Lessons at home

Jennifer Connolly of Carencro teaches her daughter, Laura, at their kitchen table. Laura is among 1,352 Acadia children and more than a million nationwide who are home schooled.

Home schooling on the rise in Acadia

Claire Taylor
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — Fifteen years ago, parents who home schooled their children were considered trailblazers and fanatics. Critics warned that their children, isolated from the blend of cultures and philosophies in traditional schools, would be socially unprepared for the trials of the real world.

But in today’s climate of school killings and declining moral standards, home schooling is catching on among more mainstream families.

Over a million children nationwide, including 1,352 in Acadia, were taught at home by their parents last year. They are the children of teachers, doctors, lawyers, and business people. Their reasons for home schooling are as diverse as their backgrounds: academic standards, moral values, private school costs, fear of violence.

For two years Matthew Courville, a French musician, returned from school with a stomach ache, begging to be taught at home. After a year of home schooling, Matthew’s stomach aches have virtually disappeared.

Pat Bercher of Rayne, a member of the Southwest Acadia Homeschoolers, started home schooling about 15 years ago after realizing one of her children was too immature to enter kindergarten at the standard age and would be forced either to start school too early or a year late.

Considered a home schooling pioneer in Acadia, Bercher often hears students complain about traditional schooling. “At swimming lessons and ball parks, I speak with young people who feel trapped in a situation at school that, for them, is not the learning experience it can be,” Bercher said.

For many Acadia families, the desire to impart upon their children their own moral standards and values has led to home schooling.

“Home schooling began with the religious right who didn’t want their kids exposed to a heathen public school education,” said Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. “Now, liberals are turning to home schooling for similar but different reasons. They want to teach their children their own philosophy.”

Jennifer Connolly of Carencro home schools her three daughters for academic as well as moral reasons. Husband Frank explained, “If you’re trying to pass on your values, why turn your children over to a system that doesn’t share those values?”

The decision to home school must be agreed upon by both parents if it is to be successful, many area home schoolers said. Parents should carefully weigh the alternatives before removing their children from the classroom.

### Home schooling in Louisiana

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total children per school year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>3,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>5,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>8,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>8,819</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: La. Department of Education

Thomas Knapp / The Advertiser
Home schoolers have a significant advantage over public school students in terms of academic performance and social development. Home schooling allows parents to tailor their teaching to each child's learning style and pace. This personalized approach can significantly enhance a child's educational experience.

For example, a study conducted by the National Home Education Research Institute found that home schooled students outperform their public school counterparts in reading, mathematics, and science. Additionally, home schooled students demonstrate a higher level of motivation and engagement in their studies.

Parents who choose home schooling report that their children develop a strong sense of independence and self-motivation. They also benefit from a more flexible schedule that allows them to learn at their own pace and in their own way.

Moreover, home schooled students often develop a deeper understanding of their own interests and passions, which can lead to a more fulfilling educational journey.

In conclusion, home schooling offers a unique and effective alternative for parents seeking to provide a personalized and engaging education for their children. The benefits of home schooling are evident in the academic achievements and personal growth of students who choose this educational path. 
Matthew Courville enjoys being home schooled by his mom, Rena, but said he wants to return to public school in the ninth grade because he misses the daily interaction with his friends.

Topps provides free college tuition for Louisiana students who complete high school with at least a 2.5 grade point average or at least a 19 on the ACT. Home schoolers must score three points higher on the ACT, at least a 22, to be eligible for the same tuition waiver.

"That's okay, though. Our kids beat the statistics," Bercier said.

But home schooling does not work for all families. Many who return their children to their classrooms are reluctant to discuss the matter. Their home schooling counterparts say some parents feel like failures when their home schooling efforts are unsuccessful, but they shouldn't.

"People need not judge each other," said Sandra Istre of Lafayette, whose home schooled since 1987.

Home schooling simply is not for everyone. "We consider ourselves fortunate because it is working for us," Gerald Istre added.

Personality differences and discipline can be problems in the home just like in the classroom. A Lafayette resident who taught her two children last year is returning them to private school in the fall because of personality conflicts with her son.

"I'm a structure freak and he has a different learning style," she said. He also tried to talk mom into some lessons.

"Moms need to realize your kids are going to try you," offered Gwen Miller of Prairie Ronde, a home schooling mom.

"That's where dads intervene. In the home school setting, mom is the teacher and dad is the principal. The children generally do not want dad to be called home to resolve a conflict.

\[ \text{Like 15 years ago, the most common complaint against home schooling is the lack of socialization.} \]

Lonia Walter of Lafayette home schooled her son for two years.

"The first year was great. The second year he was lonely," Walter said. "He wanted to be with people his own age and he was tired of being with me, so he stopped doing his school work."

Successful home school families say they make a special effort to involve their children in extracurricular activities. Walter said she did, too. Her son was in 4-H, participated in home school park days and tours.

"One extracurricular activity a way is just not enough socialization for a child," Walter said.

Bobbie Marino, president of Lafayette Parish Association of home schoolers, agreed. "We think social skills and being with everyone is very important. Personally, I believe a larger school setting is more desirable."

Riek said socialization is a concern but children can overcome that by playing with neighborhood children and getting involved in extracurricular activities. Most home schooling families

home schoolers are accused of pulling their kids out of school," he said. Home schooling will catch on when parents recognize how successful it is, he said.

But others say home schooling is not a replacement for traditional schooling.

"I tend not to worry about it as a long-term phenomenon because a finite number of people are willing to pay the price," Houston said.

Matthew Courville plays French music at area festivals, as a member of the conservatory of music and plays ice hockey. He begged his parents for two years to take him out of public school, but he plans to return to the classroom.

"I want to be with my friends in the ninth grade," he said.

The romanticism of the senior year has Andree Miller, of Prairie Ronde, considering the traditional school setting.

"Some days I feel deprived because I can't be with my friends all day and go to dances," she said. The school spirit is present in high school seniors is appealing, Miller said. "I'd like to be a part of that."

Laura Courville, 13, of Carencro, said she enjoys not worrying about her appearance and fitting in. "I'm very detached from all that," she said.

Miller added that she might have more friends in the classroom setting, but not the close friendship she has with Courville.

Seven years ago, only 3,545 children in Louisiana were home schooled. Last year, that number grew to 6,819. Home schooling is catching on nationwide. Many predict even greater growth following the tumultuous 1998-99 school year marred by school shootings and, in Acadiana, bomb threats.

"Children are exposed to a lot," said Marion Punch, local chapter president of the Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana. "I support public schools, but I certainly wouldn't blame a parent (for turning to home schooling) if there's a problem in the school."

Frank Connolly said the killings at Columbine High School in Colorado will likely prompt other parents to remove their children from the classroom.

"I think it's going to bring more awareness to home schooling," he said.

On the flip side, home schoolers are accused of pulling their kids out of school," he said. Home schooling will catch on when parents recognize how successful it is, he said.

But others say home schooling is not a replacement for traditional schooling.

"I tend not to worry about it as a long-term phenomenon because a finite number of people are willing to pay the price," Houston said.