



## A LOOK AT THE GROWING TREND OF HOMESCHOOLING

# STAYING HOME FOR SCHOOL

DAVID CHANDLER

YOU MAY HAVE SEEN THIS NEWS ITEM on the Covenant Church's website ([www.covchurch.org](http://www.covchurch.org)) in May 2001: Elizabeth Dorman, a high-school student from Grace Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, scored a perfect 1,600 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). That was after she had won Chicago's spelling bee for three straight years, and around the time she was earning As in chemistry and calculus classes at the University of Illinois. She is now a second-year student at the California Institute of Technology.

The article also noted something else about Elizabeth—she was homeschooled by her parents, Sue and Don.

If you've seen homeschooling in the headlines in recent years, it's likely been for one of two reasons—congratulations, as with a remarkable student like Elizabeth, or controversy. Education

Perri Mueller, six, studies math at the dining room table with brother Paxton, eight. Their parents, Pete and Patty, homeschool four of their five children and are members of Grace Covenant Church in Chicago. (Their youngest, one-year-old Paavo, hasn't started school yet).

has become a battleground in the culture wars, and homeschooling is the site of skirmishes between various parties. Many educators question whether homeschooling is a legitimate alternative to public or established private schools. On the other side, James Dobson (whose "Focus on the Family" radio broadcast is heard by millions in over 100 countries) last year advocated that parents in California remove

their children, they viewed character training and imparting their religious values as priorities. Homeschooling, as they saw it, provided great opportunity for that.

Most Covenant homeschoolers with whom I spoke strongly echoed this point. In the target of education, as one parent put it, "character, including especially the formation of Christian faith and morals, is the bull's-eye."

## Education has become a battleground in the culture wars, and homeschooling is the site of skirmishes between various parties.

children from public schools and place them in Christian schools or home schools. (He also advocated removing children from public schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Washington, Wisconsin, Vermont, and Washington, D.C.)

As these skirmishes flare, they can prompt us to ask, "What about homeschooling? What do those who try it say about it? Specifically, what do homeschoolers in the Covenant say about it? Why have they made that educational choice? And what considerations do they offer to those surveying educational options?"

### TAKING A FIELD TRIP

To better understand the motivation to homeschool, we asked Covenanters from across the United States—from West Coast to East, in urban, suburban, and rural settings, both veterans and newcomers to the task—to share homeschool experiences. For someone like Beth Dorman, who taught herself to read at age four and had finished Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* before she was six, an education at home may provide more stimulation than a conventional classroom. But taking on the workload of an institution like education is a daunting task for parents.

Why do it? In Beth's case, her parents had pondered homeschooling their children even as early as Beth's birth. In evaluating educational options for

Homeschoolers say that while at first they may have been prompted by some undesirable trait of their local schools to consider options to it, their search led them to sort out what they most desired in their children's education. For many, they came to set spiritual as well as academic priorities. A number refer to a sense of divine guidance. "We believe this is what God has called us to do," says Don Dorman.

With this spiritual dimension in mind, homeschooling can become a fundamental form of discipleship.

"I can't think of any better way to disciple your kids, to send them in the spiritual direction you want to, than homeschooling," says Wendy Stevick of Grace Community Covenant Church in Olympia, Washington. Wendy and her husband, Drew, are nineteen-year homeschooling veterans. Their experiences parallels that of Calvin and Shelly Carlson, who attend Evangelical Covenant in Lindsborg, Kansas, and have homeschooled for eleven years.

In both cases, the families' mothers, both former public school teachers, were concerned about behaviors their first-born children were picking up in kindergarten.

This prompted them to read books influential in the early homeschool movement such as Susan MacAulay's

*For the Children's Sake*, and *Home Grown Kids* by Raymond and Dorothy Moore. That reading, coupled with concern for their relationships with their young daughters, led them to try educating at home. While not originally intending to do so for the long term, they have so far taught all their children at home through middle-school years before sending them to public high school. The Stevicks have five children, includ-

ing two college grads, one collegian, and two younger ones still at home. Of the three Carlson children, Bethany is a freshman at Kansas State, Ben is in public high school, and Laura continues her studies at home.

Homeschooling "makes me more disciplined to be more purposeful in raising my children," says Annette Walker, who with husband Doug and family attends Salem Covenant in New Brighton, Minnesota. With the hours children otherwise spend in a class-



Mary Dorman dissects a sheep's brain for a biology class on her kitchen counter.

David F. Chandler is pastor of Trinity Covenant Church in Plainville, Connecticut. He assists his wife, Edie, as she directs their new venture of homeschooling their children.

room now spent at home, there is increased opportunity for building relationships between children and parents. "I'm still their mother," Sue Dorman says, "but I think we have the chance we wouldn't otherwise have to be friends."

