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Home school

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mates for home-schooled children, and foster religious vocations as well.

Diane Leavy, a parishioner at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit, belongs to T.O.R.C.H. and teaches its ideals to her children.

"They look forward to saying daily rosary and going to Mass together on first Friday. They're very comfortable with it," said Leavy, who, with her husband Anthony, has eight children ages 2 to 15. She teaches the seven who are of school age.

Patricia Wheeler of Piffard, Livingston County, added that she takes her children on frequent "field trips" to the Abbey of the Genesee monastery, where her husband, Jim, is employed. The Wheelers, parishioners at St. Mary's Church in Genesee, have four children, ages 7 to 15, all home schooled by their mother.

As a whole, home schooling is on the rise. A Sept. 13 article in *Time* magazine, "Home-school Report Card," reported that more than 1 million children nationwide are currently home schooled, with the total amount having tripled between 1990 and 1995. As of 1993, home schooling has been legal in all 50 states.

Leavy — coordinator of Catholic Home Schoolers of Western New York, a 65-family coalition — said that Catholic home schooling appears to be gaining popularity as well. Exact local and national statistics are hard to come by, since home-schooling families are from different religious backgrounds and may not belong to any governing network. Leavy estimated that New York state has about 11,000 Catholic home-schooling families.

Until the 1980s, home schooling in the United States was most prevalent among Protestant evangelicals. That characteristic is changing, according to an Oct. 26, 1998, *Time* article, "Home (school) Improvement."

"As home schooling infiltrates the wider culture, the wider culture is starting to infiltrate home schooling," Peter Beinart wrote. "Many of the newest home schoolers are not religious. And home schooling,



Mike Mergen/Photo intern

Janet Condon and her sons Joshua, right, and David spend part of every school day focused on religion.

with its low cost, is attracting growing numbers of children who have been expelled from public school."

More so than ever, home schooling may also provide a safe haven from violence in schools, the Sept. 13 *Time* article asserted.

"In the gruesome wake of recent school shootings, a new cadre of parents are wondering whether home schooling is the best way to shield their kids from bullets," Francine Russo wrote.

Primary educators

Home-schooling parents interviewed for this story cite Pope John Paul II's dictum that Catholic parents are their children's primary educators. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2444, adds that "parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children."

Timothy Dwyer, diocesan superintendent of Catholic schools, said that based on this teaching, he has no reason to oppose home schooling.

"Certainly, core to our philosophy is that the parent is the primary educator," Dwyer said. "We certainly support the parent's

right to educate."

Dean Condon pointed out that the current home schooling surge is actually a rebirth of a longstanding practice.

"Public education is a very recent phenomenon. For most of history, people have been home-schooled," said Condon, who serves as pastoral administrator at Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta. Condon and his wife, Janet, have four children ages 9 months to 8 years. Janet home schools the oldest two in their home on the church campus.

On average, home-schooled students rank above the national norm in college-entrance testing, according to an Oct. 5, 1998, *Newsweek* article, "Learning at Home: Does It Pass the Test?" The story reported that home-schooled students averaged 23 (out of 36) on their ACT tests, while the national average score was 21.

Janet Condon noted that Joshua, 8, and David, 6, are both working on fourth-grade math. Home-schooled children can be taught at their own paces much better than can be accomplished in a classroom setting, she said.

"I know that once they 'get it,' we can go right on to the next thing," Janet said.

"You can convey the material in a fraction of the time as in an institutional environment," her husband remarked.

Home-schooling parents, Dean Condon added, don't waste time undoing bad habits their children may pick up at school, such as swearing or aggressive behavior.

Although Dean Condon said that Catholic schools are "the best option out there" for parents who decide to send their children to a school, he and his wife prefer investing in learning equipment, rather than tuition.

Material for the Condons' curricula comes from a variety of sources: the Internet and computer programs; prepackaged series from publishers; and even garage sales. Their children are required by state law to undergo annual testing in the Rush-Henrietta School District.

Dean Condon contended that most parents don't need college degrees to be effective home-schooling teachers. And Leavy said some of the best home-schooling teachers she knows are those who didn't attend college.

However, Dwyer said, parents shouldn't take church teaching to mean that as primary educators, they must be their children's only educators.

"I would hope that they didn't see it as, 'I have to teach my kid.' Hopefully they would come to that decision only after weighing all the alternatives," Dwyer said.

Dwyer said he only partially agrees that home-schooling parents are as effective as professional teachers.

"The younger the child is, the more reasonable that comment is," Dwyer said. "But in high school, I don't think that's reasonable at all. Just the content of the curriculum alone is too advanced."

Timothy McGuire, 16, for one, said he

had little trouble going from a Catholic school to being home schooled by his mom (Cathy McGuire).

"She's always been teaching me stuff anyway; she just started teaching me a little bit more," he said.

Home-schooling parents have numerous options for specialized study, Russo wrote in *Time*: "Many parents mix and match kitchen-table lessons with classes at other parents' houses, apprenticeships and even — where permitted — public school or college courses."

Social formation

But is being removed from a school environment — and, often, mainstream society in general — good for a child's social development?

William Coleman, associate professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina, isn't so sure. Sooner or later, home-schooled children must come face-to-face with a bigger world, he notes.

"Parents have this Pollyanna view that they're going to keep their kids away from bad influences, when kids biologically and psychosocially are going to want to push away," Coleman stated in an Oct. 5, 1998, *Newsweek* magazine article, "No Longer a Fringe Movement."

Home-schooling families counter that all their children's social needs are adequately met. Kelly Brennan, 14, said for example that she has developed friends through home schooling, in her neighborhood and also from when she attended public school.

"I wouldn't say we're separatist. You're not building up a fortress around you," Kelly's mother said.

Catholic Home Schoolers of Western New York provides an array of social activities, from bowling on Monday afternoons to attending Catholic services together. The notion of home schoolers being socially underdeveloped is "only in the mind of the person who isn't in home schooling," Diane Leavy said.

Even so, Leavy said she's in no hurry for her children to live independently of their parents. She said she'd prefer her children to live at home until they either marry or enter religious vocations. She said she and other home-schooling parents do talk about letting go eventually, however.

"At some point, the kids are going to have to be able to handle themselves. All we can do as parents is do the best we can," she said.

Not for everyone

When it comes to home schooling, parents undertake a staggering commitment to do the best they can. Older children often take on added responsibility as well.

Leavy, whose husband is a lawyer, recommends home schooling only for families who are in it for the long term.

"It is not a decision you make lightly. It's a lifestyle," she said.

With a laugh, Janet Condon said that she thinks about giving up home schooling "once a month. That's when you've got to take a step back."

Home schooling also demands a social sacrifice for parents, said Patricia Wheeler, who had been a registered nurse prior to home schooling her children.

"You're used to working in the working world, and now you're dealing with the needs of your children full-time," she said.

Although Deacon McGuire said his wife cannot devote as much time as before to her career as an accountant, they remain firm in their decision to home school.

"It's a choice. Our children are more important than the money or the lifestyle," Deacon McGuire said.

Generally speaking, Leavy said, families who enter into home schooling do stick it out. Even on the tough days, she said, she couldn't bring herself to go with any alternative.

"The closeness of the family, being with my children — they are my favorite people in the whole world. And I want to be with them," she said.

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