory care — wheeling them down to the dining room and serving them lemonade and cupcakes.”

Recently, she adds, “There was a concert and my six-year-old daughter held the hand of a brain-injured resident in his fifties as they listened. They were swaying back and forth together — it was so heart-warming.”

What about special needs children?

Students with learning disabilities often struggle in regular classrooms, and home educators’ ability to customize can be a game-changer. MACHE offers these families a variety of resources, including the opportunity to consult with “SPED Homeschool,” founded by Peggy Ployhar, a nationally recognized physicist-turned-home educator and special needs expert.

One special needs mom, Barbara DeVries of Hutchinson, credits homeschooling with “saving” her son, who was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome at age 4. Experts told DeVries and her husband that their son had a high IQ, but would likely never learn to write in cursive or drive a car, and would probably

need to live with them into adulthood.

The ability to tailor instruction at home was key, she says. With the routines she set up, he knew what to expect and what was expected of him.

“I taught him to write in cursive in second grade, and he got his driver’s license when he was 16.” Now age 18, her son has a part-time job at a farm implement store and will graduate from high school in May. He is taking PSEO classes in communications, computer programming and computer-assisted design at Ridgewater College in Hutchinson. “I can’t help him with his homework anymore,” she says with a smile. “It’s way too complicated.”

DeVries’s advice to other parents is to “Figure out what’s right for your child, go online and read, read, read — books by parents of autistic children about what worked for them. And don’t just accept from an expert that your child will ‘never do X.’ You know what your child can do.”

Like students with learning disabilities, “gifted and talented” children often fall through the cracks in public schools. Home education allows such children to soar. HSLDA, for example, offers many resources, and the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented sponsors a “CHOICES” chapter that caters to homeschoolers.

A remarkable success story is Evan Erickson of Lake Elmo, whose parents homeschooled him and his four siblings. In 2021, at age 17, he won a gold medal at the International Physics Olympiad, hosted by Lithuania. During Covid, he and a friend launched a free online summer math camp for middle-schoolers. He plays the oboe and piano and gained early admission to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which he now attends, while working as the manager of an ice cream store.

The challenges of homeschooling

Homeschooling isn’t for every family and can bring many challenges. “Just because you *can* do it, with guidance, doesn’t mean you *should* do it,” counsels Koop. Difficulties include navigating complex parent/child dynamics and coping with the burdens of managing a household while educating children.

But homeschooling parents can find support in meeting challenges like these. MACHE, for example, regularly sponsors speakers on topics like dyslexia, the rigors of high school, and how to avoid burnout. Its annual two-day convention, held this year in Rochester on May 19-20, draws hundreds of attendees. MACHE hosted a conference in Detroit Lakes in February 2023, and will sponsor another in Hermantown on April 28-29, 2023.

Homeschool families can obtain limited financial reimbursement — generally between \$80 and \$90 per child per year — from their local school district. They can also deduct certain expenses on their state income tax.

Interest in homeschooling skyrocketed among black families during Covid, and the Louisiana-based National Black Home Educators organization offers advice and support and sponsors an annual summer conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The Homeschool Buyers Club, with a national membership, offers discounts on curricula and resources, as does HSLDA, which suggests “creative ways to stretch your dollars” and provides grants to families coping with hardship or financial challenge.

In addition, there are support groups for black and Hispanic parents. Interest in homeschooling skyrocketed among black families during Covid, and the Louisiana-based National Black Home Educators organization offers advice and support and sponsors an annual summer conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Another challenge, for some parents, is finding a way to balance part-time work and home education. Hillary Swanson, who works for a regional hospital, cut back from 30 to 24 hours a week when she began homeschooling

during Covid. Now she works from home three days a week while her son studies independently, and on Thursday and Friday, they work on school together. Their goal is to finish by 2:00 p.m.

She describes an “Aha! moment” that warmed her heart: “My son has learned, not just about math, but about study skills. He recently wrote in his journal: ‘I see myself as a student that’s trying my best to get better grades.’ His new habit, he said, is to ‘start with the hardest class’ and work through to the easiest, so he has more time to do his best.”

“He understands now you have to decide on your own to invest in your education,” explains Swanson. “It was an important milestone for him. I made a sacrifice, but I’m so glad.”

The joys of homeschooling

The greatest benefit of homeschooling, many parents agree, is the opportunity to build a strong, positive family culture. “You can teach crucial life skills and have the time and energy to focus on cultivating truth and wisdom — creating well-rounded, emotionally secure and morally confident adults,” says Julia Doffing.

“There are wonderful academic moments,” comments Molly Koop, “but so much of the reason is to see our kids grow in virtue. We have to take back our culture, but the way to do that is in our home.”

Cassie Deputie, whose husband fled Liberia, has eight children from age 12 to 15 months. “We’ve sacrificed so much in order to homeschool,” she explains. “My husband worked three jobs at one time and then started his own business to make this possible. We always say, ‘Don’t wait for the perfect circumstances to homeschool. Create the perfect circumstances while you homeschool.’”

Deputie’s and her husband’s greatest joy is the family culture they have forged. “We have our kids’ hearts,” she explains. “They trust us; they respect us. We’ve shared so many experiences, so many challenges, so many stories and struggles. We’ve wrestled with big ideas and given them the skills they need so when life gets hard, they have such deep roots — such a moral compass — that they know how to conduct themselves in meeting whatever storms may come.” ★