The small student-teacher ratio clearly suits Debbie and Rick Clark of Trinity Covenant in Manchester, Connecticut. When serious, faith-related questions come up during lessons with son Alex or daughter Abby, says Deb-

bie, "I'm the one to address them. I'm the one training them; I'm the one building their character."

They also enjoy opportunity to be creative and flexible in teaching. Twenty years ago, homeschooling pioneers in large part had to develop their own curricula. No more. Contemporary homeschoolers are able to pick and choose curricula to meet individual children's learning styles. If a student has a hard time developing a particular skill, he need not be unduly pushed to keep up with a class; likewise, if she is especially bright, she need not be held back.

They also enjoy opportunity to be creative and flexible in teaching. Twenty years ago, homeschooling pioneers in large part had to develop their own curricula. No more. Contemporary homeschoolers are able to pick and

hours.

"I don't think people realize how much freedom it affords you," Annette Walker says. "It's amazing how much you can get done in a small amount of time." She also notes that Minnesota requires homeschoolers to go through standardized testing each year, "and our sons have always done well."

Homeschooling parents say that their children experience less negative peer pressure. Don Dorman says he wanted to spare his children the neg-

### **Whether it's when a child comes to faith, learns to read, or grasps the concept of fractions, many welcome the joy, as Debbie Clark says, "of being the one next to them when they say, 'I get it!'"**

ative peer pressure he anticipated they would encounter in a school setting. From his own recollections he knew that even as soon as first grade, "kids could be very cruel at that age, and we could give [our kids] a more supportive environment."

Rick adds, "I'm pleased we can instill a Christian ethic and focus on Jesus and following him." At a father-son retreat his parents had blended into his curriculum last spring, Alex, seven, came to Christian faith.

#### **SOME ADVANTAGES**

Once parents have homeschooled for a time, they can often find themselves enumerating a number of other virtues they see in the practice.

Homeschooling parents say they rel-

ate peer pressure he anticipated they would encounter in a school setting. From his own recollections he knew that even as soon as first grade, "kids could be very cruel at that age, and we could give [our kids] a more supportive environment."

Covenanters who homeschool say they are pleased with their children's academic progress while at the same time appreciating that teaching a small number of students condenses the time spent sitting at desks. It's common for homeschoolers, even in academically challenging curricula, to complete their home-class sessions in two to four

And homeschooled student do have plenty of opportunities for positive social influences, say homeschool advocates, including parents, siblings, homeschool support groups, and church group.

Among her five children, Wendy Stevick says, "I don't have to deal with peer pressure on clothes, TV, food, and the like."

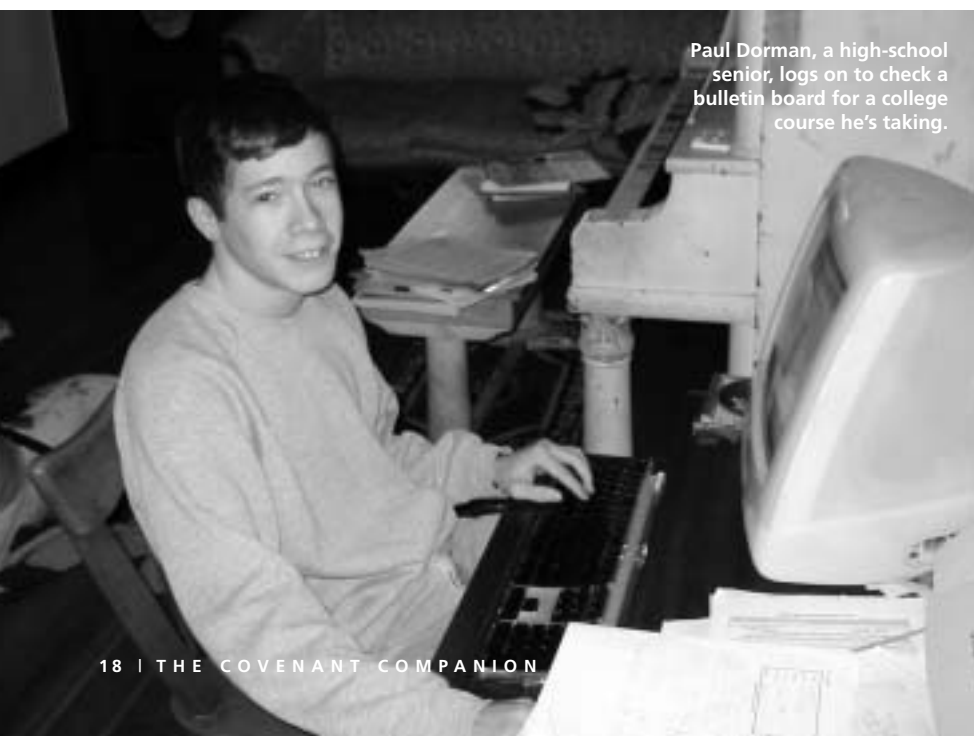
And homeschooled student do have plenty of opportunities for positive social influences, say homeschool advocates, including parents, siblings, homeschool support groups, and church group.

