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Opinion

Home schooling contributes to public education

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All parents are teachers, whether they use play to teach young children shapes, sounds, and colors or teach character through example. For many children, though, mom and dad have another role: classroom teacher.

One newspaper in Kansas recently produced a series of articles about the home school phenomenon. The results are both challenging and reassuring for the future of education.

In the popular mind, there are two types of home schooling-parents. One is the religious parent who wishes to shelter the children (foolishly or wisely, you pick) from certain social influences. The second is the counter-cultural rebel who shuns structure and authority.

To be sure, such parents exist. But these stereotypes overlook the wide diversity of families involved in home schooling. According to a researcher at the U.S. Census Bureau, "home schooling is not primarily a religious phenomenon." One of the reporters who produced the articles told me that "we had more folks along the middle of the spectrum than at its ends."

How common is home schooling? Last year, the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that in 2003, approximately 1.1 million children were home-schooled across the county. That's more than twice the number of all school children in Kansas.

According to an article in the *Southern Economic Journal*, the number of home-schooled students is increasing 10 percent each year, and it has climbed from no more than 20,000 in 1980.

Home schools offer advantages to both students and parents. They allow for more family time, obviously, since parents work with children and siblings are nearby. Grassroots parents pool their resources for physical education classes, band practice, and other activities, making it likely that students will interact with both older and younger children rather than just their peers.

The flexible nature of home schooling makes it easier to accommodate unexpected opportunities for learning, such as a temporary museum exhibit. Children are able to work at their own pace, neither held back by others or forced to play catch-up.

This isn't to say that home schooling is totally unstructured. Parents must register with the state, and truancy laws apply. Periodic testing is required, too.

Thanks to a flourishing publishing industry, conferences, and fast Internet connections, there are plenty of resources available to the parent. Some at-home teachers use district-approved

curriculums, while others choose from a variety of approaches, including classical and Montessori.

So how well do home schools perform? As you might expect from any human institution, some do better than others. As a group, though, their students scored higher than the general population on the ACT college entrance exam.

Home schooling-parents also point to the college and professional careers of their children. One parent responded to an *Education Week* article, for example, by noting that her children attended Stanford University and Oberlin College. So much for the idea that students in home schools don't learn.

The biggest knock on home schooling is that it does not promote proper socialization of children. Home-school parents, however, argue that socialization takes many forms and occurs in many places. Furthermore, enrollment in a traditional public school is no guarantee that a student will become a well-adjusted productive citizen. Unfortunately, some legislators would like to impose further regulations on home schools. At a time when regulations are a sore spot for schools in general, imposing more rules is unwise.

To be sure, not every parent should home school, and not every parent wants to. But the freedom to do so, absent evidence of gross abuse, should and does reside with parents. In the 1925 landmark case *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the "liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control." That includes the right to home school.

Traditional public schools work for some students, but certainly not all. Some drop out, some test below grade level, and some have behavioral problems. Still others find that the structure, style, or curricular emphasis of the traditional school falls short of what is required to maximize their potential.

No two children are the same. As the experience of home-schooled children demonstrates, there's no reason to expect that one type of school is best for all.