And homeschooled student do have plenty of opportunities for positive social influences, say homeschool advocates, including parents, siblings, homeschool support groups, and church group.

#### **THE CHALLENGES**

Homeschooling, notes *Time* magazine, "seems to require the same formula for success as parenting, which is to say, it can work when the parents are loving and open-minded and dedicated."

Observe that word "dedicated." Veterans at it acknowledge that homeschooling is work. The parent researches and selects curricula, prepares lesson plans, coordinates field trips and



Paul Dorman, a high-school senior, logs on to check a bulletin board for a college course he's taking.



## HOMESCHOOLING *Snapshot of a growing movement*

other learning activities outside home, attends support groups, and prays a good deal.

As with most ambitious endeavors, homeschooling can have its seasons of frustration, perhaps prompting some at times to ask themselves if it's worth the effort. "It's very time-consuming," says Wendy Stevick. "I think you really have to love it, because you have very little time for yourself."

Moreover, she adds, with multiple children the balancing act that is parenting in general carries over into homeschooling, with the requisite tensions of how much attention to give each student/child. "I have five," Stevick says, "and to concentrate on the older ones felt like it meant neglecting the younger ones."

Students can also reach an educational level beyond that of their parents, who can fret over their ability to teach what they themselves have not yet learned. Homeschool-curriculum literature addresses this matter often, with different solutions offered (from farming out such subjects to tutors, to plowing ahead with guidance and learning along with the child), but the struggle may not easily go away.

Sue Dorman, who was trained as an actuary, is now learning Latin with daughter Mary, fifteen, and son Paul, seventeen. "I got the curriculum when Beth was in seventh grade—and it's high-school honors Latin," she says. "We got about 40 percent through the book and then it just petered out. Beth picked it up a few years later and then she finished it on her own. It's not easy stuff, and my brain doesn't work as well as it used to."

A typical homeschooling family has a bread-winning dad and a stay-at-home mom, the latter of whom does the lion's share of the teaching. The onus is routinely on her to initiate most all of the educational experiences. Shelly Carlson feels this tension: when asked what she liked least about homeschooling, she paused and then said, "It makes me the hub for things that

Twenty years ago, fewer than 100,000 students were educated at home in the US; the number now is likely twenty times that figure. Brian Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute says there are now 1.5 to 1.9 million American students being homeschooled. (For comparison, there are roughly 500,000 students in charter schools.) Homeschoolers now make up about 10 percent of the privately schooled population (in some states more than 20 percent). It is also no longer a US phenomenon, as organizations form in Canada, Mexico, Japan, South Africa, Switzerland, and Germany.

### Who home schools?

Mitchell Stevens, in his book, *Kingdom of Children*, cites a 1995 study demographically identifying homeschooling families as 98 percent white and 97 percent married, most under forty. In comparison with the general population of the region studied, respondents were better educated and slightly more affluent than their non-homeschooling counterparts. Presently, according to Ray, practicing Christians make up 75 percent of US homeschoolers.

"As in American culture generally," Stevens says, "one can find great diversity in the movement in terms of religion, marital status, economics, race, and size of family. Generally speaking, though, many homeschooling families espouse conservative Protestant faiths, have full-time or nearly full-time moms, and a higher number of children than average."

### History—then and now

In a cover story on homeschooling in August 2001 entitled "Home Sweet School," *Time* noted that prior to 1850s, "it was the movement to establish public schools that was nascent while homeschooling was quite common." Since that time, *Time* noted, "Public schools became the institution," and homeschool practically disappeared until the 1960s. Even then, homeschooling was often viewed as a concept on the fringe or an excuse for truancy, and the practice had become illegal in many states.

According to *Time*, that changed in the last twenty years "when well-organized evangelical Christians adopted homeschooling...." Through years of work and the development of a remarkable grassroots effort, homeschoolers have made school at home legal in all fifty US states (though there is wide variation between

states on regulations, ranging from virtually no requirements to a good deal of mandatory testing and submitting of forms).

The homeschooling movement continues to undergo further change. Often associated with fundamentalist Christians, homeschooling now draws more moderate believers into its ranks.

The relationship between homeschoolers and public schools is changing, too—though there are wide-ranging variations from one school district to the next. In some places those relations are tense, prompting homeschoolers to form more extensive networks and support groups and to organize their own field trips, sports programs, and even homeschool bands.

In other places, public schools are quite open to homeschoolers taking classes there, and will even pay for portions of school supplies. One of the latest trends, in fact, is the "virtual charter school," where students enroll in public school and through online curricula takes courses at home that are monitored by the host school.

### Making the grade

According to "Home Sweet School," the average SAT score for homeschoolers in 2000 was 1100, compared with 1019 for the general population. In one large study using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, where the national average was the 50th percentile, the average homeschooler scored in the 75th percentile.

"Certainly," the article went on, "the old suspicion of the academic credentials of homeschooled kids has waned; perhaps three-quarters of universities now have policies for dealing with homeschooled applicants. . . . Today Harvard admissions officers attend homeschooling conferences looking for applicants, and Rice and Stanford admit homeschoolers at rates equal to or higher than those for public schoolers."

There is even a more direct transition from secondary to post-secondary education levels: in May 2002, Patrick Henry College in Virginia, a new Christian institution with homeschooled students making up the majority of its student body, held commencement for its first graduating class. □



**Paxton Mueller works on a math lesson with his mom, Patty.**

take a lot of responsibility—if I don't do it, it doesn't get done. It takes a lot of energy, a lot of juggling and self-discipline."

On a more practical level, many homeschoolers admit that with the clutter that can accumulate from homeschooling—the requisite school supplies, books, and projects-in-progress—"you also perhaps need to let go of the idea of having a hyper-clean house."

### **AN ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE?**

While homeschooling has grown in recent years to become something of an institution, many non-homeschoolers still see it as novel or offbeat. It is unfamiliar in many places and largely unregulated in many more, where it has yet to earn the full trust of observers.

Homeschooling parents say they are aware of these tensions and are diplomatic in wanting to relieve them. Many are quick to point out their gratitude for living in a time that affords educational options. Some have had children in public and/or private schools for a number of years and then educated at home, or vice versa—some blend homeschooling with part-time attendance in formal classrooms.

Former schoolteacher Shelly Carlson, for one, says that homeschooling "can be a good complement to public and private education. We keep each other fresh and sharp." She encourages each family to seek out what is God's best for that family.

In their planning, parents, as one

homeschool advisory website suggests, can imagine their child's graduation from high school, and ask themselves: "What do you want that child to know? What skills do you want him/her to have learned? What kind of a relationship do you want to have

with that child? What kind of relationship do you want the child to have with God?"

"Whether you homeschool or not," advises Stevick, another former public-school teacher, homeschooling is "a good thing to investigate and consider."

"Even if you put your kids in public or private school," she says, "you would think about the education of your child in a totally different way." In looking at homeschooling, parents can gain an awareness that they may not otherwise have of the importance of education in their child's life and the

pivotal role they play in that.

For their part, the Dormans are pleased with the decision to homeschool, though their children would have probably done well in any setting. Their success is "not the homeschooling, it's just them," says Sue Dorman.

Beth is reportedly doing well at Caltech, where she's majoring in molecular biology. Paul is in the process of applying to college, and Mary, fifteen, is studying biology in the kitchen with Sue on most days.

That's not to say everything has gone without a hitch. Beth spent one summer catching up on her English studies—"It took me too long to get organized one year," says Sue Dorman—and there are a number of courses that the family bought at homeschooling conferences and just never got to.

"I can't tell you how much money I spend on curriculum that is just sitting on the shelf," Sue Dorman says.

And she doesn't think that her children missed much by not being in public schools. "Some people say, well they missed the prom—I grew in a Mennonite family and we didn't dance." □

## Homeschooling Resources

### **WEBSITES**

**[www.discovery.org/fellows/pat-lines/index.html](http://www.discovery.org/fellows/pat-lines/index.html)**

Articles on homeschooling by a researcher in the field.

**[www.dir.yahoo.com/Education/Theory\\_and\\_Methods/Home\\_Schooling/](http://www.dir.yahoo.com/Education/Theory_and_Methods/Home_Schooling/)**

Part of the Internet portal service Yahoo, this site has links to reference materials, online learning communities, and more (including "Opposing Views").

**[www.TeachingHome.com](http://www.TeachingHome.com)**

*The Teaching Home* is "a Christian magazine for home educators."

**[www.home-school.com](http://www.home-school.com)**

The website of *Practical Homeschooling Magazine*, billed as "the world's most-visited homeschool site."

**[www.homeschool.com](http://www.homeschool.com)**

Not to be confused with the previous site

(no hyphen in the address), this site presents itself as "Your Virtual Homeschool."

### **BOOKS**

*Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*, Mitchell Stevens (Princeton University Press, 2001)

*Worldwide Guide to Home-schooling: Facts and Stats on the Benefits of Home School, 2002-2003*, Brian D. Ray (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002)

*The Homeschool Journey: Windows into the Heart of a Learning Family*, Susan and Michael Card (Harvest House Publishers, 1997).

*The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*, Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer (W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).